

# Ekphrasis in American Poetry



# Ekphrasis in American Poetry:

*The Colonial Period  
to the 21st Century*

Edited by

Sandra Lee Kleppe

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Ekphrasis in American Poetry: The Colonial Period to the 21st Century

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most poets have engaged with the genre of ekphrasis, which is sometimes narrowly defined as a poem about a painting and sometimes broadly defined to include any verbal encounter that responds to a visual source. The contributors in this book have been given free rein to decide for themselves where their chosen works are on the scale of definitions comprising the notion of ekphrasis. The poets and artists discussed in the chapters that follow range from the period of Colonial America to the present-day United States, including some Native American poets whose works do not fit such period-based categories. Readers can choose to peruse the book chronologically, as the chapters are arranged roughly from the earliest to the most contemporary period, or simply pick out chapters on individual topics or poets. The first chapter provides an overview of the term ekphrasis and its uses in the American context, and it also presents an abstract of and commentary on how the chapters speak to each other but are also independent works, similar to the relationship between a poem and an *object d'art*.

This project was made possible by a stipend from Hedmark University College, Norway. The stipend included a research trip to UC Berkeley libraries in June 2015, and I would like to thank the staff for their assistance, especially Teresa Mora at the Bancroft Library, who went out of her way to help me. My librarian at Hedmark University College, Karianne Hagen, also provided crucial help in tracking down and ordering resources.

This volume is richly illustrated (see centrefold) due to the help of many individuals and institutions, and they are acknowledged in what follows. The cover illustration, Grace Hartigan's painting *Oranges No. 3 (What Fire Murmurs its Seditious)* (1953), is in the private collection of Julie and Michael Herzbach-Wied, who kindly gave me permission to use it and provided a high quality image. Chapter Two is illustrated with Scipio Moorhead's portrait of Phillis Wheatley, which appeared as the frontispiece of her *Poems on Various Subjects*, originally published in London by A. Bell, 1773. The Chapter Three illustration shows a detail from *The Moving Panorama of Pilgrim's Progress* (1850), "Fight with Apollyon," created by multiple artists and now in the Saco Museum,

Maine, which has given permission and provided images from the restored work. Chapter Four is illustrated with Alfred Jacob Miller's *The Trapper's Bride* (1850; originally completed in 1837); permission and a high-quality image were provided by Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska. Chapter Five is accompanied by Elaine de Kooning's *Harold Rosenberg # 3* (1956, oil on canvas) in the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, which has given permission and provided a high-quality image of the work. Chapter Six is illustrated by Anders Zorn's *Bather (Evening III)* (1896), an etching on tan wove paper at the Art Institute of Chicago, which has provided permission to include it. The illustration for Chapter Seven is Giotto, *The Last Judgment* (1304-1305), which is in Cappella degli Scrovegni, Padua, Italy; permission to use the image was given by the Director, Musei e Biblioteche, Comune di Padova. Chapter Eight is illustrated with a reproduction of Diego Velázquez, *Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus* (c. 1617-1618), owned by the National Gallery of Ireland and reprinted with their permission. Chapter Nine is illustrated with a photograph of a Kiowa Anko calendar on buckskin (c. 1871-1907) at the Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology. The photo is for unrestricted use in the National Archives Catalog <http://research.archives.gov/description/523631>. Finally, Chapter Ten is illustrated with a photograph by Stephen Strom, "Overlook, Fort Defiance Plateau, Winter," that appeared in Joy Harjo's and Stephen Strom's volume *Secrets from the Center of the World* (1989) published by the University of Arizona Press, which has given permission to use it. Thanks to Stephen Strom for providing a high-quality copy of the photograph.

In cases where the contributors quote extensively from volumes of poetry, permissions were obtained as follows. The Oberlin College Press has provided permission to quote from the poems of Angie Estes that appear in Chapter Seven. The University of New Mexico Press has provided permission to quote the passages from N. Scott Momaday's volume of prose poetry, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (14<sup>th</sup> edition, 1998), that appear in Chapter Nine.

Special thanks go out to all the contributors in this volume for their patience and hard work in making it such an exciting and worthwhile project.

Hamar, Norway  
July 2015  
Sandra Lee Kleppe

**PART I:**

**AMERICAN EKPHRASIS**



## CHAPTER ONE

# AMERICAN EKPHRASIS THROUGH THE CENTURIES

SANDRA LEE KLEPPE

*Ekphrasis in American Poetry: The Colonial Period to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* provides a small sample of the chronological range and stylistic variety of ekphrastic poetry, or poetry that engages in various ways with types of visual art, including pictographs, paintings, moving panoramas, daguerreotypes, photographs, landscape, and more. The volume's modest aim is to suggest both that ekphrasis has been a part of American poetry from its inception, and that as many American men as women have produced work in this genre. While the term "American" has not been sufficiently problematized in this book—all of the poets discussed are from the geographical area that is now the United States—the topics covered do not recognize boundaries between nations or between what has been traditionally termed the "sister arts" of poetry and painting.

