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Negotiating empathy in the art museum: ekphrastic inquiry as a historiographic tool

Rachel Carney 

School of English, Communication and Philosophy, Cardiff University and Aberystwyth University, Cardiff, UK

ABSTRACT

This article is positioned at the intersection of literary studies and museum studies. It investigates the potential of Ekphrastic Inquiry in art museums as a form of visitor engagement that can facilitate a simultaneous sense of empathetic connection with people and events from the past, with a heightened awareness that such connection must always be perceived through our experience in the present. Ekphrastic Inquiry presents multiple ekphrastic texts alongside existing curatorial labels, with an invitation for museum visitors to respond by composing their own ekphrastic text. Drawing on visitor response to an ekphrastic display that took place at National Museum Cardiff in 2022—alongside data from a series of in-depth interviews, an online survey, a set of writer’s reflective journals, and a close reading of ekphrastic texts—I argue that Ekphrastic Inquiry can facilitate a nuanced form of simultaneous empathetic engagement and historical perspective for museum visitors.

KEYWORDS

Ekphrasis; museum; empathy; historical distance; visitor engagement; poetry

Introduction: mediating between past and present

The historian Mark Salber Phillips (2013, 1–7) describes two concurrent attitudes towards historical distance: the desire to distance ourselves from our past in order to see it objectively, versus a desire for “historical intimacy” and connection across time. Drawing on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s theories, he argues that “a genuine encounter with the past” can only be experienced as a product of critical and creative endeavour that “must trace a path from initial recognition of alterity to some form of insight” (Phillips 2013, 2–6). In the context of an art museum, historical distance can be seen as problematic, creating a “psychological and interpretive chasm” that may hinder our ability to engage with artefacts (Benton 1999). Recent developments in the museum sector have led to an increase in the provision of contextual information, particularly in social history museums; they attempt to build a bridge across this gap, evoking

CONTACT Rachel Carney  Carneyr2@cardiff.ac.uk

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a sense of empathetic connection between past and present (Pierce 2010, xvii) (Kavanagh 2000). Gadamer (1991, 159–60) argues that reconstruction can never fully restore an artefact's original meaning, and that conscious reflection is needed, so that the past is understood "in thoughtful mediation with contemporary life," giving equal priority to historical *and* contemporary perspectives, to an acknowledgement of the gap *and* the attempt to mediate across it (Gadamer 1991, 160–61). Museum critic Jenny Kidd (2014, 10–11) agrees with this view, arguing that, while empathy can bring valuable insights for museum visitors, it is also important to recognise the "limits of our understanding" through what Dominick La Capra calls "empathic unsettlement" (La Capra 2001) acknowledging that "our understanding of the Other can never be complete."

The literary critic Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux (2010, 21–34) argues that, just as historical works of art can make the past seem "present and immediate" to the viewer, the poetic mode of ekphrasis — where a writer responds to a work of art (2010, 17) — can fulfil a mediating role between past and present. Both Loizeaux and David Kennedy argue that ekphrasis is "especially suited to probing the modern idea of history as constructed," as it opens up a particular concept of history "as made by the artist and re-made by the viewer/poet" (Kennedy 2012, 15; Loizeaux 2010, 21). However, while museums regularly facilitate ekphrastic activities (Golding 2016; Sabeti 2018), no previous studies have employed empirical research methods to examine ekphrasis as a historiographic interpretive tool that might facilitate a nuanced form of empathetic engagement for museum visitors. This paper will explore the potential of ekphrastic activities in an art museum setting as a means of both complicating and enriching our engagement with historical works of art, and with the past lives that such artefacts depict or evoke.

Methodology: an analysis of ekphrasis in the art museum

As I have described elsewhere (Hasbun et al. 2022) my application of Ekphrastic Inquiry as a form of visitor engagement in museums originates in the concept of Poetic Inquiry: a method of research that is becoming increasingly common within the social sciences (Prendergast 2009, xix – xxiii).¹ Many social scientists view the writing of poetry as a valuable method of knowledge production that offers "new ways of seeing" through reflection and interrogation (J. Webb and Brien 2010, 194–95). My research transfers this methodological approach from the sphere of academic research to the social setting of the art museum, by combining the reading and writing of ekphrastic texts into one interactive museum display. Ekphrastic Inquiry begins by inviting community participants to write poems in response to works of art. Their ekphrastic poems are then displayed alongside the artwork, with an invitation for other museum visitors to respond by writing their own text. Visitors are invited to contribute their texts to

the display, producing an ever-expanding collaborative form of creative interpretation.

