

Ekphrastic Poetry

Ekphrasis: writing that comments upon another art form, for instance a poem about a photograph or a novel about a film. Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a prime example of this type of writing, since the entire poem concerns the appearance and meaning of an ancient piece of pottery.

Assignment:

For Paper 3, you will need to select a poem and artwork to analyze and compare in some way. In class we have been attempting to read poems as if they were paintings on a canvas, and for your next paper I would like you to explore the intersection of literature and the visual arts. The length requirement will be the same as your previous papers, four to five pages, so you will need to find a very specific and focused thesis statement that compares your two pieces of art. You will need to include a minimum of four sources, including the two works you are examining.

Some issues to consider to get you started in the direction of a thesis: the type of language used by the poet and the "syntax" of lines used by the painter; composition and the use of space, color, shapes, etc.; the level of abstraction; the use of symbols or figurative language; the presence or absence of a subject; the movement of energy; the regularity of line length or rhyme or form and the use or abandonment of structure; time period or regionality of the language or artistic style; the use of materials in the work's construction; pauses, gaps, and punctuation (or lack thereof) in the poem; rhyme, rhythm, and meter; issues of performance, how is this to be performed and/or received by an audience; issues of framing or focus - what has been left out or cropped from the painting or the poem?

Select your works from the examples below, or see the following website, [The Poet Speaks of Art](#), for many (many!) more pairings of paintings with poems. If you uncover additional examples, please email me at valerie6@uga.edu with your suggestions, and many thanks to [the contributors](#) who have helped me compile this webmuseum.

Painting	Poem
Number 1 Jackson Pollock (1948)	"Number 1 by Jackson Pollock" Nancy Sullivan (1965) No name but a number. Trickles and valleys of paint Devise this maze Into a game of Monopoly Without any bank. Into A linoleum on the floor In a dream. Into Murals inside of the mind. No similes here. Nothing But paint. Such purity



Taxes the poem that speaks
Still of something in a place
Or at a time.
How to realize his question
Let alone his answer?

Painting and Poem

Starry Night

Vincent van Gogh (1889)



"The Starry Night"

Anne Sexton (1961)

The town does not exist
except where one black-haired tree slips
up like a drowned woman into the hot sky.
The town is silent. The night boils with eleven stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die.

Song

"Vincent (Starry, Starry Night)"

Don McLean

Starry, starry night
Paint your palette blue and grey
Look out on a summer's day
With eyes that know the darkness in my soul

Shadows on the hills
Sketch the trees and the daffodils
Catch the breeze and the winter chills
In colors on the snowy linen land

Now I understand
What you tried to say to me
And how you suffered for your sanity
And how you tried to set them free
They would not listen, they did not know
how
Perhaps they'll listen now

Starry, starry night
Flaming flowers that brightly blaze
Swirling clouds and violet haze
Reflect in Vincent's eyes of china blue

Colors changing hue
Morning fields of amber grain

It moves. They are all alive.
Even the moon bulges in its orange irons
to push children, like a god, from its eye.
The old unseen serpent swallows up the stars.
Oh starry starry night! This is how
I want to die:

into that rushing beast of the night,
sucked up by that great dragon, to split
from my life with no flag,
no belly,
no cry.

Weathered faces lined in pain
Are soothed beneath the artists' loving hand

Now I understand
What you tried to say to me
And how you suffered for your sanity
And how you tried to set them free
They would not listen, they did not know
how
Perhaps they'll listen now

For they could not love you
But still your love was true
And when no hope was left in sight
On that starry, starry night
You took your life as lovers often do
But I could have told you Vincent
This world was never meant
For one as beautiful as you

Like the strangers that you've met
The ragged men in ragged clothes
The silver thorn and bloody rose
Lie crushed and broken on the virgin snow

Now I think I know
What you tried to say to me
And how you suffered for your sanity
And how you tried to set them free
They would not listen, they're not listening
still
Perhaps they never will.

Painting and Two Related Poems

Fall of Icarus
Pieter Brueghel the Elder (c. 1558)



***Note: Icarus is in the water in front of the ship. Only his legs are visible as he falls to his death.**

"Musée des Beaux Arts"

W. H. Auden (1938)

About suffering they were never wrong,
 The Old Masters: how well they understood
 Its human position; how it takes place
 While someone else is eating or opening a window or
 just walking dully along;
 How, when the aged are reverently, passionately
 waiting
 For the miraculous birth, there always must be
 Children who did not specially want it to happen,
 skating
 On a pond at the edge of the wood:
 They never forgot
 That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
 Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
 Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the
 torturer's horse
 Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything
 turns away
 Quite leisurely from the disaster; the plowman may
 Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
 But for him it was not an important failure; the sun
 shone
 As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the
 green
 Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have

"Landscape with the Fall of Icarus"

William Carlos Williams (1962)

According to Brueghel
 when Icarus fell
 it was spring

a farmer was ploughing
 his field
 the whole pageantry

of the year was
 awake tingling
 near

the edge of the sea
 concerned
 with itself

sweating in the sun
 that melted
 the wings' wax

unsignificantly
 off the coast
 there was

a splash quite unnoticed
 this was

seen Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.	Icarus drowning
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Monument	Three Related Poems
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The Vietnam Veterans War Memorial in Washington D.C., built in 1982, is a huge black granite wall carved into the ground. The over 58,000 names are not listed in alphabetical order, but in chronological order of death or capture.

"Facing It"
Yusef Komunyakaa
(1988)

My black face fades,

hiding inside the
black granite.
I said I wouldn't,
dammit: No tears.
I'm stone. I'm flesh.
My clouded
reflection eyes me
like a bird of prey,
the profile of night
slanted against
morning. I turn
this way -- the stone
lets me go.
I turn that way -- I'm
inside
the Vietnam
Veterans Memorial
again, depending on
the light
to make a difference.

I go down the
58,022 names,
half-expecting to
find
my own in letters
like smoke.
I touch the name
Andrew Johnson;
I see the booby trap's

white flash.
Names shimmer on a
woman's blouse
but when she walks
away
the names stay on
the wall.
Brushstrokes flash, a
red bird's
wings cutting across
my stare.
The sky. A plane in
the sky.
A white vet's image
floats
closer to me, then
his pale eyes
look through mine.
I'm a window.
He's lost his right
arm
inside the stone. In
the black mirror
a woman's trying to
erase names:
No, she's brushing a
boy's hair.