In many ways, American ekphrasis is about encounters. The poet's or artist's personal encounter with a work of art or poem usually has reverberations far beyond the local or private aesthetic experience. Such poems often implicate larger social issues, including ideologies, that contribute to nation building. An example of the latter can be found in depictions of the first known encounters between Europeans and the indigenous people of North America by prominent 19<sup>th</sup>-century poets Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and John Greenleaf Whittier. Longfellow's "The Skeleton in Armor" and Whittier's "The Norsemen," both published in *The Knickerbocker* in 1841, are ekphrastic poems prompted by what the poets believed to be Viking artifacts found in New England. In Whittier's prose preface to "The Norsemen" he notes that the "fact that the ancient Northmen visited the northeast coast of North America and probably New England, some centuries before the discovery of the western world by Columbus, is now very generally admitted" (30).

In their search for a “native” American poetry as an alternative to the British imperial influence, both Longfellow and Whittier create a new American mythos in their ekphrases on Viking encounters with the New World. Such myth-building is explored in Anette Kolodny’s recent book *In Search of First Contact: The Vikings of Vinland, the Peoples of the Dawnland, and the Anglo-American Anxiety of Discovery* (2012). In 1837 two Icelandic sagas on encounters between Vikings and Natives were translated into English and became enormously popular in the U.S. Greenleaf and Whittier were exposed to these Vinland sagas and in their poems on the topic, the Viking “artifacts” are employed as ekphrastic sources to promote the notion of an American literature and history originating in Norse culture. However, Kolodny works to problematize this mythos of first contact by examining a body of Native American works, including pre-Vinland petroglyphs which can be considered—indeed are considered by contributors in this volume (see Chapter Nine)—as ekphrastic literature alongside other conventional works such as paintings and sculptures.

In the centuries following another first contact his/story, that of Columbus’ ‘discovery’ of the New World in 1492, came the African presence that is so central to post-Columbian American culture. This book opens with a chapter that examines American ekphrastic poems during the formative Colonial period where Europe, Africa, and Indigenous America met in encounters that are depicted in art and literature. It closes with two chapters on Native American poetry that consider how American landscapes serve as ekphrastic prompts for personal and collective experiences. In between are chapters on men and women poets and artists who have engaged with ekphrasis in a variety of ways from different periods. Thus American ekphrasis emerges as a genre that has implications far beyond the Eurocentric versions of the canon that have hitherto been discussed in the critical literature on the topic.

## **What Is/Was Ekphrasis?**

The meaning of ekphrasis has changed dynamically over time. While some dictionaries translate the word from the Greek simply as “description” (Merriam-Webster), etymologies posit the origin variously as “to speak out” or “to point out,” where “ek” means out and “phrazein” means to point out, explain, or speak. Ruth Webb, the leading scholar on ekphrasis in the ancient period, believes that the contemporary use of the term has little to do with how it was used in the classical period, where it was defined a “speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes” (Webb 1). However, in contemporary critical discourse, Webb

notes, “it is usually seen as a text or textual fragment that engages with the visual arts” (ibid.). Ekphrasis in ancient rhetorical theory and practice was not confined to poetry but concerned any use of language that attempted to “make an audience imagine a scene,” and such a scene could be about “battles, people, animals, landscapes” in addition to visual arts (Webb 3). The term did not become specifically yoked to poetry about visual arts until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but has since then been associated with this more narrow category.<sup>1</sup>

While Webb claims that the ancient and modern uses of ekphrasis are radically different, others consider the ability of words to summon images in the listener’s or reader’s mind as a source of continuity through the ages. Current definitions of ekphrasis include: “the literary representation of visual art” (Mitchell 1995); “the verbal representation of a visual representation” (Heffernan 1993); “poems about paintings” (Cheeke 2008); and “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art” (Spitzer quoted in Loizeaux 2008). Contemporary discussions of ekphrasis have emphasized the relationship between word and image, usually formulated as a paragonal (from *paragone*, meaning rivalry) or antagonistic encounter between textual and visual arts. The ekphrastic encounters analyzed in this book, however, seem less concerned with rivalry and more about moments of contact and exchange.