In partnership with Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales, my research (Carney 2023) investigated the impact of Ekphrastic Inquiry on museum visitors through an interactive display that took place at Museum Cardiff in 2022. Alongside an analysis of the texts written by visitors as part of this display, visitor feedback, and feedback from museum staff, I also completed an initial analysis of the ekphrastic reading process and the ekphrastic writing process. This detailed analysis—which took place in 2020 and 2021 while museums were closed as a result of the pandemic—included interviews, an online survey and reflective journals completed by participants attending online writing workshops. I will draw on this data, along with a close reading of ekphrastic texts, to demonstrate the potential of ekphrastic activities for facilitating a nuanced interplay between empathetic engagement and historical perspective for art museum visitors. I will begin by analysing the process of reading ekphrastic poems, followed by an analysis of the ekphrastic writing process. I will then evaluate what happens when these two processes are combined through Ekphrastic Inquiry, in the form of an interactive museum display. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of those who participated in interviews and workshops, while data collected from museum visitors has been kept anonymous, in line with Cardiff University's ethical procedures.

Ekphrasis as empathetic engagement

Loizeaux describes contemporary ekphrasis as “an engagement with the foreign,” referring to both the art object itself and its subject — other cultures, time periods, races — so that the past can be perceived by the reader/viewer as one of many possible *others* (2010, 11). Such engagement with the *Other* goes back to the origin of ekphrasis in Greek rhetoric, where it was defined as “a speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes” where “the referent [such as a work of art or a historical event] is only of secondary importance; what matters . . . is the impact on the listener” (R. Webb 2009, 1–7). Ruth Webb (2009, 99) argues that this “visual impact” in Greek rhetoric was just the beginning; it was intended as a stimulus for “an emotional impact” on those listening, “involving the listener in the events” so that they felt “as if they were present” (2009, 19–20). Murray Krieger (1992, 94) describes this involvement as a form of “fusion, or empathy, between audience and the object into which they enter . . . as imaginary subjects.”

However, this focus on empathetic involvement was not straightforward. Webb argues that the ancient device of ekphrasis was rooted in the “language of illusion” (2009, 53) and that this illusion was complex and multi-layered, particularly if an orator were adopting a persona:

The student or performer who described the storm at sea was speaking as if he were a general in classical Athens who was, in turn, attempting through his ekphrasis to make his audience feel as if they shared his experience . . . the listeners were in a sense placing themselves imaginatively in the situation of the purported classical addressees of the speech . . . not just imagining that they were caught up in the storm at sea with the classical general but imagining that they were classical Athenian citizens imagining the scene. Moreover, their involvement in the scene could coexist with the critical awareness that it was a fiction . . . based on particular historical sources. (R. Webb 2009, 176–77)

Such ironic duality appears to achieve what Gadamer describes as “historically effected consciousness,” by reaching towards empathetic involvement while simultaneously remaining aware of difference (1991, 301).

While our understanding of the term “ekphrasis” has changed since that time, it can — in its contemporary sense, as literary “description” (“Ekphrasis,” n.d.) “representation” (Heffernan 2004, 1) or “response” (Loizeaux 2010, 17) to visual art — still be perceived as inherently relational and dialogic (Loizeaux 2010, 5–6).² My initial in-depth analysis of the ekphrastic reading process — through an online survey and a set of interviews — revealed that, when participants read an ekphrastic poem, many of them felt a heightened sense of emotional involvement or empathy with various real or imagined *others* that were evoked by, or depicted in, the artwork. It also became clear that a similar sense of empathy could be felt by those writing an ekphrastic poem. However, the data also revealed the illusory nature of ekphrasis—similar to that in ancient Greek rhetoric, described above—as a critical, ironic tool that can evoke a simultaneous immersion in, and distance from, the work of art and/or various *others*, including the *other* of the past.

The ekphrastic reading process

I invited online survey participants to look at a digital reproduction of a work of art: *St George and the Dragon* by Paolo Uccello (1470), and to then read an ekphrastic poem which responds to this artwork. In “Not my Best Side” by U. A. Fanthorpe (1978), the poet ventriloquises the voices of the figures depicted in Uccello’s painting — the dragon, the damsel in distress, and St George — through three short comic monologues. Participants were asked to reflect on whether the process of reading the poem altered their perception of, or engagement with, the artwork. Data from the survey clearly indicate that the ekphrastic technique of ventriloquism can prompt a sense of empathy with the figures depicted in a painting. The most common response to the survey indicated that the reader’s perception of one or more of the three figures changed, as they felt a greater sense of emotional connection with each one. However, my analysis revealed that this sense of heightened empathetic connection with the artwork and its associated

figures was just the beginning. As a result of reading the poem, participants experienced this sense of empathetic connection *alongside* a heightened awareness of their own temporal distance from the past that the painting represents. The three monologues that make up Fanthorpe's poem appear to enable the three figures depicted in this fifteenth-century painting to speak, but their language is rooted in a twentieth-century present familiar to the reader, providing an ironic contrast with the *quattrocento* past in which the painting was produced:

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. (lines 20–23)

Fanthorpe's use of colloquial, contemporary language disturbs our sense of past and present by undermining the viewer's expectations of social conventions from a period so far removed from our own. Many of the survey participants reflected on this ironic contrast, and many of their comments focused on Fanthorpe's subversion of historical gender roles. Such comments suggest that the ironic contrast between the painting's mythical past and our position in the present accentuates the reader's awareness that they are viewing the artwork from a contemporary perspective. The poem appears to evoke a sense of intimate connection with the three figures — to bridge the distance between a historico-mythical past and our contemporary present—while simultaneously reminding us of our distance from them. It appears to be Fanthorpe's use of two particular ekphrastic tropes — ventriloquism, and the juxtaposition of two time periods — that contribute to this simultaneous collapsing and foregrounding of the distance between past and present.

