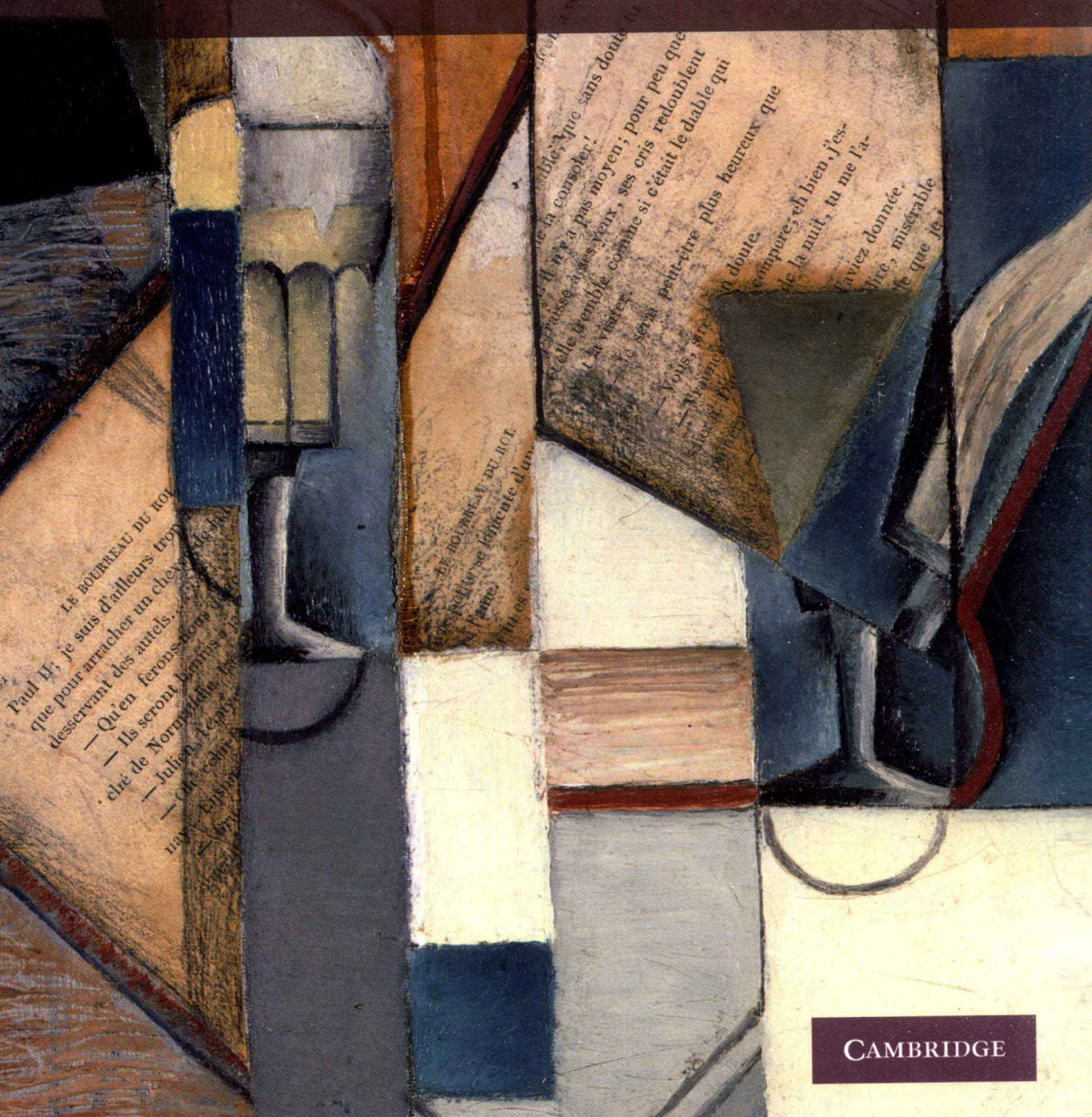


Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts

ELIZABETH BERGMANN LOIZEAUX

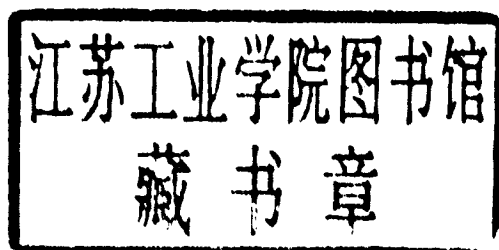


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Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts

ELIZABETH BERGMANN LOIZEAUX

University of Maryland, College Park



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Introduction. The engaging eye: Ekphrasis and twentieth-century poetry

You are worried that you don't write?
Don't be. It's the tribute of the air that
your paintings don't just let go
of you. And what poet ever sat down
in front of a Titian, pulled out
his versifying tablet and began
to drone? Don't complain, my dear,
You do what I can only name.

