

Ekphrastic Therapy: On Improving Relationships with Art Through Writing

by Jennifer E. Carinci T-C '07, Jennifer_carinci@yahoo.com,
Reflections from the Baltimore Museum of Art



“So she lay there in the great quiet of the museum next to the warm quiet of her brother and allowed the soft stillness to settle around them: a comforter of quiet. The silence seeped from their heads to their soles and into their souls. They stretched out and relaxed. Instead of oxygen and stress, Claudia thought of hushed and quiet words: glide, fur, banana, peace. Even the footsteps of the night watchman added only an accented quarter-note to the silence that had become a hum, a lullaby.”

Ever since I was a little girl reading E. L. Koningsburg’s *From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, I imagined how exciting it would be to sneak into an art museum at night and sleep peacefully amongst the artifacts with whom I had become well acquainted from frequent visits with my mother. Much like Claudia, I pictured myself enjoying this, the perfect spot for runaway children.

After participating in an ekphrastic writing course at the Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) and hearing the results read at the audio tour launch in January, I realize how wrong my imagination had been; if you are lucky enough to visit a museum at night and take the time to really get to know a work of art by writing the story of the object, as told to you by the object, you will realize being alone in a museum will be anything but quiet. It’s as if all the countless trips I had made to art museums were a series of first dates. A 2001 study conducted at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the same museum where Claudia and her brother slept over, found a sample of museum viewers spent a mean of 27.2 seconds and a median of 17.0 seconds during meetings with six of the collection’s masterpieces. No wonder I had not been properly introduced as this ratio is worse than speed dating! In fact the Getty Center has a lesson on its website based on similar statistics. In this short activity intended to illustrate how deep reflection on an art object takes time, students use visual recall to describe what they have seen after only being exposed to a work of art for thirty seconds.

Similarly, the assignment of writing

a new poem each week about a new object, during an ekphrastic course at the BMA, forced me to get past the awkward small talk phase of first encounters; I could really enjoy the company of my partner and appreciate strengths and weaknesses in us both. I was lucky enough to be admitted to this free workshop after finding out about the project through the MWP e-mail list. (Suki Kuss, a fellow T-C also attended the course.) The class was made possible by a grant for the BMA to compile an Acoustiguide audio tour called *60 Objects / Countless Stories*. The tour comprises a diverse group of favorites from its collection which are brought to life through art inspired stories and poems spun by Baltimore writers as well as inside perspectives from the museums’ curators. The workshop’s structure provided a critical and reflective atmosphere. Critiques were meaningful and thought provoking, dissecting each verb choice without the dreaded “I like it” or other such cop outs or sugar coating. Participants created a poem on a new object from the BMA’s collection every week for five weeks. Since each writer had spent quality time with the subject it was often hard to be objective. However the spirited debates which arose over gender biased language and writers choosing the same pieces kept us honest. I grew as a poet and looked forward to reading each member’s poem to provide feedback and for my own pleasure.

The poems proved to have the power to color both the writer’s and the listener’s perception. The posters of a few of the works from the audio tour such as *Woman of the Mango*, which have

been hanging around my classroom since before I started this ekphrastic adventure, appear very different to me now. When I look at the pieces or share them with the students, I no longer see the formal elements of color, shape, line, form, space, and value. Instead I hear the love song spun by musician Caleb Stine competing with the more troubled musings from Dr. Lalita Noronha’s poem: *You hide within plum-purple folds/what he hasn’t been told,/the fruit you alone must bear.*

Chris Stewart, the workshop instructor and Program Director for the Maryland State Arts Council, describes ekphrasis as, “A rhetorical device in which one medium of art tries to relate to another medium by defining and describing its essence and form, and in so doing, relate more directly to the audience, through its illuminative liveliness.” Ekphrasis hails from the Greek *ek*, “out of,” and *phrasis*, “speech” or “expression.” Through the addition of the poet’s reflections, memories, and emotions, the resulting response transcends the status of verbal “photocopy” and creates a relationship between the visual art and the poet’s impressions. When writing an ekphrastic poem, a delicate balance exists between how much the product relies on the art object of its inspiration to be understood and whether it can stand on its own without the viewer seeing the visual art source.