"Reflection on the Vietnam War Memorial"
Jeffrey Harrison (1987)

Here is, the back porch of the dead.
You can see them milling around in there,
 screened in by their own names,
 looking at us in the same
vague and serious way we look at them.

An underground house, a roof of grass --
one version of the underworld. It's all
 we know of death, a world
 like our own (but darker, blurred).
inhabited by beings like ourselves.

The location of the name you're looking for
can be looked up in a book whose resemblance
 to a phone book seems to claim
 some contact can be made

"The Vietnam Wall"
Alberto Rios (1988)

I
Have seen it
And I like it: The
magic,
The way like cutting
onions
It brings water out of
nowhere.
Invisible from one
side, a scar
Into the skin of the
ground
From the other, a
black winding
Appendix line.

through the simple act of finding a name.

As we touch the name the stone absorbs our grief.
It takes us in -- we see ourselves inside it.

And yet we feel it as a wall
and realize the dead are all
just names now, the separation final.

A dig.

An
archaeologist can
explain.
The walk is slow at
first,
Easy, a little black
marble wall
Of a dollhouse,
A smoothness, a
shine
The boys in the
street want to give.
One name. And
then more
Names, long lines,
lines of names until
They are the shape
of the U.N. Building

Taller than I am: I
have walked
Into a grace.
And everything I
expect has been
taken away, like
that, quick:

The names are
not alphabetized.

They are in the
order of dying,

An alphabet of --
somewhere--
screaming.

I start to walk out. I
almost leave
But stop to look up
names of friends,
My own name.

There is somebody
Severiano Ríos.

Little kids do not
make the same
noise

Here, junior high
school boys don't

run
Or hold each other in
headlocks.
No rules, something
just persists
Like pinching on St.
Patrick's Day
Every year for no
green.
No one knows
why.
Flowers are forced
Into the cracks
Between sections.
Men have cried
At this wall.
I have
Seen them.

Painting

Girl Before a Mirror
Pablo Picasso (1932)



Poem

"Before the Mirror"
John Updike (1996)

How many of us still remember
when Picasso's "Girl Before a Mirror" hung
at the turning of the stairs in the pre-
expansion Museum of Modern Art?
Millions of us, probably, but we form
a dwindling population. Garish
and brush-slashed and yet as balanced
as a cardboard Queen in a deck of giant cards,
the painting proclaimed, "Enter here
and abandon preconception." She bounced
the erotic balls of herself back and forth
between reflection and reality.

Now I discover, in the recent re-
trospective at the establishment,
that the vivid painting dates
from March of 1932,
the very month which I first saw light,
squinting nostalgia for the womb.
I bend closer, inspecting. The blacks,
the stripy cyanide greens are still uncracked,
I note with satisfaction; the cherry reds

and lemon yellows full of childish juice.
No sag, no wrinkle. Fresh as paint. Back then
they knew how, I reflect, to lay it on.

Painting

American Flamingo John James Audubon (1838)



Poem

"American Flamingo" Greg Pape (1998)

I know he shot them to know them.
I did not know the eyes of the flamingo
are blue, a deep live blue.

And the tongue is lined with many small
tongues, thirteen, in the sketch
by Audubon, to function as a sieve.

I knew the long rose-pink neck,
the heavy tricolored down-sweeping bill,
the black primaries.

But I did not know the blue eye
drawn so passionately by Audubon
it seems to look out, wary, intense,

from the paper it is printed on.

-- *what*

Is man but his passion?

asked Robert Penn Warren. In the background
of this sketch, tenderly subtitled Old Male,
beneath the over-draping feathered


monument of the body, between the long
flexible neck and the long bony legs
covered with pink plates of flesh,

Audubon has given us eight postures,
eight stunning movements in the ongoing
dance of the flamingos.

Once at Hialeah in late afternoon
I watched the satin figures of the jockeys
perched like bright beetles on the backs

of horses pounding down the home
stretch, a few crops whipping
the lathering flanks, the loud flat

	<p>metallic voice of the announcer fading as the flamingos, grazing the pond water at the far end of the infield, rose</p> <p>in a feathery blush, only a few feet off the ground, and flew one long clipped-winged ritual lap</p> <p>in the heavy Miami light, a great slow swirl of grace from the old world that made tickets fall from hands,</p> <p>stilled horses, and drew toasts from the stands as they settled down again like a rose-colored fog on the pond.</p>
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Painting	Poem
<p>I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold Charles Demuth (1928)</p> 	<p>"The Great Figure" William Carlos Williams (1920)</p> <p>Among the rain and lights I saw the figure 5 in gold on a red firetruck moving tense unheeded to gong clangs siren howls and wheels rumbling through the dark city.</p> <p>*Note: in this case, the poem inspired the painting, not the other way around.</p>

Occult Game	Two Related Poems
<p>Ouija Boards</p>	<p>"Ouija"</p>

Originated c.1850

All images taken from the [Museum of Talking Boards](#)



Kennard Novelty Co. Board (1891)



I-D-O PSY-CHO-I-D-E-O-GRAPH (1919)



Lee Ind. Glow in the Dark Edition (1940)



Parker Brothers Deluxe Edition (1967)

Sylvia Plath (1957)

It is a chilly god, a god of shades,
Rises to the glass from his black fathoms.
At the window, those unborn, those undone
Assemble with the frail paleness of moths,
An envious phosphorescence in their wings.
Vermillions, bronzes, colors of the sun
In the coal fire will not wholly console them.
Imagine their deep hunger, deep as the dark
For the blood-heat that would ruddlr or reclaim.
The glass mouth sucks blooh-heat from my
forefinger.

The old god dribbles, in return, his words.

The old god, too, write aureate poetry
In tarnished modes, maundering among the wastes,
Fair chronicler of every foul declension.
Age, and ages of prose, have uncoiled
His talking whirlwind, abated his excessive temper
When words, like locusts, drummed the darkening air

And left the cobs to rattle, bitten clean.
Skies once wearing a blue, divine hauteur
Ravel above us, mistily descend,
Thickening with motes, to a marriage with the mire.

He hymns the rotten queen with saffron hair
Who has saltier aphrodisiacs
Than virgins' tears. That bawdy queen of death,
Her wormy couriers aer at his bones.
Still he hymns juice of her, hot nectarine.
I see him, horny-skinned and tough, construe
What flinty pebbles and ploughable upturns
As ponderable tokens of her love.
He, godly, doddering, spells
No succinct Gabriel from the letters here
But floridly, his amorous nostalgias.