(Frank O'Hara, "To Larry Rivers," 1955)¹

Admire, when you come here, the glimmering hair
Of the girl; praise her pale
Complexion. Think well of her dress
Though that is somewhat out of fashion.
Don't try to take her hand, but smile for
Her hesitant gentleness.

(W. D. Snodgrass, "VUILLARD: 'The Mother and
Sister of the Artist,'" 1960–1961)²

This book takes up one prominent aspect of twentieth-century poetry's varied and intense involvement with the visual arts: ekphrasis, the poem that addresses a work of art. Specifically, this book is about the social dynamics of ekphrasis; about the complex, changing and various relations among poet, work of art, and audience that structure the ekphrastic poem; and about how ekphrastic poetry, by means of those relations, opens the lyric into a network of social engagements within and across the boundaries of the poem. The book began in a fascination with the workings of modern ekphrasis and with a question: Why did so many modern poets, with such attention and such conflicted self-consciousness, turn to painting and sculpture as subjects for their poems? Why does this subgenre of the lyric occur so frequently in Anglo-American poetry in the twentieth century, used by so many poets, often repeatedly and to produce their best work? From W. B. Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," "The Municipal Gallery Re-visited" and "Lapis Lazuli," through W. H. Auden's "Musée des

Beaux Arts," Marianne Moore's "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns" and William Carlos Williams's "Pictures from Brueghel," to Robert Lowell's "For the Union Dead," Adrienne Rich's "Mourning Picture," Thom Gunn's "In Santa Maria del Popolo," John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" and Rita Dove's "Agosta the Winged Man and Rasha the Black Dove," poets across the stylistic spectrum turned to ekphrasis to write some of the finest and most important poems of the twentieth century. Well-exercised in the first half of the century by Pound, H. D., Stein and Stevens as well, ekphrasis boomed in the second half: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Frank O'Hara, Denise Levertov, James Merrill, Seamus Heaney, Yusef Komunyakaa, Jorie Graham, Mark Doty. Nearly every poet has turned at least once, many again and again, to painting and sculpture, and to the genre that stages their interaction. J. D. McClatchy hardly exaggerated when he observed that "for most [twentieth-century] poets paintings are primal, as 'real' as the bread and wine on the table, as urgent as a dying parent or concealed lover in the next room."³ Wallace Stevens compared the relation between poetry and painting to that necessary dialogue between our inner and outer worlds: "The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us. There is the same interchange between these two worlds that there is between one art and another, migratory passings to and fro, quickenings, Promethean liberations and discoveries."⁴ "Picture-making is the air I breathe," said Paul Durcan.⁵

If the record of ekphrastic production can be a measure, images are more urgent in the twentieth century than ever before. The intimacy and necessity McClatchy identifies pervades modern ekphrasis, the "quickenings" of love and friendship, the "passings to and fro" of a life-sustaining connection among artists. "I am alone on the surface/ of a turning planet. What// to do but, like Michelangelo's/ Adam, put my hand/ out into unknown space,/ hoping for the reciprocating touch?" asked R. S. Thomas, himself looking to Michelangelo.⁶ As in O'Hara's "To Larry Rivers" above, direct address to the artist registers that connection in many modern ekphrases, companionable, contentious, desiring, admiring: "and all the while you knew/ what you dared to acknowledge only in oils," says Richard Howard to Henri Fantin-Latour; "Can you stand it,/ Francesco? Are you strong enough for it?" Ashbery asks Parmagianino; "You were more interested/ in her swinging baroque tits/ and the space between her thighs/ than the expression on her face," Vicki Feaver accuses Roger Hilton.⁷