Ekphrasis has been practiced since the ancient Greeks, yet there seems to be a growing trend in this region and nationally. Last year the Delaware Art Museum embarked on a similar project. A recent issue of *Beltway*

Poetry Quarterly also focused attention by featuring poems about objects in museums. In fact, the evening after the launch of the BMA's audio tour, an exhibit at Metro Gallery showcased a concert and audio tracks by local musicians responding to an artists' work as well as her work in response to these new compositions based on the original visual art pieces.

When presented with the list of art objects from which to choose the subject of the poem for the audio tour I knew right away with which object I had chemistry enough to try a second date. My thought process for the decision reminds me of how Claudia's younger brother Jamie must have felt when he said, "Unfortunately, the museum people had fastened all the drawers of their furniture so they could

not be opened. They had never given a thought to the convenience of Jamie Kincaid." (p. 45) He is therefore forced to hide his trumpet in the belly of a huge urn and tuck his book bag neatly behind a drape behind a statue from the Middle Ages. I completely understood his frustration as I sat in front of my object, my *Lady's Writing Desk*, closed to business forcing me to write her story on my lap of denim instead of hers of poplar.

Performing the final poem on the night of the launch and showing the inspiration object in the flesh (or should I say veneer) to my family in attendance was like introducing an old friend. While I am a little old to run away from home like Claudia and Jamie, visiting the museum and creating ekphrastic poetry provided an opportunity to run

away from reality and the present for awhile, thankfully for more than thirty seconds. I would like to give kudos to Anne Manning and Preston Bautista of the BMA for bring writers together and enhancing the visitors' experiences through the audio tour. If you have practiced ekphrastic writing or heard the poems included in the audio tour, you will see how museum objects are anything but quiet wallflowers. In fact, if the watchman had met the vibrant speaker of a classmate's poem and the seemingly austere subject of the eponymous painting *Dorothea Berck*, the ladies would have "warn[ed] him not to touch anything" as they primped in a museum bathroom, similar to the one in which Koningsburg's characters hid!

Commiseration with a Wallflower

Jennifer E. Carinci, T-C '07. Jennifer_carinci@yahoo.com

After "Lady's Writing Desk" American, Maryland, Baltimore (c. 1800-1810) at the Baltimore Museum of Art

Ancient art, dating back to the Egyptians who used veneers on their sarcophagi; museum tag reveals your inferior interior under mahogany's superior façade, despite Baltimore's finest Federal work.

Crowd of standing, era furniture, waiting for a dance - eight chairs and two recliners on pedestals but none in front of you.

A desk sighs, silence?

Paler, thinner trees rested on your dark, fine frame now folded, closed to business.

What joy and tragedy crossed your stage.

These lines I write, seated on manicured carpet, a leaf resting on my lap of denim instead of yours of poplar.



From below I see your bottom, worn – not meant to be admired, like your hutch:

Recycled imagery from Greece - reverse painted on glass masking the inside and the artist's hand:

Graces grace us draped positives on black negatives.

Intricate inlay – you must have once been tired to now be retired after becoming a gift of another *lady*.

You were built to have your back against a wall; your dainty legs were not made for exercise nor do they end in claws, but miniature casters – the better to take you home.

NEW AUDIO TOUR! 60 Objects | Countless Stories

FREE (admission to the Museum's collection is free for everyone, everyday). Pick up the audio tour and map at the BMA Box Office.
443-573-1700
<http://www.artbma.org/visit/tours.html>

The Baltimore Museum of Art, 10 Art Museum Drive, Baltimore, MD 21218
Hours: Wednesday—Friday 11 a.m.—5p.m., Saturday—Sunday 11 a.m.—6 p.m.