I also conducted nine interviews, to examine, in greater detail, how individuals might engage with a range of different ekphrastic poems. These interviews enabled me to determine which characteristics of ekphrasis are particularly effective in prompting engagement with works of art. The first set of four interviews invited participants to compare two or more ekphrastic poems from a selection of five different poem/painting pairings, while the second set of five interviews invited participants to discuss three poems all responding to the same painting: *Hunters in the Snow* (Brueghel The Elder 1565). In both cases I initially invited participants to view and discuss the painting. I then asked them to read the corresponding poem or poems, inviting them to reflect on and compare poems, and to consider to what extent they felt reading each poem had changed their perception of the artwork, or whether the process of reading the poem had no impact on their perception of the image. Some of the ekphrastic poems inspired a heightened sense of empathetic engagement with the artwork in question. This was particularly clear in response to "Brueghel's Snow" by Anne Stevenson (1995) which responds to

Hunters in the Snow (Brueghel the Elder 1565) and “Two Views of a Cadaver Room” by Sylvia Plath (1960), which responds to *The Triumph of Death* (Brueghel the Elder 1562).

Stevenson’s poem begins in the third-person, describing the scene depicted in Brueghel’s painting: “Here in the snow: / three hunters with dogs and pikes” (lines 1–2), introducing first-person pronouns only in the final stanza. After reading the poem, one of the interviewees made the following observation:

It [the poem] focuses on the main element of the painting. But it certainly evokes more feelings than the last one [poem]. It’s obviously designed to get you to understand how the people in the painting were, to a certain extent... [this comment tailed off into silence]. (Gareth)

Gareth’s use of the phrase “how the people in the painting were” indicates a tentative awareness that the figures in the painting can be perceived as temporally alive. After a pause, I asked if he could pinpoint any particular parts of the poem that create this sense of animation. He responded with a series of quotations:

“They have little to show / on their bowed backs.” The sense that they’ve come back without whatever they set out to get ... and the sentence that follows it, “Unlike the delicate skaters below, / these are grim, they look ill.” They’re definitely pushing that idea that these hunters are not happy, healthy people: bent backs ... things like that ... (Gareth)

Gareth identified sections of the poem where rhyme, alliteration and assonance emphasise the hunters’ plight, in contrast with the skaters’ enjoyment in the background, inviting empathy from the reader. Such empathy appears to result from a focus on emotional and physical suffering, highlighting the hunters’ apparent exhaustion and despair, producing empathy through the perception of need (Coke, Batson, and McDavis 1978).

Entering the artwork

The *OED* defines “to empathise” as “to comprehend and share the feelings of another; to identify oneself mentally *with* a person ... in such a way as to understand his or her feelings, experiences, etc.” (“Empathise,” *n.d.*). However, my research suggests that, when it comes to ekphrasis, there is a particular kind of empathetic response that extends this concept of empathy, enabling the viewer not only to identify with *the Other*, but to metaphorically project themselves *into* the scene depicted in a work of art. The word *empathy* was originally translated from Theodor Lipps’ term *Einfühlung* by the experimental psychologist E.B. Titchener:

We have a natural tendency to feel ourselves into what we perceive or imagine. As we read about the forest, we may, as it were, *become* the explorer; we feel for ourselves the

gloom, the silence, the humidity ... This tendency to feel oneself *into* a situation is called empathy... (Titchener 1915, 198)

Similarly, in the context of sociocultural poetry, Michael Ingram and Motoko Nakazawa (2003, 487) define empathy as “the ability to enter into another person’s world.” This kind of self-projection is a common ekphrastic trope, and is evident in the final stanza of Anne Stevenson’s poem “Brueghel’s Snow,” in which the speaker appears to enter into the painting: “as I trudge through this snow.” Stevenson’s poem led one participant to feel immersed in the winter weather depicted in the painting:

I suppose it [the poem] captures the grimness and the snow ... it uses a lot of words that are not very positive ... “they look grim,” “in the village it’s zero,” “raw faces” ... I see again the grey sky, and the mountains, and the cold. I’m feeling cold now, [laughs] drinking my cup of coffee. (Nia)

The poem’s focus on cold weather, implying hunger and despair for the hunters and their community, seems to immerse Nia in the scene to the point where she feels cold herself. It is possible that Stevenson’s final stanza — with its focus on walking through snow, and its projection of the speaker into the scene — may have contributed towards these feelings of immersion.