The twentieth century's various pan-arts avant-gardes and their multidisciplinary manifestos (Dada, vorticism, futurism, surrealism) speak to

this energizing banding together, as do the circles of artists and writers like the one that gathered in the 1910s around Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery, or around Walter Arensberg and Alfred Kreymborg's journal *Others*, or in Stein's Paris apartment, or, in the fifties, as the New York School: "We were restless and constrained, closely allied to the painters. Impressionism, Dadaism, surrealism applied to both painting and the poem," commented Williams.⁸ This sense of shared goals points to one of the many varied and interconnected ways the engagement with the visual arts tells in the work of poets. As Marjorie Perloff and others have documented, poets and artists, working off of and with each other, jointly developed ideas and strategies for confronting modernity.⁹ Analogy frequently provided a way of fruitfully taking those strategies into the different arts. Yeats turned to the later Pre-Raphaelites for the "picture" that he hoped would save him from the sin of Victorian poetic abstraction.¹⁰ Imagism developed by implicit analogy to the visual arts in desiring the instantaneous revelation the visual image is thought to have: "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."¹¹ Abstraction, itself, as Charles Altieri has argued, would later become a goal that the poets worked by analogy to painting.¹² More materially, poets and artists collaborated with each other, producing imagetexts of many kinds, as we'll see in Chapter 5 on Ted Hughes's and Leonard Baskin's collaboration. Reference and allusion to the visual arts abound, as in *The Cantos*, for example. Concrete or shaped poems reappeared as a viable poetic model. And in prose, twentieth-century poets wrote frequently about art and artists in numerous essays and reviews: Yeats on the Pre-Raphaelites, Pound on Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Auden on Van Gogh, Elizabeth Bishop on Gregorio Valdes, Ted Hughes on Leonard Baskin, Frank O'Hara on Jackson Pollock, Mark Strand on Edward Hopper.¹³ As the engagement with a work of art, ekphrasis often contains or is intertwined with all of these verbal-visual relations

Why, among the arts, such interest in images in particular as subject matter for poems? This book will suggest a number of reasons, but two, I think, predominate. First, poets, like the rest of us, look at images because they are everywhere. The widespread presence of ekphrasis in twentieth-century poetry can be understood as both a response to and a participant in what W. J. T. Mitchell has called "the pictorial turn" from a culture of words into a culture of images that began in the late nineteenth century with the advent of photography and then film, and has accelerated since the mid twentieth century with the invention of television and, now, digital media.¹⁴ Excited – and haunted – by a sense of images' increasing

power in western culture, poets have taken up ekphrasis as a way of engaging and understanding their allure and force. With the founding of public art museums, beginning in the late eighteenth century and increasing through the twentieth (the Louvre in 1793; the National Gallery, London in 1824; the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1880; MoMA in 1929; the National Gallery, Washington in 1941), works of art have become readily available, and sometimes popular with a large public, as the blockbuster exhibitions of the late twentieth century attest. Photographic reproductions on postcards, posters, exhibition catalogues and, most recently, websites – constituting what André Malraux called a “museum without walls” – have helped make works of art vital participants in visual culture.¹⁵

At the heart of twentieth-century ekphrasis is this growing familiarity of works of art among a broad reading public. Poets write on a Van Gogh or Brueghel or Monet or Hopper aware that those works are available to the eye and the mind’s eye of an audience. As I’ll argue in Chapters 2 (Brueghel) and 3 (Van Gogh), ekphrasis has both increased and tapped the cultural currency of the images it engages, and helped shape the debate about them. When Anne Sexton writes on Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*, for example, she appeals to wide-spread familiarity with the image and enters into the popular debate about madness and artistic genius that centered on Van Gogh. Paul Durcan’s 1991 volume of poems on the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland rose to the top of the best-seller list and sold 20,000 copies in Dublin in two months. There’s an audience beyond the usual poetry readers interested in a poet’s take on images, and not just in Ireland.

Along with the deep pleasure and the sense of excitement and possibility for poetry in being involved with images comes the nagging sense that pictures have something that words do not – and an underlying fear that the power to shape culture is passing from one medium to another. Modern poems on works of art are fraught with mixed emotions about images. McClatchy’s sense of painting as a dying parent or concealed lover gets at a complex, ambivalent feeling that the visual arts are an intimate, pressing bodily presence in the next room. Ekphrasis is an emphatically deictic mode: “Here,” says Snodgrass above, indicating how tightly the space of the painting binds to his own. “See,” “Look” are frequent imperatives of the pointing poet. From early Pound and the imagists to the post-language poets, poets have seen in works of art an immediacy, a presence, a “hereness” that they have wanted for words, but that they suspect words can only gesture toward. “The writer will always envy the

painter,” said James Merrill in “Notes on Corot.”¹⁶ When Seamus Heaney set out to collaborate with photographer Rachel Giese on *Sweeney’s Flight* (1992), he confessed he feared a “misalliance of some sort between the impersonal instantaneous thereness of the picture . . . and the personal, time-stretching pleas of the verse.”¹⁷ The word might be shown up as a beggar for the audience’s attention, having to start from a disadvantaged position as symbolic and non-objective statement. No amount of talk about the illusion of the natural sign in painting, about images as semiotic systems too, or about writing as itself visual and material, can do away with the suspicion that the image participates in the physical world and/or can give access to it in a more direct, less mediated way than language. Modern painting’s emphasis on its own materials and making, which could make painting seem more like writing, did little to banish the persistent sense among many ekphrastic poets that painting still has more presence in the world than words. As Frank O’Hara said so wistfully to Larry Rivers, “You do what I can only name.”