Excerpts from *The Book of Ephraim*

James Merrill (1980)

Here, there, swift handle pointing, letter upon
Letter taken down blind by my free hand --
At best so clumsily, those early sessions
Break off into guesswork, paraphrase.



Predicta All Knowing Magii Board (1968)



Colorforms Finger of Fate (1971)

Too much went whizzing past. We were too nice
To pause, divide the alphabetical
Gibberish into words and sentences.

Another evening at the Ouija board
(Which only worked when you were side by side,
Fingertips touching hers--
That women, smoking, auburn-haired, abhorred)

A word from Eros made it all worthwhile:
UPON MY STAGE DEAD HUNTERS DANCED IN
TIME
WITH THOSE U SAW BELOW
Leo, transcribing it, looked up. His smile.

--

Jung says --or if he doesn't, all but does --
That God and the Unconscious are one. Hm.
The lapse that tides us over, hither, yon;
Tide that laps us home away from home.
Onstage, the sudden trap about to yawn --
Darkness impenetrable, pit wherein
Two grapplers lock, pale skin and copper skin.
Impenetrable brilliance, topmost panes
Catching the sunset, of a house gone black...
Ephraim, my dear, let's face it. If I fall
From a high building, it's your name I'll call,
OK? Now let me go downstairs to pack,
Begin to close the home away from home --
Upper story, lower, doublings, triplings,
Someone not Strato helping with my bags,
Someone not Kleo coming to dust and water
Days from now. And when I stroll by ripples
A winged Lion of gold with open book
Stands watch above, what vigilance will keep
Me from one emblematic, imminent,
Utterly harmless failure of recall.
Let's face it: the Unconscious, after all...

Painting

Poem

Nude Descending a Staircase

Marcel Duchamp (1912)



"Nude Descending a Staircase"

X. J. Kennedy (1961)

Toe upon toe, a snowing flesh,
A gold of lemon, root and rind,
She sifts in sunlight down the stairs
With nothing on. Nor on her mind.

We spy beneath the banister
A constant thresh of thigh on thigh--
Her lips imprint the swinging air
That parts to let her parts go by.

One-woman waterfall, she wears
Her slow descent like a long cape
And pausing, on the final stair
Collects her motions into shape.

Painting

The Great Wave at Kamagawa

Katsushika Hokusai (1823)



Poem

"The Great Wave: Hokusai"

Donald Finkel (1991)

*But we will take the problem in its most obscure
manifestation, and suppose that our spectator is an average
Englishman. A trained observer. carefully hidden behind a
screen, might notice a dilation in his eyes, even an intake
of his breath, perhaps a grunt. (Herbert Read, The Meaning of
Art)*

It is because the sea is blue,
Because Fuji is blue, because the bent blue
Men have white faces, like the snow
On Fuji, like the crest of the wave in the sky the color of their
Boats. It is because the air
Is full of writing, because the wave is still: that nothing
Will harm these frail strangers,
That high over Fuji in an earthcolored sky the fingers
Will not fall; and the blue men
Lean on the sea like snow, and the wave like a mountain leans
Against the sky.

In the painter's sea
All fishermen are safe. All anger bends under his unity.

But the innocent bystander, he merely
 'Walks round a corner, thinking of nothing': hidden
 Behind a screen we hear his cry.
 He stands half in and half out of the world; he is the men,
 But he cannot see below Fuji
 The shore the color of sky; he is the wave, he stretches
 His claws against strangers. He is
 Not safe, not even from himself. His world is flat.
 He fishes a sea full of serpents, he rides his boat
 Blindly from wave to wave toward Ararat.

Painting

House by the Railroad
 Edward Hopper (1925)



Poem

"Edward Hopper and the House by the Railroad"

Edward Hirsch (1995)

Out here in the exact middle of the day,
 This strange, gawky house has the expression
 Of someone being stared at, someone holding

His breath underwater, hushed and expectant;

This house is ashamed of itself, ashamed
 Of its fantastic mansard rooftop
 And its pseudo-Gothic porch, ashamed
 Of its shoulders and large, awkward hands.

But the man behind the easel is relentless.
 He is as brutal as sunlight, and believes
 The house must have done something horrible

To the people who once lived here

Because now it is so desperately empty,
 It must have done something to the sky
 Because the sky, too, is utterly vacant
 And devoid of meaning. There are no

Trees or shrubs anywhere--the house
 Must have done something against the earth.
 All that is present is a single pair of tracks
 Straightening into the distance. No trains
 pass.

Now the stranger returns to this place daily
 Until the house begins to suspect

That the man, too, is desolate, desolate
And even ashamed. Soon the house starts

To stare frankly at the man. And somehow
The empty white canvas slowly takes on
The expression of someone who is unnerved,
Someone holding his breath underwater.

And then one day the man simply disappears.
He is a last afternoon shadow moving
Across the tracks, making its way
Through the vast, darkening fields.

This man will paint other abandoned
mansions,
And faded cafeteria windows, and poorly
lettered
Storefronts on the edges of small towns.
Always they will have this same expression,

The utterly naked look of someone
Being stared at, someone American and
gawky.
Someone who is about to be left alone
Again, and can no longer stand it.

Painting

The Village of the Mermaids
Paul Delvaux (1942)



Poem

"Paul Delvaux: The Village of the Mermaids"
Lisel Mueller (1988)

Who is that man in black, walking
away from us into the distance?
The painter, they say, took a long time
finding his vision of the world.

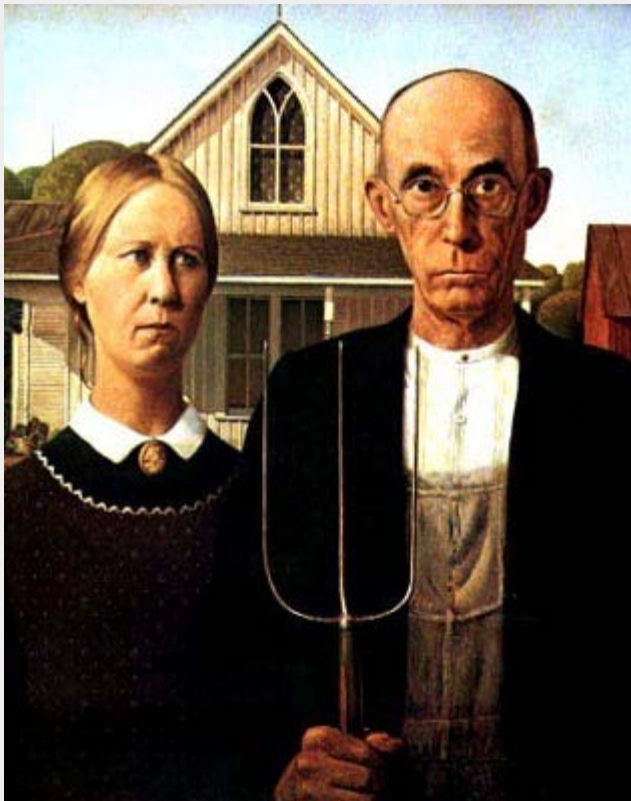
The mermaids, if that is what they are
under their full-length skirts,
sit facing each other
all down the street, more of an alley,
in front of their gray row houses.
They all look the same, like a fair-haired
order of nuns, or like prostitutes
with chaste, identical faces.
How calm they are, with their vacant eyes,
their hands in laps that betray nothing.