From our point of view in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the genre appears to have been primarily a male, Eurocentric tradition dating from Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield as “the inescapable ur-ekphrasis” (Webb 6), and somehow making its way into American poetry via Modernism. Almost every contemporary critical work on ekphrasis presents a canonical list of major poets and poems that make up the genre: Homer’s shield, John Keats’ *Urn*, W. H. Auden’s “*Musée des Beaux Arts*”, and John Ashbery’s “*Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*” (Hedley and Halpern 2009). Sometimes the list reads Homer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Robert Browning (Heffernan 1993). Or Homer, P. B. Shelley, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams (Mitchell 1995). The common denominator of all of these lists is that they posit ekphrasis as an all-male, all-white canon. In the chapters that follow, ekphrases from men and women, as well as from African-Americans and Native Americans, are included as important texts in the making of an American genre. Many more groups could have been included since encounters between the textual and the visual are near universal. Though this volume only examines a dozen or so

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Webb provides an account of the development the term *ekphrasis* in the late 19th and early 20th century in her article, “Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre.” *Word and Image*, 15: 7-18.

poets in depth, it does suggest continuity in the American ekphrasis that stretches from the pre-Columbian “literatures” of indigenous peoples on the continent to 21<sup>st</sup>-century poets such as recent laureate Natasha Trethewey.

## Versions of American Ekphrasis

We glean already in Chapter Two, “‘Teach the Paints to Speak’: Mythology and the Muse in the Ekphrastic Poems of Mather Byles and Phillis Wheatley” by Kristin M. Distel, a foundational version of American ekphrasis that does not mesh with the white male paragonal canon as outlined above. Wheatley, born in Africa and enslaved in the New World, established in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that collaboration is a central feature of American poetry through her ekphrastic representations of African-American artist Scipio Moorhead. Ironically, none of Moorhead’s paintings are known to have survived except a portrait of Wheatley attributed to him and featured as the frontispiece of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773); the portrait is reprinted as an illustration of Distel’s chapter. Wheatley’s poem from this volume, “To S.M., a Young African Painter, on Seeing his Works” (1773), remains the textual witness to Moorhead’s visual production. As Distel notes of this work, it reflects on how “poets and painters rely upon one another to immortalize landscapes and earthly beauty” rather than rivaling each other.

Other ironies abound in the Colonial period in the encounters between abducted Africans and European colonizers. Both Wheatley and Byles employ painterly techniques such as impasto, or layering of paint in order to create depth, represented by the accumulation of layers of meaning in the poems. Yet Byles, a clergyman, is surprisingly secular in his dealing with the figure of the muse, where Wheatley writes about the muse in the service of religion. Wheatley’s poetry, considered superior to Byles’ by literary critics, nevertheless required verification by white scholars such as Byles, as colonial discourse did not consider slaves capable of such learning. Regardless of such complexities, both of these Bostonian poets, as Distel argues, were instrumental in establishing the ekphrastic trend in American poetry.

The pious themes of Wheatley’s poetry and Byles’ occupation are taken up again in Chapter 3, “Sacred Tableaux: Jones Very, Elizabeth Ellet, and the Moving Panorama of Pilgrim’s Progress” by Michael Keller. Like Distel, Keller considers one male and one female poet who both have written an ekphrastic sonnet on the same topic, in this case the enormously popular moving panorama based on John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.



This art work, known as the Bunyan Tableaux, toured the United States in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and was viewed by over 200 000 people in New York alone. In exploring reasons for the popularity of this new art form in America, Keller notes that the moving landscape of the panorama “mirrored the expanding vision of a growing nation” and that the pilgrim was “a uniquely potent motif in American culture at this time” as it is insinuated in “the American creation myth.”

Keller also analyzes the two known sonnets on the Bunyan Tableaux by Jones Very and Elizabeth Ellet, illuminating the cultural contexts and thematic purposes of these ekphrases. Like Wheatley, Jones Very was preoccupied with how “the mind could be fundamentally transformed by depictions of beauty” that would lead to a more pious appreciation of the panorama and poem as religious objects. Elizabeth Ellet, on the other hand, produced a sonnet that was used to accompany the panorama on tours and thus served as an early marketing scheme. Ellet is a fascinating figure from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, author of *The Women of the American Revolution* (1845), the first history of women’s participation in that historical period, and a host of other works in various genres. That her sonnet was chosen to accompany the vastly popular panorama is evidence of her status as an important voice in American letters of the time. Both Very and Ellet reflect upon the spiritual themes of the art work they engage with, yet both produce what Keller refers to as inverted ekphrasis in that the few references to the panorama are employed as an avenue into the religious themes. Keller also discusses the innovative techniques of the American artists involved in the making of the panorama, showing how the painted scenes “participate in the iconology of American culture during the 1850s”.