The second major reason for the prevalence of ekphrasis in twentieth-century poetry arises from the particular resources of the genre itself, beginning with its given structure. Writing on a work of art differs from writing on a natural object in that the work of art constitutes a statement already made about/in the world. As the staging of the relation between words and images, poet and artist, ekphrasis is inherently dialogic. What Mary Ann Caws calls the “afterness” of ekphrasis, which sometimes translates as a sense of belatedness, is also the fundamental relatedness of ekphrasis.¹⁸ The ekphrastic poet always responds to someone else’s work. The poet who would write on a work of art, says James Merrill, must “listen for its opening words.”¹⁹ Ekphrasis is a mode of poetry that, by its very nature, opens out of lyric subjectivity into a social world. In the twentieth century, it has been one means of making the lyric, the dominant poetic mode, more flexible; of expanding lyric subjectivity into a field that includes at least one other, the artist/work of art, with a third always present and sometimes active in the exchange, the audience. What we might call the “ekphrastic situation” – the poet engaging the work of art and representing it to an audience – contains at least three participants. In arguing for the key role of the Victorian “literature of art” in the transition from Romanticism to modernism, Richard Stein pointed to the dynamics this triangle introduced into the lyric: “the writer now mediates between an external object, an acknowledged personal perspective on it, and a felt need to create a new public context of values.”²⁰ The importance of the audience’s role to a revitalized poetry became increasingly important in the

twentieth century as poetry further lost popular readership and its significant social role. Ekphrasis engages the reader: "The reference to a second art gives a new and important role to the reader-spectator, who shares the writer's contemplation of an external artifact."²¹ Randall Jarrell prompted the readers of "The Knight, Death, and the Devil," on Dürer's engraving of the same name, to compare "the details of the poem with those of the picture," to engage in the conversation of interpretation.²² W. D. Snodgrass, above, gives his readers "instructions" for visiting the scene in Vuillard's disturbing portrait of his mother and sister. The opening of the lyric field into a social realm thus happens along two lines – the poet's relation with the artist/work of art and his relation to his audience – and in the interaction among the three.

Richard Wilbur's "A Dutch Courtyard" (1947), a witty send-up of the ekphrastic situation, exposes the urgency of the social relations inherent in ekphrasis and suggests what the stakes can be:

A Dutch Courtyard

What wholly blameless fun
 To stand and look at pictures. Ah, they are
 Immune to us. This courtyard may appear
 To be consumed with sun,

 Most mortally to burn,
 Yet it is quite beyond the reach of eyes
 Or thoughts, this place and moment oxidize;
 This girl will never turn,

 Cry what you dare, but smiles
 Tirelessly toward the seated cavalier,
 Who will not proffer you his pot of beer;
 And your most lavish wiles

 Can never turn this chair
 To proper uses, nor your guile evict
 These tenants. What surprising strict
 Propriety! In despair,

 Consumed with greedy ire,
 Old Andrew Mellon glowered at this Dutch
 Courtyard, until it bothered him so much
 He bought the thing entire.²³



Figure 1 Pieter De Hooch, *A Dutch Courtyard* (1658/1660).

At the heart of this self-ironic “ars ekphrasis” is a triangular set of social relations: between the speaker/poet and the figures depicted in De Hooch’s seventeenth-century Dutch genre scene (Fig. 1); between the speaker/poet and De Hooch, whose painting seems to invite the viewer in with its ordinary domestic scene of people talking and laughing and its perspective lines opening the space of the picture into ours (see how the floor extends

to include us); and between the speaker/poet and his audience/fellow viewer (the “us”). The poem revolves around how the parties involved conduct their relations: not well, in Wilbur’s scenario. This ekphrastic poet has a grievance: “This girl will never turn, // Cry what you dare, but smiles / Tirelessly toward the seated cavalier, / Who will not proffer you his pot of beer.” The figures in De Hooch’s scene refuse entry to the party, despite the invitation the painting seems to offer.