Only one has scales on her dusky dress.

It is 1942; it is Europe,
and nothing fits. The one familiar figure
is the man in black approaching the sea,
and he is small and walking away from us.

Painting

American Gothic
Grant Wood (1930)



Poem

"American Gothic"
John Stone (1998)

Just outside the frame
there has to be a dog
chickens, cows and hay

and a smokehouse
where a ham in hickory
is also being preserved

Here for all time
the borders of the Gothic window
anticipate the ribs

of the house
the tines of the pitchfork
repeat the triumph

of his overalls
and front and center
the long faces, the sober lips

above the upright spines
of this couple
arrested in the name of art

These two
by now
the sun this high

ought to be
in mortal time
about their businesses

Instead they linger here
within the patient fabric
of the lives they wove

he asking the artist silently
 how much longer
 and worrying about the crops

she no less concerned about the crops
 but more to the point just now
 whether she remembered

to turn off the stove.

Painting

Girl Powdering Her Neck
 Kitagawa Utamaro (c. 1790)



Poem

"Girl Powdering Her Neck"
 Cathy Song (1983)

The light is the inside
 sheen of an oyster shell,
 sponged with talc and vapor,
 moisture from a bath.

A pair of slippers
 are placed outside
 the rice-paper doors.
 She kneels at a low table
 in the room,
 her legs folded beneath her
 as she sits on a buckwheat pillow.

Her hair is black
 with hints of red,
 the color of seaweed
 spread over rocks.

Morning begins the ritual
 wheel of the body,
 the application of translucent skins.
 She practices pleasure:
 the pressure of three fingertips
 applying powder.
 Fingerprints of pollen
 some other hand will trace.

The peach-dyed kimono
 patterned with maple leaves
 drifting across the silk,
 falls from right to left

in a diagonal, revealing
the nape of her neck
and the curve of a shoulder
like the slope of a hill
set deep in snow in a country
of huge white solemn birds.
Her face appears in the mirror,
a reflection in a winter pond,
rising to meet itself.

She dips a corner of her sleeve
like a brush into water
to wipe the mirror;
she is about to paint herself.
The eyes narrow
in a moment of self-scrutiny.
The mouth parts
as if desiring to disturb
the placid plum face;
break the symmetry of silence.
But the berry-stained lips,
stenciled into the mask of beauty,
do not speak.

Two chrysanthemums
touch in the middle of the lake
and drift apart.

Painting

St. George and the Dragon
Paolo Uccello (1460)

Poem

"Not My Best Side"
U. A. Fanthorpe (1989)

I

Not my best side, I'm afraid.
The artist didn't give me a chance to
Pose properly, and as you can see,
Poor chap, he had this obsession with
Triangles, so he left off two of my
Feet. I didn't comment at the time
(What, after all, are two feet
To a monster?) but afterwards
I was sorry for the bad publicity.
Why, I said to myself, should my conqueror
Be so ostentatiously beardless, and ride



A horse with a deformed neck and square
hoofs?

Why should my victim be so
Unattractive as to be inedible,
And why should she have me literally
On a string? I don't mind dying
Ritually, since I always rise again,
But I should have liked a little more blood
To show they were taking me seriously.

II

It's hard for a girl to be sure if
She wants to be rescued. I mean, I quite
Took to the dragon. It's nice to be
Liked, if you know what I mean. He was
So nicely physical, with his claws
And lovely green skin, and that sexy tail,
And the way he looked at me,
He made me feel he was all ready to
Eat me. And any girl enjoys that.
So when this boy turned up, wearing
machinery,
On a really dangerous horse, to be honest
I didn't much fancy him. I mean,
What was he like underneath the hardware?
He might have acne, blackheads or even
Bad breath for all I could tell, but the dragon-

Well, you could see all his equipment
At a glance. Still, what could I do?
The dragon got himself beaten by the boy,
And a girl's got to think of her future.

III

I have diplomas in Dragon
 Management and Virgin Reclamation.
 My horse is the latest model, with
 Automatic transmission and built-in
 Obsolescence. My spear is custom-built,
 And my prototype armour
 Still on the secret list. You can't
 Do better than me at the moment.
 I'm qualified and equipped to the
 Eyebrow. So why be difficult?
 Don't you want to be killed and/or rescued
 In the most contemporary way? Don't
 You want to carry out the roles
 That sociology and myth have designed for
 you?
 Don't you realize that, by being choosy,
 You are endangering job prospects
 In the spear- and horse-building industries?
 What, in any case, does it matter what
 You want? You're in my way.

Painting

L'Estaque
 Paul Cezanne (1883)



Poem

"Cezanne's Ports"
 Allen Ginsberg (1950)

In the foreground we see time and life
 swept in a race
 toward the left hand side of the picture
 where shore meets shore.

But that meeting place
 isn't represented;
 it doesn't occur on the canvas.

For the other side of the bay
 is Heaven and Eternity,
 with a bleak white haze over its mountains.

And the immense water of L'Estaque is a go-
 between
 for minute rowboats.

Artwork

Sketch of Grecian Urn

John Keats (1819)



"Ode on a Grecian Urn Summarized"

Desmond Skirrow (1960)

Gods chase
Round vase.
What say?
What play?
Don't know.
Nice, though.