Another new technology that became popular in the U.S. at the time is the daguerreotype, exploited by Walt Whitman in his iconic portrait on the cover of *Leaves of Grass* (1855). In Chapter 4, “Toward a More Perfect Union: Whitman, Ekphrasis, and the Daguerreotype,” Alexander J. Ashland links the revolutionary technology of the daguerreotype with “America’s pre-war obsession with establishing a national literature which was at once both natural and empirically verifiable.” In this context, Whitman and other mid-century writers were suspicious of ekphrasis as an old-world form. Ashland thus analyzes how Whitman employed both ekphrastic and daguerrian techniques in order to create a dialectic that is at once conservative and radical. These tensions are represented in Whitman’s ekphrasis on Alfred Jacob Miller’s painting “The Trapper’s Bride” (1837/1850), depicting the wedding negotiations between a trapper and a Native American woman, and included as an illustration to Chapter 4. While Miller’s painting is a “conservative portrayal of mixed-race

barter politics,” Whitman’s poem focuses on particular details of the characters portrayed in a manner similar to the empiricism associated with the daguerreotype.

Ultimately, Ashland demonstrates how Whitman embraces the classical genre of ekphrasis and the innovative technology of the daguerreotype in a careful negotiation of an aesthetic that calls for a synthesis between central authority and individual freedom, mirroring his ideology of “a new national mythos where all Americans are united.” Ashland concludes his chapter with a comparative discussion of the lovers on Keats’ urn with the trapper and his bride in the Miller painting, explaining how Whitman’s use of ekphrasis attempts to divorce the genre from its European associations by inserting American subjectivity into the form.

By the twentieth century, Whitman’s utopic vision of an American aesthetic, however, had reached a point of crisis among modernist writers who were concerned that American art had not yet fulfilled its early promise. This topic is addressed by Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Strachan in Chapter 5, “Ekphrasis in American Poetry: Wallace Stevens, Harold Rosenberg, and Action Painting,” which examines how both of these “authors respond to the sense of scarcity in the literary and artistic production of America.” Rosenberg’s essays on American art are analyzed as examples of *critical ekphrasis* in which the essayist employs the literary devices of the ekphrastic genre to reveal the principles underlying the production of art. In so doing, Rosenberg builds on Wallace Stevens’ poetry, especially the principles in his ekphrastic poems, including “Anecdote of the Jar” and “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” to discuss the state of American cultural production in the mid-twentieth century.

Guerrero-Strachan discusses how Rosenberg employs the terms *Redcoatism* and *Coonskinism* to describe how artists “move between the extremes of following European formal standards or pursuing American anti-formal freedom,” the latter reaching its ultimate expression in American Abstract Expressionism of the 1940s and 1950s that Rosenberg dubbed “action painting.” This new American form has a close affinity with Stevens’ ideas of an aesthetics of decreation, yet Rosenberg’s and Stevens’ artistic theories, as Guerrero-Strachan notes, grew out of Emerson’s writing on nature and human perception, a point that illustrates continuity in the development of both critical and poetic ekphrasis from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Some of America’s most accomplished Abstract Expressionists—not mentioned by Rosenberg—were women. Elaine de Kooning’s striking portrait of Rosenberg, a hybrid between figurative and abstract methods, is used as an illustration for Chapter 5 and also as an indirect link to the rest

of the book, suggesting ways in which ekphrasis does not survive the journey to America as a male European genre. Likewise, Grace Hartigan's painting *Oranges No. 3* graces (pun intended) the cover of this book as an example of American ekphrasis that is neither paragonal nor paranoid about European influences. This work is examined in Chapter 6, "20<sup>th</sup>-Century Women Who Engage with Ekphrasis" by Sandra Lee Kleppe, who uncovers a blind spot in recent critical theories of ekphrasis that attempt to perpetuate the genre as a patriarchal form. Both Grace Hartigan, a contemporary of Rosenberg, and poet Amy Lowell, a contemporary of Stevens, are discussed in light of their own ekphrastic strategies that are complex and often collaborative.

As Kleppe notes, "Lowell was a boisterous lesbian poet in an age when none of those roles (boisterous, lesbian, or poet) fit a woman, and Hartigan was a woman painter among the male-dominated New York School," yet both managed to reinvent American poetry and art through their engagement with ekphrasis. One of the most ekphrastic contemporary poets is also a woman, Angie Estes, whose body of work is the topic of Chapter Seven, "*Visibile Parlare*: Ekphrastic Images in the Poetry of Angie Estes," by Douglas Rutledge. Like other American poets discussed in the book, Estes' use of the genre, as Rutledge notes, is not paragonal: "For Estes, the notion of antagonism between art and poetry is itself antagonistic to what she is trying to accomplish." Rather, she draws on a large body of artworks, including paintings, photographs and architecture, to produce images that intend to move the audience between one state of being and another. Visible speaking, or Dante's term "*visibile parlare*," is not a mechanism for the traditional ekphrastic gesture of speaking for the silent figures in art works, but a kind of anagogical thinking that becomes more and more complex as Estes develops her poetry from early to more recent works.