However, as is the case with Fanthorpe’s poem, Stevenson’s poem does not simply create a sense of heightened empathetic engagement for the reader. As participants reflected on the process of looking at three different poems responding to Brueghel’s painting, it became clear that “Brueghel’s Snow” tended to provoke more complex levels of engagement than the others. This more complex response from participants appears to have been prompted by Stevenson’s interrogatory approach, and the insertion of the poem’s speaker into the scene in the final stanza, along with an explicit reference to the time that has passed since it was painted:

Who’s painting them now?
 What has survived to unbandage
 my eyes as I trudge through this snow,
 with my dog and stick,
 four hundred winters ago? (lines 21–25)

The first of these questions implies an impossible situation, since the figures in the painting — if representing real individuals — must be long dead and cannot therefore be painted “now.” This question thus appears to emphasise our sense of historical distance from the scene. However, the leading phrasing of the question, beginning with “Who,” implies that there could be a person painting these figures now, conjuring an image in the reader’s mind of a scene being painted in contemporary and historical periods at the same time. This contradictory question is followed by the image of a bandage being removed from the speaker’s eyes, suggesting an obstacle

that prevents us from seeing into the past. This final question is also a leading question, implying that some small, unspecified thing *may* have survived to remove that obstacle and enable sight, or insight, into the past. The speaker then appears to enter the historic scene of the painting with their dog, implying a sense of connection between past and present, emphasised by their use of present tense. However, the fact that this final stanza is presented in the form of rhetorical questions, with a lack of clarity expressed in “Who” and “What,” suggests that any sense of connection between past and present is unstable, and the reference to “four hundred winters ago” in the final line reminds us that, however much we may wish to connect past and present, time intervenes. The speculation evoked by these questions produces an ironic duality of connection with and distance from the painting, and the period of time that it represents.

Kennedy (2012, 15) asserts that ekphrasis is “the complicated performance of historical fact,” arguing that works of art can only produce meaning “by the addition of voices, opinions and fictions,” while Siglind Bruhn (2000, 64) describes the common ekphrastic trope of adding “a possible ‘before’ and ‘after’.” Ekphrastic poetry can thus be perceived as counterfactual. As voices, opinions and fictions are added to a work of art through ekphrastic response, different pasts, presents and futures add further layers of meaning. This ekphrastic strategy of adding fictional pasts, presents and futures to a work of art emphasises our contingent relationship with history, while ironic questioning — such as the questions in Stevenson’s final stanza — is often used to remind the reader that such creative additions are exactly that. These ekphrastic techniques seem to prompt both a sense of empathetic connection with the past depicted in the painting, and a sense of historical distance from them, as suggested by Nia:

It’s treating the poem ... as almost like a historical snapshot. And where would these people be today, you know “four hundred winters ago” ... Who’s painting them now? Who’s survived? It’s quite sort of bleak ... It’s more harsh, more struggle ... (Nia)

Her words “harsh” and “struggle” imply a sense of empathetic connection with the plight of those depicted in the painting, but she also reflects on how the poet’s speaker observes them from the perspective of the present, looking back at a previous historical period.

This extended version of ekphrastic empathy, where the viewer/reader feels a sense of projection into or immersion in the artwork, can be seen most explicitly in the reflections made by another participant, after reading Plath’s poem “Two Views of a Cadaver Room” (Plath 1960), in response to *The Triumph of Death* (1562). Her first reaction focused on visual and olfactory impressions, quoting certain lines from the poem:

"Vinegary fume." Ooh, you can smell the vinegary fume, can't you? Of the death-vats ...
 "The head of his cadaver had caved in" ... I can see that head. It's horrible ... (Helen)

When asked if reading the poem had changed her perception of the painting, she went on to explain,

It's changed in that I can smell it. I can smell that horror of rotting flesh and death.
 Because that's where it is, all over the picture... (Helen)

While this participant clearly felt some sense of being immersed in the painting, enabling her to imagine the stench of decay and feel a more immediate sense of horror, these references to odour and decay all come from the first half of the poem, before Brueghel's *The Triumph of Death* is even mentioned. Plath's poem is presented in two halves, each comprising a stanza of nine lines, followed by a couplet. The first section appears to present a personal recollection: "The day she visited the dissecting room / They had four men laid out, black as burnt turkey" (lines 1–2). This depiction of a young woman's experience does not appear to have any explicit connection with Brueghel's painting. Plath leaves the reader to make their own connections between the young woman watching a group of male medical students dissecting corpses, and Brueghel's "panorama of smoke and slaughter" (line 12). It is this juxtaposition between an apparently real scene of death and decay, with Brueghel's painted scene of death and destruction, that emphasises the horror of the painting; the first section of the poem establishes a vivid olfactory and personalised context — or frame — in which the reader encounters the depiction of the painting, in the second section, prompting a sensory immersion in the scene.