Poem

"Ode on a Grecian Urn"

John Keats (1819)

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

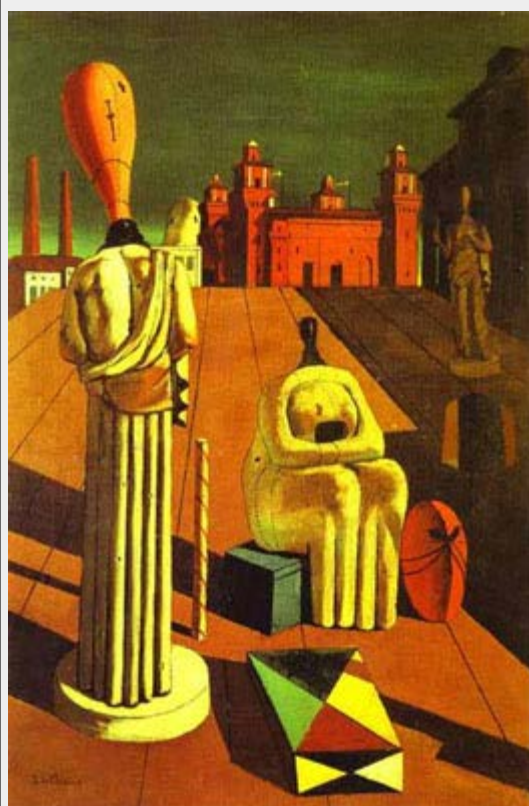
Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore

Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," --that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Painting

The Disquieting Muses
Giorgio de Chirico (1916)



Poem

"The Disquieting Muses"
Sylvia Plath (1957)

Mother, mother, what illbred aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly
Cousin did you so unwisely keep
Unasked to my christening, that she
Sent these ladies in her stead
With heads like darning-eggs to nod
And nod and nod at foot and head
And at the left side of my crib?

Mother, who made to order stories
Of Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear,
Mother, whose witches always, always,
Got baked into gingerbread, I wonder
Whether you saw them, whether you said
Words to rid me of those three ladies
Nodding by night around my bed,
Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head.

In the hurricane, when father's twelve
Study windows bellied in
Like bubbles about to break, you fed
My brother and me cookies and Ovaltine
And helped the two of us to choir:
"Thor is angry: boom boom boom!"
Thor is angry: we don't care!"
But those ladies broke the panes.

When on tiptoe the schoolgirls danced,
Blinking flashlights like fireflies
And singing the glowworm song, I could
Not lift a foot in the twinkle-dress
But, heavy-footed, stood aside
In the shadow cast by my dismal-headed
Godmothers, and you cried and cried:
And the shadow stretched, the lights went out.

Mother, you sent me to piano lessons
And praised my arabesques and trills
Although each teacher found my touch
Oddly wooden in spite of scales
And the hours of practicing, my ear
Tone-deaf and yes, unteachable.
I learned, I learned, I learned elsewhere,
From muses unhired by you, dear mother,

I woke one day to see you, mother,
Floating above me in bluest air
On a green balloon bright with a million
Flowers and bluebirds that never were
Never, never, found anywhere.
But the little planet bobbed away
Like a soap-bubble as you called: Come here!
And I faced my traveling companions.

Day now, night now, at head, side, feet,
They stand their vigil in gowns of stone,
Faces blank as the day I was born,
Their shadows long in the setting sun
That never brightens or goes down.
And this is the kingdom you bore me to,
Mother, mother. But no frown of mine
Will betray the company I keep.

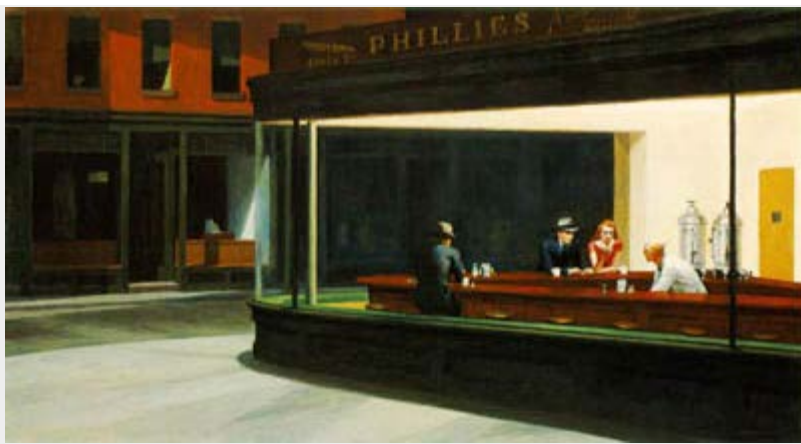
Painting

Nighthawks
Edward Hopper (1942)

Poem

"A Midnight Diner by Edward Hopper"
David Ray (1970)

Your own greyhounds bark at your side.
It is you, dressed like a Siennese,
Gallop[ing], ripping the gown as the fabled
White-skinned woman runs, seeking freedom.



Tiny points of birches rise from hills,
Spin like serrulate corkscrews toward the sky;

In other rooms it is your happiness
Flower petals fall for, your brocade
You rediscover, feel bloom upon your
shoulder.

And freedom's what the gallery's for.
You roam in large rooms and choose your
beauty.
Yet, Madman, it's your own life you turn
back to:
In one postcard purchase you wipe out
Centuries of light and smiles, golden skin
And openness, forest babes and calves.
You forsake the sparkler breast
That makes the galaxies, you betray
The women who dance upon the water,
All for some bizarre hometown necessity!
Some ache still found within you!
Now it will go with you, this scene
By Edward Hopper and nothing else.
It will become your own tableau of sadness
Composed of blue and grey already there.
Over or not, this suffering will not say
Hosanna.
Now a music will not come out of it.
Grey hat, blue suit, you are in a midnight
Diner painted by Edward Hopper.

Here is a man trapped at midnight underneath
the El.
He sought the smoothest counter in the world
And found it here in the almost empty street,
Away from everything he has ever said.
Now he has the silence they've insisted on.
Not a squirrel, not an autumn birch,
Not a hound at his side, moves to help him
now.

His grief is what he'll try to hold in check.
His thumb has found and held his coffee cup.

"Nighthawks"
Samuel Yellen (1952)

The place is the corner of Empty and Bleak,
The time is night's most desolate hour,
The scene is Al's Coffe Cup or the
Hamburger Tower,
The persons in this drama do not speak.

We who peer through that curve of plate glass

Count three nighthawks seated there--patrons
of life:
The counterman will be with you in a jiff,
The thick white mugs were never meant for
demitasse.

The single man whose hunched back we see
Once put a gun to his head in Russian
roulette,
Whirled the chamber, pulled the trigger, won
the bet,
And now lives out his *x* years' guarantee.