Some examples of the many artworks that Estes incorporates into her poems in order to elicit emotional responses in the reader are paintings by Giotto, Leonardo da Vinci, Vermeer, and van Gogh, as well as Camille St-Saën's opera *Samson and Delilah*, a photograph of ballet dancer Nijinsky, and the Gothic architecture of Abbot Suger. These and other works are employed by Estes to challenge conventional theories of ekphrasis that emphasize narrative and paragone; instead, Rutledge shows how Estes produces sets of "images in a complex poetic structure to move her readers from the historical to the anagogical level" in a leap that inspires them with the emotional energy behind the art.

The limitations of contemporary ekphrastic theories are also exposed in Chapter Eight, "Restoring Broken Bodies: The Ekphrastic Poetry of Larry Levis and Natasha Trethewey" by Kristin M. Distel. Both Larry

Levis and Natasha Trethewey have produced innovative ekphrastic poems that work toward restoring broken honor and broken bodies in both the speaker and the *objects d'art* that are referenced. This empathic gesture is attained through the use of personal memory and narrative in order to connect to the artistic subjects, and therefore both poets move beyond standard definitions of ekphrasis that emphasize the verbal as representation of the visual. Distel notes how Levis does this through “collapsing the distance between viewer and subject” in poems that evoke personal and national traumas. An example of this is found in Levis’ poem “Caravaggio: Swirl and Vortex” in which the speaker associates a Vietnam victim he knew with the head of Goliath in the Caravaggio painting, thereby “restoring dignity to Goliath’s desecrated body.”

Distel discusses ways in which Levis and Trethewey employ poetic techniques that mirror artistic ones, such as the use of the triptych, impasto, or chiaroscuro, yet Trethewey’s topics are most often “historically significant paintings and drawings” that depict important changes in American attitudes toward mixed marriages, biracial children, and minorities. Thus some of the subjects in casta paintings, such as in Miguel’s Cabrera’s *De Español y Negra; Mulata*, are endowed by the speaker with both dignity and agency rather than in positions of subordination, as depicted in the art works. Through a variety of readings of poems that engage with paintings and photographs, Distel shows how Levis and Trethewey work consistently with ekphrastic strategies that restore, rather than rival, the dignity of the artistic subjects portrayed through the use of memory and personal narrative.

Personal and collective memory are also discussed in the final section of this book, titled “Post-Columbian Ekphrasis,” which contains two chapters that provide fresh perspectives on American ekphrasis through readings of Native American poetry by N. Scott Momaday (Chapter 9) and Joy Harjo (Chapter 10). While the term *postcolonial* is a contentious one in indigenous studies (after all, the “colonizers” have not gone “home”), post-Columbian is employed here not to suggest a break but rather a continuity between before and after, where ekphrastic encounters, especially with the landscape, are seen as an inherent part of American literature from the time of the first known pictographs of the pre-Columbian continent. In Chapter Nine, “Land as Ekphrastic Prompt for Memoirist Prose Poems in N. Scott Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain*,” Molly Fuller and Robert Miltner note that Native peoples of North America have engaged in ekphrastic artmaking since long before the arrival of Vikings or Columbus to the continent:

The human impulse to make art engages in an ekphrastic expression by using the ecology of the natural world as a prompt for artistic expression.

Inclusion of both ideomorphs and tectiforms as proto-art, and adaptation of the images to the natural textures of the rock surfaces as proto-cinema, suggests that the need to animate and annotate go beyond mere literal representation.

Momaday's memoirist prose poems are read in this tradition, where the landscape provides prompts for his ekphrastic explorations of personal, tribal, and cosmological connections that express ecological rather than paragonal thinking.

Laura Castor examines a similar epistemology in Chapter Ten, "I saw the whole world caught in that sound': The Visual in Joy Harjo's Poetry," through readings of Harjo's prose poems in *Secrets from the Center of the World*. As Castor notes, within "the Indigenous framework of Harjo's art, the relationships between representation and phenomenon, and between the verbal and the visual modes, are not separate." Harjo's and Strom's volume places each poem alongside a landscape photograph by Stephen Strom and is thus a collaborative ekphrastic venture not unlike Hartigan's paintings depicting O'Hara's poems or Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. And like Natasha Trethewey, both Harjo and Momaday explore ekphrastic poetry as means of healing historical traumas. Moreover, both Harjo's and Momaday's prose poems expand our understanding of the scope of the canon of ekphrasis and offer new ways of understanding the theoretical implications of the traditional Eurocentric genre. The link between the pre- and post-Columbian American landscapes is a continuous one for these Native poets, and their work expresses an interconnectedness that transcends the paragonal ekphrastic encounter, as so many of the works examined in this book do.