Taken together, the data from the online survey and interviews indicate that the depiction of an apparently personal recollection, the use of sensory details and/or emphasis on human frailty or emotional pain, or the ventriloquism of figures from a work of art, are the most likely ekphrastic tools to prompt feelings of empathy in the reader. It is also clear that a more complex level of empathy may be experienced, as immersion in, or self-projection into, the scene depicted in a work of art, especially if the poem's speaker appears to enter into the painting.

The ekphrastic writing process

In addition to my analysis of the ekphrastic reading process, I also assessed the impact of writing ekphrastic poems on the person writing the text. This was important because my implementation of Ekphrastic Inquiry in art museums does not just include the presentation of ekphrastic texts for visitors to read. It also includes an invitation for visitors to write their own ekphrastic text, as an essential element of the display. In order to examine the writing process in detail, I delivered a set of ten online ekphrastic writing

workshops, inviting participants to write poems in response to artwork from the Museum Wales collection. Participants were encouraged to keep reflective journals to document their writing process. The journals were structured as questionnaires, beginning with a reflection on the workshop itself. The second section of the journal focused on participants' engagement with people or events from the past, leaving *the past* as a term open to interpretation.

My earlier analysis of the online survey and in-depth interviews indicates that the process of reading ekphrastic poems can prompt viewers to feel a sense of empathetic connection with figures or events from the past, while emphasising the irretrievability of the past and heightening the reader/viewer's awareness of their own position in the present. Several of the writing workshop participants' poems and reflective journal entries indicate that this is also true of ekphrastic writing: the writer/viewer can experience a simultaneous sense of empathetic connection across time along with a heightened awareness of their own historical meta-perspective.

One example of such duality can be found in Eley's ekphrastic response to two different paintings, each of which depicts a female figure: *Interior* (Artist Unknown, Dutch School nineteenth century) and *Conversation* (Renoir 1912). After focusing on sensory detail, with a series of rhetorical questions, such as "Do their heavy / skirts drag? Are their head / coverings burdensome?" Eley's speaker reflects on how life has changed since the time in which these paintings were produced:

... One
 day, painted women will
 throw off the rules that
 bind them. They will be more
 than art. They will be artists.
 But the bowed-back women
 cannot know that, and so they
 sit, posed, poised, ever waiting
 for our eyes to turn away
 so they may shed whatever
 meaning we have thrust
 upon them without
 permission.³

The initial sensory details and questions invite the reader to empathise with these women and, by implication, with real women who lived in nineteenth century Holland and pre-war France. Although these women were painted in different historical periods and locations, Eley has chosen to reflect on their similarities, contrasting their lives with our own by highlighting the societal changes that have taken place. In her journal, she wrote:

I started writing from the point of view of where the women “were” historically and contrasting it with today where I am as a woman who has the luxury of critically engaging with art, something women of previous generations didn’t have. (Eley)

Eley’s poem combines a strong sense of historical meta-perspective with an attempt to connect empathetically across time. The final few lines of the poem emphasise the sense of historical distance between the poem’s speaker and the two women by referring to the fact that whatever “meaning” we might place on these women or their paintings, it will always be imposed; thus, we can never really understand what life was like for women living in a previous century.

Another participant (Carol) repeatedly stated in her journal that she did not perceive a connection with *the past* as being of any relevance to her engagement with artwork. Most of Carol’s poems are centred on her perspective as an art viewer in the present, but some of them also inhabit or ventriloquise voices from the past, such as “Class Act,” written in response to *La Parisienne* (Renoir 1874):

Pretence, Pretence, Pretence
those inhabiting ivory towers,
float through life,
detached from reality.

Sometimes I detest my job,
mixing with those who look down
on my meagre existence,
our common frame dismissed.

Creativity stifled,
I move when instructed,
painting what is presented,
authenticity denied.

I know what I have seen though,
etched in my mind.
I depart to live my truth,
Thank God!⁴

While this poem is written from the perspective of the artist, it also includes a strong sense of Carol’s experience in the present, as she explains in her journal:

I saw the picture from a social-economic perspective. Here I am as the painter from a lower class painting this picture of somebody clearly from a more privileged background. I thought about the unfairness of the class system ... the plight of have and have nots in society ... (Carol)

Carol’s use of the first person: “Here I am” indicates that she felt a sense of empathy with the artist, which led her to imagine a fictional socio-economic background for him. However, when asked to reflect on whether writing the

poem had affected her engagement with people or events from the past, Carol responded:

For me, it's just a picture from the past. What it represents for me is the same in any period of time. (Carol)

While Carol may have experienced a sense of connection with an artist from a previous historical period, what mattered for her was the fact that this discrepancy between rich and poor is as relevant now as it was in the past. Although her poem does not explicitly refer to the unknowability of the past, the title, "Class Act," and the first stanza, with the repetition and capitalisation of the word "Pretence," set the entire poem within a framework of irony and illusion. The final stanza alludes to — but does not explicitly identify — the "reality," or "truth" that the artist claims to have seen, and this lack of revelation emphasises the fact that, while ekphrasis can present the illusion of connection across time, this sense of connection is always filtered through a lens of historical meta-perspective; the artist can never be more than a construct of the writer's imagination.