And facing us, the two central characters
Have finished their coffee, and have lit
A contemplative cigarette;
His hand lies close, but not touching hers.

Not long ago together in a darkened room,
Mouth burned mouth, flesh beat and ground
On ravaged flesh, and yet they found
No local habitation and no name.

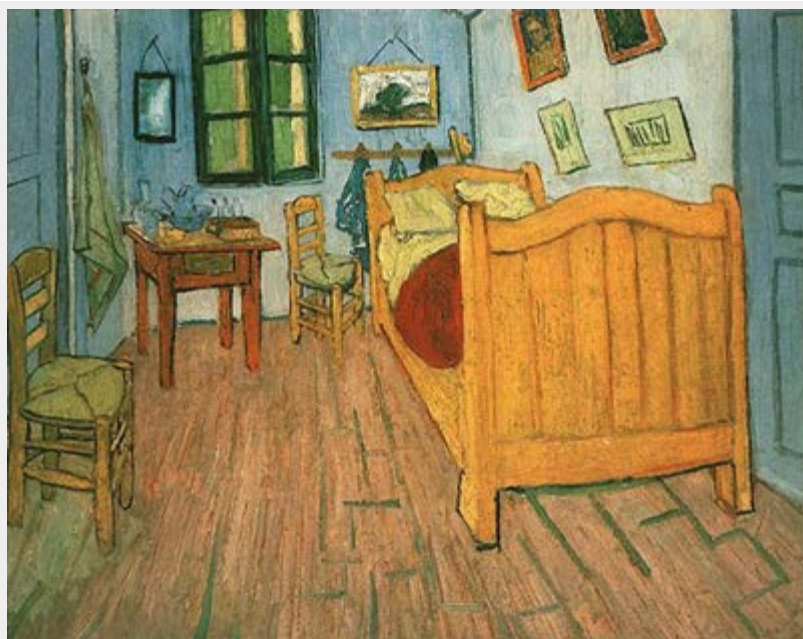
Oh, are we not lucky to be none of these!
We can look on with complacent eye:
Our satisfactions satisfy,
Our pleasures, our pleasures please.

Painting

Vincent's Bedroom in Arles
Vincent van Gogh (1888)

Poem

"Van Gogh's Bed"
Jane Flanders (1985)



is orange,
like Cinderella's coach, like
the sun when he looked it
straight in the eye.

is narrow, he sleeps alone, tossing
between two pillows, while it carried him
bumpily to the ball.

is clumsy,
but friendly. A peasant
built the frame; and old wife beat
the mattress till it rose like meringue.

is empty,
morning light pours in
like wine, melody, fragrance,
the memory of happiness.

Painting

Mourning Picture

Edwin Romanzo Elmer (1890)



Poem

"Mourning Picture"

Adrienne Rich (1965)

They have carried the mahogany chair and
the cane rocker
out under the lilac bush,
and my father and mother darkly sit there, in
black clothes.
Our clapboard house stands fast on its hill,
my doll lies in her wicker pram
gazing at western Massachusetts.
This was our world.
I could remake each shaft of grass
feeling its rasp on my fingers,
draw out the map of every lilac leaf
or the net of veins on my father's
grief-tranced hand.

Out of my head, half-bursting,
still filling, the dream condenses--
shadows, crystals, ceilings, meadows, globes
of dew.
Under the dull green of the lilacs, out in the

light
carving each spoke of the pram, the turned
porch-pillars,
under high early-summer clouds,
I am Effie, visible and invisible,
remembering and remembered.

Sculpture

The Belvedere Torso
Anonymous Athenian Sculptor (1st century BC)



Poem

"To the Fragment of a Statue of Hercules"
Samuel Rogers (1814)

And dost thou still, thou mass of breathing
stone,
(Thy giant limbs to night and chaos hurl'd)
Still sit as on the fragment of a world;
Surviving all, majestic and alone?
What tho' the Spirits of the North, that swept
Rome from the earth, when in her pomp she
slept,
Smote thee with fury, and thy headless trunk
Deep in the dust mid tower and temple sunk;
Soon to subdue mankind 'twas thine to rise.
Still, still unquell'd thy glorious energies!
Aspiring minds, with thee conversing, caught
Bright revelations of the Good they sought;
By thee that long-lost spell in secret given,
To draw down Gods, and lift the soul to
Heav'n!

Painting

Peele Castle in a Storm

Poem

"Elegiac Stanzas"

Sir George Beaumont (1805)



William Wordsworth (1807)

*Suggested by a Picture of PEELE CASTLE, in a Storm,
painted BY SIR GEORGE BEAUMONT.*

I was thy Neighbour once, thou rugged Pile!
Four summer weeks I dwelt in sight of thee:
I saw thee every day; and all the while
Thy Form was sleeping on a glassy sea.

So pure the sky, so quiet was the air!
So like, so very like, was day to day!
Whene'er I look'd, thy Image still was there;
It trembled, but it never pass'd away.

How perfect was the calm! it seem'd no
sleep;
No mood, which season takes away, or
brings:
I could have fancied that the mighty Deep
Was even the gentlest of all gentle Things.

Ah! THEN, if mine had been the Painter's
hand,
To express what then I saw; and add the
gleam,
The light that never was, on sea or land,
The consecration, and the Poet's dream;

I would have planted thee, thou hoary Pile!
Amid a world how different from this!
Beside a sea that could not cease to smile;
On tranquil land, beneath a sky of bliss:
. .

Thou shouldst have seem'd a treasure-house,
a mine
Of peaceful years; a chronicle of heaven:--
Of all the sunbeams that did ever shine
The very sweetest had to thee been given.

A Picture had it been of lasting ease,
Elysian quiet, without toil or strife;
No motion but the moving tide, a breeze,
Or merely silent Nature's breathing life.

Such, in the fond delusion of my heart,
Such Picture would I at that time have made:

.

And seen the soul of truth in every part;
A faith, a trust, that could not be betray'd.

So once it would have been,--'tis so no more;
I have submitted to a new controul:
A power is gone, which nothing can restore;
A deep distress hath humaniz'd my Soul.

Not for a moment could I now behold
A smiling sea and be what I have been:
The feeling of my loss will ne'er be old;
This, which I know, I speak with mind
serene.

Then, Beaumont, Friend! who would have
been the Friend,
If he had lived, of Him whom I deplore,
This Work of thine I blame not, but
commend;
This sea in anger, and that dismal shore.