What might set American ekphrasis apart from the strong European tradition dating back to Homer is an inclusiveness that has allowed for as many men as women to produce ekphrastic works; African-Americans have been employing this genre from the Colonial period and continue to produce exciting ekphrastic works, and there has been a rise in the number of Native American ekphrastic writers since the Native American Renaissance. While other ethnic writers did not find space within in the scope of this book, their work certainly invites further inquiry. American ekphrasis is also characterized by an openness to many types of ekphrases that engage with all kinds of media from daguerreotypes and photographs, to collaborative poem-paintings, to the use of ecocritical land models, and much more. From the Colonial period to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, there seemed to be continuity in American poets' and artists' concern with throwing off European influences. In the Post-war period, new artists and poets have been freer to venture both outwards, using European art and models as prompts, as well as inwards, exploring American history and

the American landscape and their implications for mediating the relationship between the verbal and the visual.

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**PART II:**  
**THE COLONIAL ERA**





CHAPTER TWO

“TEACH THE PAINTS TO SPEAK”:  
MYTHOLOGY AND THE MUSE  
IN THE EKPHRASTIC POEMS  
OF MATHER BYLES AND PHILLIS WHEATLEY

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The afflatus for the writing of ekphrastic poetry has varied based on era, social status of the poet, contemporaneous art trends, and myriad other factors. In the case of Mather Byles (1706-1788) and Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784), the experience of viewing a particular painting—combined with mythological allusions and references to the muse—prompted them to write poems in praise of said visual art. Pleas to the muse, along with myths and allusions to classical literature, were common features of ekphrastic writing in early Colonial poetry. Wheatley and Byles’s ekphrastic poems unite visual and written art through invocation of the muse and allusions to mythological figures; what is especially significant about their approaches to ekphrastic poetry, however, is the foundational way in which their poetic techniques mimic the methods and styles of visual artists (specifically, of painters).

Phillis Wheatley’s ekphrastic poetry, especially “To S.M., a Young *African Painter*, on seeing his Works<sup>1</sup>” emphasizes not only the painter’s skill but also the viewer’s experience in observing the painting. The speaker invokes the muse, whom Wheatley reappropriates in praise of the Christian God; essentially, art is worthwhile largely insofar as it serves as a means of worship. In contrast, Byles’s “To Pictorio, on the Sight of his Pictures” refers to the muse’s role in preserving the fame of the painter and in creating ekphrastic poetry. He exhorts Pictorio, requesting that he “teach the Paints to speak.” In actuality, Byles’s poem accomplishes this

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<sup>1</sup> This essay preserves the spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and other formatting features of Wheatley and Byles’s original volumes.

task. Specifically, his poem gives voice to the painting by referring to the muse, numerous mythological figures, Anthony van Dyck, and Peter Paul Rubens, along with several other ekphrastic references and examinations within the poem. Taken as a whole, Wheatley and Byles's poems resemble an impastoed canvas on the page, a union of poetry and the paintings about which the poets write.

This chapter will examine the ways in which Phillis Wheatley and Mather Byles unify paintings and poetry, both through invocations of the muse and through their respective manners of privileging the painter/poet relationship. I will provide a close analysis of Wheatley's "To S.M., a Young *African* Painter, on seeing his Works" and Byles's "To Pictorio, on the Sight of his Pictures" to demonstrate that Wheatley and Byles employ a shared ethic of neoclassical ekphrasis.

Wheatley and Byles's ekphrastic poems provide a useful point of comparison when discussing the literary trends of the Colonial period. As Lena Hill notes in her book, *Visualizing Blackness and the Creation of the African American Literary Tradition*, wherein she examines Wheatley and Byles's poetry in terms of their respective references to vision, "Wheatley and Byles appear inspired by similar goals, but their distinctly different views of the artistic landscape of eighteenth-century America leads them to pen very different verses" (38). Hill's assessment is correct; both Wheatley and Byles were clearly preoccupied with classical figures, the Christian religion, and visual art, though their respective renderings of such subjects often diverged in terms of the actual poetic product. Both individually and in comparative terms, Wheatley and Byles established an important trend within American poetry, one that future poets have repeatedly revisited, even if they are unaware of Wheatley and Byles's instrumental, foundational work in the area of ekphrasis. Namely, these two Colonial poets helped establish a technique in which poets not only unify but also *equate* visual and written art—a method that has become a putative means of examining visual art in American ekphrastic poetry.

A few comments on the affiliation between these two poets are in order. The poems of Wheatley, a slave, and Byles, a prominent Boston clergyman, are indicative of the ekphrastic poetry written before and during the American Revolution. Byles's book of poems, *Poems on Various Occasions*, was published in 1744, whereas Phillis Wheatley's volume of poetry, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was published in 1773. The relationship between these two poets is also of note; in short, Byles was instrumental in advancing Wheatley's credibility and fame as a poet. John C. Shields, a preeminent Wheatley scholar, has often suggested that Byles likely served as Wheatley's tutor, a belief that

is reinforced both by Byles’s interest in tutoring young poets and by simple proximity. Indeed, Byles and Wheatley lived in the same neighborhood (Hairston 59).