My analysis of the ekphrastic reading process revealed a more complex form of ekphrastic empathy that invites the reader/viewer to project themselves into a work of art, and this sense of ekphrastic projection was also experienced by participants taking part in the writing workshops. There were several writers who experienced a sense of projection or immersion into the artwork, enabling them to connect empathetically with unknown *Others*, and this occurred even when the artwork itself contained no visible figures.

In Week 2 Sylvia responded to Gwen John's *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris* (John 1904) by projecting her speaker/self into the empty room in a way that enabled her to empathise with the experience of the artist:

I decided to go with the idea of putting myself into the scene and imagining what it would be like . . . I felt a great sense of what Gwen [the artist] might have valued about the room now that I have imagined being there as an artist myself. (Sylvia)

Similarly, in Week 8, when responding to Monet's figureless landscape *The Palazzo Dario* (Monet 1908) Sylvia felt a strong sense of immersion in the artwork. On this occasion I invited participants to experiment with counterfactual ekphrasis by inserting their own fictional character into the scene. Sylvia described how this approach enabled her to feel immersed in Monet's landscape:

I know that I would have really liked this painting anyway . . . but by "diving" in the painting in this way and zoning in on the details and then imagining a character within it, I felt that I had almost gone inside it myself . . . (Sylvia)

The following extract from Sylvia's poem indicates the vivid depiction of a figure in the painting, conveyed through visual and emotional detail. However, this

sense of emotional connection contends with a simultaneous awareness of critical distance:

colour her into life
 let her sobs and sighs
 become flesh toned marks

for in this world
 hearing is silence and seeing
 is knowing and her auburn hair

specked by silver
 wills itself to manifest
 but she's pulled into a corner⁵

Although the figure appears to be real, the first line, "colour her into life," and the following two lines, acknowledge that this is an imagined figure, inserted into the landscape by the poet. This acknowledgement emphasises the tension between emotional involvement and critical distance that is produced by the counterfactual form of ekphrasis. This concept of an imagined character is then revisited in the final stanza; the speaker/poet appears to stand back from the painting and, again, acknowledge that this figure is not really visible in the scene:

her mercurial eyes
 flash violet, azure emerald
 and yet are just specks in a window

the landscape
 in all its grandeur
 swallows her it seems⁶

The figure's eyes are revealed to be no more than "specks" of colour, as the figure herself becomes subsumed by the landscape in which she exists/does not exist. Such reflections are emphasised by the poem's title, "Finding her in Monet," evoking an ironic sense of simultaneous immersion in the scene and empathetic connection with a distinct figure, *and* the acknowledgement that this animation of the artwork is an unstable product of the writer's imagination. Sylvia added the following comment to her journal:

Again, just by imagining a character being present in the painting somehow makes you have a much greater sense of the setting and its place in art history. (Sylvia)

This comment suggests that, even when there are no visible figures depicted in a painting, the ekphrastic writing process can still create a strong sense of empathetic engagement with the *Other*, stimulating emotional involvement in the artwork, the scene it depicts, and those who may have lived in that particular time or place. The phrase "its place in art history" also demonstrates how the process of ekphrastic writing can facilitate a more objective, critical perspective, as we step

back from the act of “being present” to view the artwork as an artefact with a historical context that we, in our own time, can never fully understand.

Ekphrastic inquiry in the art museum

My initial analysis of the ekphrastic reading and writing process provided a useful framework for evaluating the impact of the interactive display that took place at National Museum Cardiff in 2022.⁷ The display took place in the “Eighteenth Century Art in Britain” gallery, with multiple ekphrastic texts presented alongside works of art for visitors to read, and an invitation for visitors to respond by writing their own text on a postcard, which could be added to the display.⁸ I have analysed as many of the ekphrastic poems written by museum visitors as could be identified, in conjunction with visitor feedback and feedback from museum staff.

Comments on visitor feedback forms suggest some visitors felt a heightened sense of emotional involvement with various *others* (such as the art object itself, or real or imagined characters associated with it) as a result of taking part. One visitor stated that they “certainly connected more deeply with the artwork” as a result of writing their poem; another stated that writing their poem had made them “feel more connected,” though they did not specify to what or whom. These comments, though brief, accord with the reflections of those who completed the reflective journals while taking part in the online writing workshops.