Oh 'tis a passionate Work!--yet wise and
well;
Well chosen is the spirit that is here;
That Hulk which labours in the deadly swell,
This rueful sky, this pageantry of fear!

And this huge Castle, standing here sublime,
I love to see the look with which it braves, . .
. . . .

Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time,
The light'ning, the fierce wind, and trampling
waves.

Farewell, farewell the Heart that lives alone,
Hous'd in a dream, at distance from the
Kind!
Such happiness, wherever it be known,
Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely blind.

But welcome fortitude, and patient chear,
And frequent sights of what is to be born!
Such sights, or worse, as are before me here.-

-
Not without hope we suffer and we mourn. . .
. . . .

Painting

Abraham and the Angels
Raphael (1518)



Poem

"On the Group of the Three Angels Before the Tent of Abraham, by Rafaele, in the Vatican"
Washington Allston (1813)

O, now I feel as though another sense,
From heaven descending, had informed my soul;
I feel the pleasurable, full control
Of Grace, harmonious, boundless, and intense.
In thee, celestial Group, embodied lives
The subtile mystery, that speaking gives
Itself resolved; the essences combined
Of Motion ceaseless, Unity complete.
Borne like a leaf by some soft eddying wind,
Mine eyes, impelled as by enchantment sweet,
From part to part with circling motion rove,
Yet seem unconscious of the power to move;

From line to line through endless changes run,
O'er countless shapes, yet seem to gaze on One.

Painting

The Head of Medusa
Anonymous, once thought to be by Leonardo da Vinci
(c. 1782)

Poem

"On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery"
Percy Bysshe Shelley (1819)

IT lieth, gazing on the midnight sky,
Upon the cloudy mountain peak supine;
Below, far lands are seen tremblingly;
Its horror and its beauty are divine.
Upon its lips and eyelids seems to lie



Loveliness like a shadow, from which
 shrine,
 Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,
 The agonies of anguish and of death.
 Yet it is less the horror than the grace
 Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone;

Whereon the lineaments of that dead face
 Are graven, till the characters be grown
 Into itself, and thought no more can
 trace;

'Tis the melodious hue of beauty thrown
 Athwart the darkness and the glare of
 pain,

Which humanize and harmonize the
 strain.

And from its head as from one body
 grow,

As [] grass out of a watery rock,
 Hairs which are vipers, and they curl and
 flow

And their long tangles in each other
 lock,

And with unending involutions shew
 Their mailed radiance, as it were to
 mock

The torture and the death within, and saw
 The solid air with many a ragged jaw.
 And from a stone beside, a poisonous
 eft

Peeps idly into those Gorgonian eyes;
 Whilst in the air a ghastly bat, bereft
 Of sense, has flitted with a mad surprise
 Out of the cave this hideous light had
 cleft,

And he comes hastening like a moth
 that hies

After a taper; and the midnight sky
 Flares, a light more dread than obscurity.
 'Tis the tempestuous loveliness of terror;
 For from the serpents gleams a brazen

	glare Kindled by that inextricable error, Which makes a thrilling vapour of the air Become a [] and ever-shifting mirror Of all the beauty and the terror there- A woman's countenance, with serpent locks, Gazing in death on heaven from those wet rocks.
--	---

Painting	Poem
Virgin of the Rocks Leonardo da Vinci (1483)	"For Our Lady of the Rocks by Leonardo da Vinci" Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1848) Mother, is this the darkness of the end, The Shadow of Death? and is that outer sea Infinite imminent Eternity? And does the death-pang by man's seed sustained In Time's each instant cause thy face to bend Its silent prayer upon the Son, while He Blesses the dead with His hand silently To His long day which hours no more offend? Mother of grace, the pass is difficult, Keen are these rocks, and the bewildered souls Throng it like echoes, blindly shuddering through. Thy name, O Lord, each spirit's voice extols, Whose peace abides in the dark avenue Amid the bitterness of things occult.



Sculpture

The Greek Slave
Hiram Powers (1844)

Poem

"Hiram Powers' Greek Slave"
Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1886)

They say Ideal Beauty cannot enter
The house of anguish. On the threshold stands
An alien image with ensnackled hands,
Called the Greek Slave! as if the artist meant her
(That passionless perfection which he lent her
Shadowed not darkened where the sill expands)
To so confront man's crimes in different lands
With man's ideal sense. Pierce to the center,



Art's fiery finger! and break up ere long
 The serfdom of this world! appeal, fair stone,
 From God's pure heights of beauty against man's wrong!
 Catch up in the divine face, not alone
 East griefs but west, and strike and shame the strong,
 By thunders of white silence, overthrown.

Painting

The Old Guitarist
 Pablo Picasso (1903)

Poem

Stanzas I - IV of "The Man with the Blue Guitar"
 Wallace Stevens (1936)

I

The man bent over his guitar,
 A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
 You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
 Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said to him, "But play, you must,
 A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar,
 Of things exactly as they are."



II

I cannot bring a world quite round,
Although I patch it as I can.

I sing a hero's head, large eye
And bearded bronze, but not a man,

Although I patch him as I can
And reach through him almost to man.

If a serenade almost to man
Is to miss, by that, things as they are,

Say that it is the serenade
Of a man that plays a blue guitar.

III

Ah, but to play man number one,
To drive the dagger in his heart,

To lay his brain upon the board
And pick the acrid colors out,

To nail his thought across the door,
Its wings spread wide to rain and snow,

To strike his living hi and ho,
To tick it, tock it, turn it true,

To bang it from a savage blue,
Jangling the metal of the strings . . .

IV

So that's life, then: things as they are?
It picks its way on the blue guitar.

A million people on one string?
And all their manner in the thing,

And all their manner, right and wrong,
And all their manner, weak and strong?

The feelings crazily, craftily call,
Like a buzzing of flies in autumn air,

And that's life, then: things as they are,
This buzzing of the blue guitar.

***Note: only the first 4 of 33 stanzas are reprinted here.**

Painting

Woman Before an Aquarium

Henri Matisse (1921)



Poem

"Woman Before an Aquarium"

Patricia Hampl (1978) <>

The goldfish ticks silently,
little finned gold watch
on its chain of water,
swaying over the rivulets of the brain,
over the hard rocks and spiny shells.

The world is round, distorted
the clerk said when I insisted
on a round fishbowl.

Now, like a Matisse woman,
I study my lesson slowly,
crushing a warm pinecone

in my hand, releasing
the resin, its memory of wild nights,
my Indian back crushing
the pine needles, the trapper
standing over me, his white-dead skin.