Those who believed that a young female slave was incapable of writing the poetry that appeared in Wheatley’s collection called her authorship into question. Because her poems consist of frequent allusions and other references to classical literature (Homer, Ovid, Virgil, Horace, and others), critics maintained that such knowledge was far beyond the scope of a young slave’s knowledge. As Wheatley scholar Julian D. Mason notes, “[Wheatley] was surely aware that much of her own notoriety was the result of her work’s being usually labeled as that of an African (and she is careful to so call herself in several poems and to entitle one poem “To S.M., A Young African Painter, On Seeing His Works”)” (18). Indeed, her race both stirred debate and served as a point of pride.<sup>2</sup> In order to lend credence to her 1773 collection, the volume was undersigned by multiple prominent men who scrutinized her writing and attested that Wheatley was indeed the author of the book. Significantly, Mather Byles was one of these endorsers of Wheatley’s work. As a well-known and respected clergyman, Byles was part of a larger hegemonic social structure that systematically excluded African-Americans, including Wheatley herself (that is, until white men verified that her work was indeed her own). Nevertheless, Byles likely served as a mentor and tutor to Wheatley, and it has been established that Wheatley had access to Byles’s extensive library.

In terms of their respective poems, it is true that Byles and Wheatley wrote only a few poems that fall under a strict definition of ekphrastic poetry. However, under a broader definition, many of Wheatley’s poems can be considered a form of ekphrasis. The first poem in her collection is entitled “To Mæcenas,” “the patron of Horace and Vergil” (Mason 49). Wheatley writes:

While *Homer* paints lo! circumfus’d in air,  
 Celestial gods in mortal forms appear;  
 Swift as they move hear each recess rebound, [...]  
 A deep-felt horror thrills through all my veins.  
 When gentler strains demand thy graceful song,  
 The length’ning line moves languishing along. (ln. 7-9, 14-16)

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<sup>2</sup> Tracey L. Walters’s “Classical Discourse as Political Agency: African American Revisionist Mythmaking by Phillis Wheatley, Henrietta Cordelia Ray, and Pauline Hopkins” argues that Wheatley’s use of classical literature, especially in her “Niobe” poem, “Demonstrates her ability to translate classical tales using her own distinct voice, from her own unique Black feminine perspective” (40).

In these lines, Wheatley importantly likens the acts of writing and painting; for her purposes, writing is an act of creating visual art, as evidenced by the first line of the above-quoted stanza: “While *Homer* paints” (ln. 7). This poem’s placement at the beginning of her volume is essential in that the poem immediately establishes Wheatley’s poetic conceit: namely, that writing and painting are nearly interchangeable and certainly symbiotic art forms. This first poem’s method of equating written and visual arts provides a lens through which to read the volume’s subsequent poems—that is, through a broadly defined framework of ekphrasis.

Many of Wheatley’s poems evince a thorough knowledge of classic works of literature, including Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (in addition to the aforementioned Homer). Julian Mason notes, “Although some of her subject matter can be traced to classical origins outside of Pope’s translations and although it is difficult to pinpoint clearly indisputable instances of his influence on her, it still is held by most who study her poems that Pope’s translation of Homer was the single most important influence on her work” (16). Because Wheatley has equated written and visual art, especially regarding authors of classic literature, readers can interpret her allusions to Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and others as a broad form of ekphrasis. In the final line of the above-quoted “To Mæcenas”, for instance, “the lengthn’ing line” could refer to either a painter’s line (such as a brushstroke or drawn line) or a poet’s metrical line of verse.

As previously mentioned, Wheatley and Byles—despite their divergent places in contemporaneous social echelons—regularly addressed similar subject matter in their writings. Namely, with some exceptions, their respective poems often mention Christian themes and exhortations, frequently using biblical references in an effort to demystify and normalize daily life and common struggles, such as the death of a loved one. Scholars such as Eric Ashley Hairston and Julian D. Mason have (briefly) compared Wheatley and Byles’s respective poems; in particular, John C. Shields’s “Phillis Wheatley and Mather Byles: A Study in Literary Relationship” (1980) has foregrounded many modern discussions of these poets’ similarities and their significance.<sup>3</sup> Shields further examined these two poets in *Phillis Wheatley and the Romantics* (2010), and his comparison of their poems provided insightful commentary on the invocation of the muse. Shields’s work has been essential in maintaining the place of Wheatley and Byles in the discourse of early American

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<sup>3</sup> Shields’s article provides an astute analysis of Wheatley and Byles’s use of sun imagery, treatments of eternity and religion, hymn stanzas, and other aspects of versification. His article has created a space in which to discuss the poets’ experiments with ekphrastic techniques and subjects.

poetry. Nevertheless, scholarship has not yet examined the poems selected in this chapter through a specific lens of ekphrasis.