My analysis of the reading process (through survey responses and interviews) alongside my analysis of the writing process (through workshop participants’ reflective journals) revealed five ekphrastic techniques that appear to be particularly effective in evoking empathy or emotional involvement for the reader or writer. I therefore examined the ekphrastic poems written by museum visitors to determine how many of them made use of these five techniques: apparently personal recollections; ventriloquism; sensory detail; an emphasis on human frailty or emotional pain; and the projection of the poem’s speaker into the artwork.⁹ I also searched for poems that maintain an ironic dual sense of emotional involvement and historical meta-perspective through the merging of two or more time periods, the foregrounding of irony, paradox and illusion, and the use of speculation, counterfactual invention and questioning. See [Table 1](#). An overwhelming majority of visitors’ poems (96%) use at least one of these eight techniques, and most combine several of these techniques in the same poem.

The popularity of these techniques suggests that many of these visitors may have felt a sense of empathetic engagement with the art object and/or various *others*, balanced by an ironic self-awareness that such empathy is based on supposition and speculation, similar to that expressed by those participants who documented their writing process through the reflective journals. They may have used such techniques unconsciously and may not be aware of exactly how the writing process created this tension, but a glance at some of their poems reveals the potential impact of these ekphrastic techniques on both writers and readers.

Table 1. Analysis of empathy and distance techniques in visitors' ekphrastic poems.¹⁰

	Percentage of ekphrastic poems that use this technique
Ekphrastic techniques that invite or evoke empathy	
Apparently personal recollections	6%
Ventriloquism	29%
Sensory detail	23%
An emphasis on human frailty or emotional pain	29%
Projection into the scene/artwork	43%
Ekphrastic techniques that use irony to invite or evoke empathy with critical distance	
Merging time periods	15%
Foregrounding illusion, paradox and irony	36%
Speculation, counterfactual invention, or questioning	49%
None of the above	4%

One visitor ventriloquised the voice of Lady Charlotte, a figure in a painting by Joshua Reynolds (late eighteenth century), using a rhetorical question to emphasise feelings of despair and estrangement from her children:

I sit,
A ghostly picture of passivity

Move closer, closer
I cannot touch them
Closer
Neither in spirit nor in being

What are their names?
My daughters
My sons
I bore them, they are not mine.

Take them out, out.
Rip them from my breast.
Please, let me rest.

The rhetorical question, and the imperatives in the final stanza, imply that the reader/viewer is in possession of some knowledge (the names of the children) and has some control over this figure's situation (the ability to take them from her and let her rest). These techniques pull the reader/viewer into the poem, and the artwork itself, forcefully evoking a sense of empathetic connection with this woman's emotional despair. However, the focus on estrangement simultaneously reminds the reader/viewer of the distance between themselves and this painted figure. The first two stanzas draw attention to the impossibility of connecting with, or through, the painting. Phrases such as "I cannot touch them," and "ghostly picture" remind us of the fact that this is a work of art, even as we read ourselves into the deception. Such a combination of sensory detail, questioning, ventriloquism, and projection of the poem's speaker (and reader) into the scene, must

surely have provoked some sense of emotional engagement and critical distance for the visitor who wrote this poem. It could also have evoked a similar sense of empathy and distance for those visitors who read the poem.

The projection of the speaker and/or pull of the reader into the artwork or poem seems to have occurred particularly in those poems where the visitor used the first or second person. Another visitor responded to a portrait of Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn and Lady Henrietta Williams-Wynn (Reynolds 1769). This painting, as stated on the accompanying label, was completed after Lady Henrietta's untimely death. The visitor uses a series of rhetorical questions that appear to be addressed to Henrietta, from the perspective of her grieving husband:

The paint is dry. The thing is done.
 Here, my grief in light and shade.
 How to make art of this, of what isn't?
 How to put the life of you into colour and canvas;
 How to live outside of this perfect moment;
 How to entomb you in this gilded frame;
 How to turn away from your unblinking gaze;
 How to leave you here unliving;
 How to go on?

The painting itself is already mediating between multiple time periods: the time when it was begun, while Henrietta was alive; the time when it was completed, after her death, with its associated sense of grief and loss; and multiple presents, as museum visitors over several years encounter the painting in the context of its narrative of loss. The writer emphasises the contention between these various pasts and presents through their choice of title: "Still Life." This title evokes a simultaneous sense of life and death, playing on the double meaning of "still" as both lifeless and ongoing, and the reference to a particular style of art, where objects appear suspended in time. Meanwhile, the ventriloquism and use of the second person project the writer and reader into the scene/painting: the writer as grieving husband and the reader as dead wife. At the same time, phrases such as "Here, my grief in light and shade," evoke a sense of immediacy in this man's emotional experience. Such involvement is balanced out by multiple reminders that this narrative is a fictional one, inspired by an inanimate object, through phrases such as "The paint is dry," and "how to entomb you in this gilded frame." The paradoxical question "How to make art of this, of what isn't?," embodies this tension between the desire for emotional connection across time, and the awareness of how death prevents such connection from ever being realised.