So, out of the ekphrastic situation, the simple, “blameless fun” of looking at pictures, balloon big issues of life and art. The ekphrastic poet, the poem implies, comes to the painting seeking friendship, fun, a little flirtation: in short, connection to others in a world that seems warmer and more certain than his own, only to find it indifferent to him. “That simpler world from which we’ve been evicted,” is how Sassoon similarly described the scene in an English landscape.²⁴ This is the cry of nostalgic modernity, uttered with all the shock of the new in Sassoon’s case, satirized, though acknowledged, in Wilbur’s. With one foot often in the past, ekphrasis can thus dramatize in social terms the relation of the present to the past in an age in which that past seems to beckon, only to turn its back.

Looking is not, never has been, ethically neutral, and ekphrasis stages relations lived under that fact.²⁵ Wilbur’s poem tackles directly this underlying condition of ekphrasis. Whether looking serves truth out of which right action grows or is proprietary and invasive (itself an act of transgression) troubles the moderns: “What wholly blameless fun,” Wilbur mocks our willfully innocent desire to look.²⁶ Ethically charged, too, is the collecting that begat the modern art museum out of which this and most modern ekphrases come. With the poem’s language of property, Wilbur tests the relation between art and material possession which his choice of ekphrastic object reinforces: Dutch genre scenes such as De Hooch’s were painted for a booming art market in a newly independent country of merchants and farmers, eager to exercise their buying power and to have their national identity reflected and validated in paint. Acutely aware of his situation both physically (in the National Gallery in Washington, DC) and ethically, Wilbur knows that he and Mellon (the Gallery’s founder) are allied in the “greedy ire” with which they set out to possess the object of desire.

“A Dutch Courtyard” plays to the hilt the gendering of poet and work of art that has been taken as a hallmark of ekphrasis by recent commentators: the observing male poet gazing on the feminized image and wanting his way with her.²⁷ Mellon and Wilbur are outrageously, stereotypically, male, intent on seducing and finally possessing the resolutely independent females in the image, and the recalcitrant feminized image. The “guile” and

“lavish wiles” Wilbur deploys in his pursuit include this poem’s showily deft quatrains and clever rhymes. They mock the poet’s doomed efforts. Ekphrasis thus opens the charged terrain of twentieth-century gender struggles. The gender dynamics of the ekphrastic situation so evident in “A Dutch Courtyard,” is, I will argue, questioned, reversed and differently written in significant ways in twentieth-century ekphrases, especially those by women.

Wilbur’s poem also plays up the self-reflexive nature of ekphrasis: writing on a work of art becomes a way of looking sideways at poetry. “A Dutch Courtyard” dramatizes the relation of the poet to his materials, laying bare and thematizing, again in social terms, what the poet does with the objects he contemplates, and how those objects respond. Wilbur’s gallery-goer/poet is caught between resistant material and his own desire to “make” something of it. If we as readers consult the originating images (sometimes even presented to us on the page with the poem), ekphrasis often allows us to see for ourselves how the poet has treated his subjects.

Ekphrasis occurs early, middle and late in the century, and crosses the stylistic spectrum. I want to suggest that the prevalence of ekphrasis indicates continuous and ongoing efforts across the century to break open the possibilities of lyric poetry. In his influential account of the transformation of modern to contemporary American poetry (1984), James Breslin located an “opening of the field” of poetry in the work produced in the 1950s by five loose groups exemplified by Allen Ginsberg (Beats), Robert Lowell (confessionals), Denise Levertov (Black Mountain), Frank O’Hara (New York School) and James Wright (Deep Image): “with the shattering of the hermetically sealed autotelic poem, American poetry broke open to the physical moment – the literal, the temporal, the immediate.”²⁸ Breslin talks in terms of a mid-century “breakthrough” from fixed forms to open, processual free verse that exposes the material nature of language. But the desire to open the field of the lyric poem (never so enclosed or monolithic as Breslin represents it, in any case) crosses the stylistic divide he constructs and is pursued by other means as well. It lies behind the prevalence of ekphrasis. In focusing on a work of art, ekphrasis, by its very nature, does what Breslin’s shattered autotelic poem does, “acknowledge[s] an immediate external reality that remains stubbornly other.”²⁹ The ekphrastic poem is all about that otherness, and about how one engages it. While Richard Wilbur, with his persistent formalism, represents what Breslin’s postwar American experimenters supposedly break through from, “A Dutch Courtyard” nevertheless shows Wilbur dramatizing, and accepting, the otherness of an irrefutable external reality