As previously mentioned, Wheatley and Byles employ a neoclassical aesthetic; however, a limited amount of scholarship has addressed these poets' neoclassical tendencies, though some such criticism does exist. Astrid Franke's "Phyllis Wheatley, Melancholy Muse" provides an important examination of the ways in which both Byles and Wheatley's poems operate within a neoclassical context. Franke comments on Byles and Wheatley's poetry and on the socially privileged position from which Byles wrote, especially in regards to Wheatley's position as a slave (and one whose work required "verification" by white men). Franke writes, "The Countess of Huntingdon and Mather Byles were two historical readers, ready to accept Wheatley as a melancholy muse and to value her capacity to fuse ideas from neoclassicism and evangelical religion, to confound assumptions about race and genius, to negotiate between patriotic concerns and transatlantic realities, and, most notably, to create the new by transforming the old" (250). Franke convincingly argues that Byles writes about neoclassical and religious subject matter that is similar to Wheatley's own writing, ultimately positing that the quality of Wheatley's writing exceeds that of Byles (241). John C. Shields concurs, stating his seminal article "A Study in Literary Relationship," "Echoes of Byles's vocabulary in Wheatley are too numerous to be considered accidental. But if they do indicate that Wheatley found Byles's choice of language appealing, they also illustrate that she was an inventive student—one who was generally capable of improving upon her example" (384). While the quality of Wheatley's poetry does indeed surpass that of Byles, both poets explore ekphrastic subjects in an intricate, multifaceted manner.

I will also briefly mention Michele McKay and William J. Scheick's work, which likewise examines Wheatley's position within the neoclassical tradition; their scholarship largely attributes her adoption of this aesthetic to her inability to recall her life before being enslaved. They note, though, that her engagement with neoclassical form also subjected her work to undue criticism: "Bereft of her African heritage, she turned to neoclassical English as a prominent literary discourse available to her as an aspiring poet. . . . Her heroic couplets, invocations to the Muses, classical allusions, and rhetoric of the sublime often strike readers as uninspired and repetitious. Critical disparagements have also been offered concerning her refusal or inability to rise above the impersonality of neoclassical style" (71). Indeed, Wheatley's access to contemporaneous and classical literature, provided by both her mistress, Susanna Wheatley, and likely by Byles himself allowed her to imbue her poems with myriad allusions to

Homer, Ovid, Virgil, and others, while also training her in the minutiae of versification, largely through her reading of Alexander Pope.

The aforementioned scholarship has been indispensable in securing Wheatley's place within the discourse of Colonial poetry. John C. Shields's work has been especially crucial; however, while his examination of Wheatley as part of a larger Romantic tradition is certainly valuable, I maintain that it is both possible and indeed necessary to see not only Wheatley but also Byles as working within a neoclassical tradition. Given their mutual practice of invoking the muse and their preoccupation with classical themes and subject matter, Wheatley and Byles largely fit within a neoclassicist framework. The work of the critics discussed here has been instrumental in maintaining both poets' place in current conversations about American poetry. However, scholarship has not yet taken up the significance of Wheatley and Byles's ekphrastic poems in terms of the ways in which their poems mimic painterly techniques, especially within a neoclassical framework.

The term *ekphrasis*, which is Greek for *description*, most commonly refers to a poem that takes as its subject a piece of visual art, especially a painting or sculpture. The poet creates an extended examination, whether lyrical or narrative, of the painting or sculpture's scene, imagery, or action. In doing so, "the poet may amplify and expand [the] meaning" of the original work of art ("Ekphrasis").<sup>4</sup> Wheatley's aphoristic poem, "To S.M., a Young *African* Painter, on seeing his Works," dedicated to Scipio Moorhead<sup>5</sup>, is one of her few poems that falls under a traditional, technical definition of ekphrasis. In order to obtain a full picture of the poem's ideation of neoclassical ekphrasis, an examination of the poem's overall themes and development is necessary. Wheatley's act of situating the poem in praise of Moorhead is significant: addressing a poem to a particular person and addressing said person within the poem itself is

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the best known example of an ekphrastic poem is Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," though I would also point out Andrew Marvell's "The Gallery," Louise Bogan's "Statue and Birds," Angie Estes's "Cell 7: The Mocking of Christ," W.D. Snodgrass's "Monet: *Les Nymphéas*," and Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" as excellent examples of poems that fall under a traditional definition of ekphrasis.

<sup>5</sup> Like Wheatley herself, Scipio Moorhead was the domestic servant of a Boston family. Julian D. Mason Jr. explores Moorhead and Wheatley's artistic affiliation in the introductory notes to his edited volume of Wheatley's poems. According to Mason, some scholars believe that Moorhead painted the portrait of Wheatley that appears as the frontispiece to her volume, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) (38). The frontispiece image is included in this chapter. Other than Wheatley's portrait, none of Moorhead's paintings has survived.