Conclusion

I began by stating that this inherent ekphrastic contention — between empathy and critical distance — is of particular relevance in a museum setting, where

historical distance can be seen as problematic, hindering our ability to engage with artefacts (Benton 1999). My analysis above indicates that Ekphrastic Inquiry in the museum gallery may both complicate and enrich the viewing experience. As visitors read each other's poems and write their own, many of them will feel what I have described as tension/interplay between empathetic involvement or immersion in the artwork and its past, and a heightened awareness of their own perspective in the present. This tension may be amplified if they decide to write their own ekphrastic text. Ekphrastic Inquiry therefore facilitates the process described by Gadamer, whereby the past is perceived "in thoughtful mediation with contemporary life" (1991, 160–61). The dialogic nature of ekphrasis can create a to-and-fro movement between past and present, self and *Other*, intimacy and distance in a way that mirrors Gadamer's depiction of how we engage with art, through "play," where meaning is continually moving "to-and-fro" between artwork and viewer (102–5). Ekphrasis — as a historiographic tool — steps into the gap, mediating across it through empathy, while simultaneously drawing attention to its existence.

Notes

1. The term "Ekphrastic Inquiry" was originally coined by Prendergast (2006) to describe her "practice of writing poetry in response to audience and performance." I am using this term in a different sense, specifically as a form of Poetic Inquiry that enables museum visitors to engage with works of art by writing ekphrastic texts.
2. Contemporary definitions of ekphrasis often include any kind of artistic response to a work of art, but I have focused my analysis on poetic ekphrasis, drawing on an established tradition of ekphrasis as a poetic mode that is inextricably linked with the advent of the art museum itself (Heffernan 2004, 137–38).
3. An untitled poem written by Eley in response to Dutch *Interior*, and Renoir's *Conversation*. This poem remained in handwritten draft form, and I have typed it up myself, adjusting some punctuation for clarity.
4. Carol's poem "Class Act" written in response to *La Parisienne*, by Renoir.
5. Stanzas two, three and four of Sylvia's poem "Finding her in Monet," responding to *The Palazzo Dario* by Monet. Sylvia's poem was also influenced by the refrain from that week's example poem: "Colour Her" by Liz Berry.
6. Stanzas five and six of the same poem.
7. There was also an interesting contrast between the results from the initial survey, interviews and workshops — which were conducted entirely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic — and the results of the physical museum display, where visitors encountered original works of art in a public space, surrounded by other visitors. I have analysed this contrast in detail elsewhere (Carney 2023). I should also note that, while the majority of artworks included in the initial interviews, survey and workshops are figurative, rather than abstract, this initial focus on figurative art did not limit the creativity of museum visitors in the final gallery-based display; on the contrary, many visitors responded to artefacts in adjoining galleries, or to the interactive display itself as a public work of art.

8. These ekphrastic texts were written by a group of fifteen participants who took part in a series of in-person creative writing workshops. They were displayed in sets of six, with three English poems and three Welsh poems displayed on a plinth beneath each work of art. Visitors were invited to either write on a postcard or re-arrange a set of magnetic words. See this blog post for images and further information: <https://createdtoread.com/poetry-in-the-art-museum-in-so-many-words/>.
9. This was an analysis of the 98 ekphrastic poems that appeared to respond to a specific, identifiable work of art, written in English or Welsh. I also documented numerous other texts (inspired by other subjects or by the museum display itself) in a total of 18 different languages (Carney 2023).
10. These eight techniques became apparent from my initial analysis of the online survey and interviews. The aim of this first stage of research was to focus on a range of ekphrastic poems and ekphrastic styles to evaluate how, when, and why the ekphrastic reading process might alter our perception of an art object. The methods I used were inspired by the iterative, cyclical process of Grounded Theory, using a majority of inductive codes to analyse the data with an open mind, keeping initial questions to participants as open as possible to capture a broad range of experiences. It was only during the analysis of interviews and survey data — and through a close reading of the poems — that a focus on empathy, and an ironic interplay between empathy and distance, became apparent. These outcomes are discussed along with several others in more detail in my thesis (Carney 2023).

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Notes on contributor

Rachel Carney is a poet, researcher and creative writing tutor. Her PhD research focused on the use of ekphrastic writing in museums, and was funded by the South, West and Wales Doctoral Training Partnership. She has an MA in Creative Writing from Manchester Metropolitan University and an MA in Museum Studies from Newcastle University. She currently teaches at Cardiff University. Her debut poetry collection *Octopus Mind* (Seren Books, 2023) explores the intricacies of neurodiversity, perception and the human mind.

Open access statement

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Ethics statement

Ethical approval from the Cardiff University School of English, Communication and Philosophy ethics committee was obtained for each of the empirical studies that involved the use of human research participants (220402ENCAPCarney). All the participants completing the online survey, the interviews and the reflective journals provided appropriate informed consent through consent forms. In the museum display, requirement for consent was waived by the ethics committee as those who participated were taking part in a public display, and information was provided about how their data may be used. Any personal data left by individuals as part of this display was therefore anonymised before the analysis took place.

Data access statement

No new data was created during this study.

ORCID

Rachel Carney  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1208-8014>

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