	<p>Fear of the crushing, fear of the human smell. A Matisse woman always wants to be a mermaid, her odalique body stretches pale and heavy before her and the exotic wall hangings; the only power of the woman: to be untouchable.</p> <p>But dressed, a simple Western face, a schoolgirl's haircut, the plain desk of ordinary work, she sits crushing the pinecone of fear, not knowing it is fear. The paper before her is blank.</p> <p>The aquarium sits like a lantern, a green inner light, round and green, a souvenir from the underworld, its gold residents opening and closing their worldless mouths.</p> <p>I am on the shore of the room, glinting inside with the flicker of water, heart ticking with the message of biology to a kindred species. The mermaid -- not the enchantress, but the mermaid of double life -- sits on the rock, combing the golden strands of human hair, thinking as always of swimming.</p>
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Painting	Poem
<p>The Millinery Shop Edgar Degas (1890)</p>	<p>"Edgar Degas: The Millinery Shop" Adam Zagajewski (1994)</p> <p>Hats are innocent, bathed in the soft light which smoothes the contours of objects. A girl is working. But where are brooks? Groves?</p>



Where is the sensual laughter of nymphs?
 The world is hungry and one day
 will invade this tranquil room.
 For the moment it contents itself
 with ambassadors who announce:
 I'm the ochre, I'm the sienna.
 I'm the color of terror, like ash.
 In me ships sink.
 I'm the blue, I'm cold, I can be pitiless.
 And I'm the color of dying, I'm patient.
 I'm the purple (you don't see much of me),
 for me triumphs, processions.
 I'm the green, I'm tender,
 I live in wells and in the leaves of birch
 trees.
 The girl whose fingers are agile
 cannot hear the voices, for she's mortal.
 She thinks of the coming Sunday
 and the rendezvous she has
 with the butcher's son
 who has coarse lips
 and big hands
 stained with blood.

Painting

Dance

Henri Matisse (1909)



Poem

"Matisse's Dance"

Natalie Safir (1990)

A break in the circle dance of naked women,
 dropped stitch between the hands
 of the slender figure stretching too hard
 to reach her joyful sisters.

Spirals of glee sail from the arms
 of the tallest woman. She pulls
 the circle around with her fire.
 What has she found that she doesn't
 keep losing, her torso
 a green-burning torch?

Grass mounds curve ripely beneath

two others who dance beyond the blue.
Breasts swell and multiply and
rhythms rise to a gallop.

Hurry, frightened one and grab on--before
the stich is forever lost, before the dance
unravels and a black sun swirls from that
space.

Painting

Black Cross, New Mexico
Georgia O'Keeffe (1929)



Poem

"Wormwood: The Penitents"
Ellen Bryant Voigt (1994)

I always thought she ought to have been an angel.
There's one I saw a picture of, smooth white,
the wings like bolts of silk, breasts like a girl's--
like hers--eyebrows, all of it. Ten years
I put away a little every year,
but her family was shamed by the bare grave,
and wasn't I to blame for everything,
so now she has a cross. Crude, rigid, nothing
human in it, flat dead tree on the hill,
it's what you see for miles, it's all I see.
Symbol of hope, the priest said, clearing his throat,
and the rain came down and washed the plastic flowers.
I guess he thinks that dusk is just like dawn.
I guess he had forgot about the nails.

Architectural Structure

The Brooklyn Bridge
Opened to traffic in 1883

Poem

"To Brooklyn Bridge"
Hart Crane (1930)

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest
The seagull's wings shall dip and pivot him,
Shedding white rings of tumult, building
high
Over the chained bay waters Liberty--



Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes
As apparitional as sails that cross
Some page of figures to be filed away;
--Till elevators drop us from our day . . .

I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights
With multitudes bent toward some flashing
scene
Never disclosed, but hastened to again,
Foretold to other eyes on the same screen;

And Thee, across the harbor, silver-paced
As though the sun took step of thee, yet left
Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,--
Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!

Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft
A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,
Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt
ballooning,
A jest falls from the speechless caravan.

Down Wall, from girder into street noon
leaks,
A rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene;
All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn .
. .
Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still.

And obscure as that heaven of the Jews,
Thy guerdon . . . Accolade thou dost bestow
Of anonymity time cannot raise:
Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show.

O harp and altar, of the fury fused,
(How could mere toil align thy choiring
strings!)

Terrific threshold of the prophet's pledge,
Prayer of pariah, and the lover's cry,--

Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift
Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of
stars,
Beading thy path--condense eternity:
And we have seen night lifted in thine arms.

Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;
Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.
The City's fiery parcels all undone,
Already snow submerges an iron year . . .

O Sleepless as the river under thee,
Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod,
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend
And of the curveship lend a myth to God.

Architectural Structure

The Brooklyn Bridge
Opened to traffic in 1883



Painting

Brooklyn Bridge
Joseph Stella (1939)



The Contributors

The following people have been of tremendous help in compiling these examples and deserve full credit:

◇Shane Bruce for offering the song "Vincent" by Don McLean, and the pairing of Plath's poem with de Chirico's painting "The Disquieting Muses."

Harry Rusche, from Emory University, who has compiled a very extensive website entitled [The Poet Speaks of Art](#), which has many more examples of poems that correspond to various paintings. Many of the examples above have been taken from his site, including Hokusai's "The Great Wave at Kamagawa" and Finkel's poem "The Great Wave: Hokusai," Hopper's painting and Hirsch's poem "Edward Hopper and the House by the Railroad," Delvaux's painting and Mueller's poem "Paul Delvaux: The Village of the Mermaids," Wood and Stone's "American Gothic," Pollock's painting and Sullivan's poem "Number 1 by Jackson Pollock," Utamaro and Song's "Girl Powdering Her Neck," Cezanne's "L'Estaque" and Ginsberg's poem "Cezanne's Ports," and my personal favorite, Uccello's "St. George and the Dragon" paired with the Fanthorpe poem, "Not My Best Side."

Monica Smith for Picasso's "Girl Before a Mirror" and the poem "Before the Mirror," Audubon's "American Flamingo" and the poem "American Flamingo," vanGogh's "Starry Night" and the Sexton poem "The Starry Night," Williams' "The Great Figure" and Demuth's painting "I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold," Duchamp and Kennedy's "Nude Descending a Staircase," Elmer and Rich's "Mourning Picture," and van Gogh's "Vincent's Bedroom in Arles," and the Flanders poem, "Van Gogh's Bed."

home