Theme 1: Word Pictures

Lesson 7: Ut pictura poësis

Part 1

Poetry is painting that talks—said Simonides of Keos some 2500 years ago—and painting is silent poetry. Thus began an explicit connection, and ensuing debate, in Western culture that posits the question: what do image texts and word texts have in common, if anything? That is in fact the central question of this course.

If we ponder literacy in the ancient world, the tiny number of written texts and the tiny percentage of people who could read them, we get a better sense of the special regard devoted to the written word. Consider also the dearth of pictures in ancient times. We live in a world of jingles and billboards, of moving images and illustrated texts, of newspapers and magazines and books and the Internet, of TV programs and commercials bombarding us for hours each day. A rural peasant or slave in the ancient Roman Empire was not only illiterate; he or she might also go days, even weeks without seeing an image of any kind, other than small figurines or totems of guardian spirits. Festivals would bring masks, shields, insignias, banners, icons, images into the town square, but not everyone could attend. The shepherd remained up in the hills except for a rare market day. Imagine such a person entering a dark temple and discovering there on the torch-lit wall brilliantly-colored figures: men, women, plants, animals, and fabulous monsters, many of them nearly life-size. In the flickering flame these figures seem to twitch and jump. Like a frame surrounding the pictures you see abstract signs you cannot decipher, the names and the stories depicted within, words that can never be forgotten because someone has written them here on stone or engraved them into the stone itself. Perhaps a priest holds aloft a lamp and reads to you, running a finger over the mysterious ciphers as you ogle a picture, one of the sacred stories about the birth and death of gods.
We cannot feel the awe of the visual image and the written text as the ancients did. To a certain extent we are numb to the commonplace. Image and text appear together so often in our culture that they seem to blend together naturally. What could be easier to understand than a big red circle with a bottle inside it and the words Coca-Cola written across it? The eye and brain grasp it in a single glance, right?

Experiments suggest otherwise. Look at the following optical illusion. As fast as you can, try to say the color of the word, not the word spelled out.

Not so easy, is it? Scientists would call this hesitation a classic right brain / left brain conflict. The right side of the brain perceives the color image while the left side perceives the word. Visual text conflicts with written text.

We must explore the relationship more deeply, starting again from the point of view of the classical age. As E.N. Tigerstedt writes in the Dictionary of the History of Ideas, Plato, the great Greek philosopher from the fourth century BC, suggested in his work the Republic that the arts resemble one another insofar as they traditionally represent people, things, and events in our sense experience. For Plato, this is not such a good thing: "poetry, like painting and sculpture, is only an imitation (mimēsis) of this sensual world, which, in its turn, is an imitation of real being, the world of ideas" (3 526). Thus poetry, like painting, would be banned from the perfect society envisioned by Plato because it shackles thought to this imperfect existence instead of lifting it to the higher reality. Art is all about sense experience.

In addition to the way all art undermines his idea of a perfect society, Plato brings up another point in his Phaedrus that makes literature "truly analogous to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as if they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever" (Hollander 3).

Leaving aside for a moment the kind of person who talks to paintings and poems, we must agree with Plato's observation that texts, both written and visual, are forever what they are, never more and never less. They do not respond to our needs. As objects they are as absolute as a frying pan or a shoe lace. They lack any ability or desire either to tell us more or to show us more about themselves. Their maker has made them and left them as they are.

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Yet we are not completely helpless before them. We can always read closer, look deeper, broaden our experience, take them apart and put them back together, and thereby shed more light on the object at hand. (This course is an attempt to foster such an active approach to art and life, combining critical thinking and informed response.) We may change our approach to it, but the object itself remains stubbornly predetermined and uncooperative. It does not take pity on us, does not give extra hints, and never adds one clarifying sentence or caption. This becomes painfully obvious in an exam.

Consider for a moment the discussions, debates, duels, and even wars that have arisen over the interpretation of a particular text. No doubt from time to time you too are uncertain what a sentence or paragraph “really means” in the context of this course. It seems that writers, at least, should explain themselves more directly, that is, should tell us plainly what they want us to know. Of course, due to the nature of language itself, ambiguities will always arise, and with them, the opportunity for readings that contrast, contradict, and clash. And since, as we have seen, the meaning of any kind of language does not reside in the words but in the reader, everything we want and love in a text exists in the same space as that ambiguity. We usually call it room for the imagination.
Part 2

Confronted by certain works of modern art, we may well wish the painter had given the picture a longer title or even attached a document to help us understand—to help us read—the painted image that confounds us, as Charlie Chaplin noted earlier. And yet as the film director Stanley Kubrick suggests, we come to texts only in part to identify and acknowledge; we also come to participate in the unfolding of meaning, to enrich ourselves and to learn something new. A thoroughly self-limiting text is generally a text that thoroughly excludes us. It is like overhearing a private joke. We become mere voyeurs looking over the painter’s or the writer’s shoulder at a communication meant for others.

“Ut pictura poēsis,” said the Roman poet Horace (65–8 BC) in his Ars poetica, or the Art of Poetry. As painting is, poetry is. He was speaking of the particular delight we may take in reading a certain verse or in viewing a certain painting, that is, the aesthetic effect poetry and painting produce. But the succinct phrase goes so well with the previous statement by Simonides of Keos, that Ut pictura poēsis has come to sum up the concept of ekphrasis. Can words, even the most vivid and carefully chosen, reproduce all or part of the experience of gazing at a painting?

Before you dismiss the problem as arcane, an intellectual sideshow with little or no relevance to really serious philosophical issues, consider that the question mirrors a far deeper inquiry: for if it turns out that words fail to reproduce in the reader an experience as relatively simple and straightforward as gazing at a two-dimensional unmoving and unchanging image, can words ever be trusted to reproduce real life with any accuracy or authenticity?

The ekphrastic debate continues to this day, and will continue at least until the end of this course. Just a few years ago the American poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote the following poem on the theme, underscoring the relationship:

And every poem and every picture
a sensation in the eye and heart
Something that jolts you awake
from the rapt sleep of living
in a flash of pure epiphany
where all stands still
in a diamond light
transfixed
revealed
for what it truly is
in all its mystery

So a bird is an animal
Ferlinghetti underscores here another similarity between poetry and painting: their stillness. That is, both poetry and painting attempt to arrest the ceaseless flow of experience into a single unchanging glimpse, the way a photograph may freeze the flight of a bird or the gallop of a race horse. In Ferlinghetti’s poem, the first sentence is so still that it even lacks a verb: “And every poem and every picture / a sensation in the eye and heart.” The understood verb here—“is”—would represent no real action to speak of, but its absence makes that stillness even more explicit. With the exception of jolts, all the verbs are similarly static: stands still, is, is, stands. The poem deliberately avoids movement and change by using participles instead of active verbs: transfixed, revealed, flown, singing, screened, smiling, blinding. Not all writing emphasizes stillness, and some texts—particularly narratives—may attempt to express fast and furious action. Yet under careful scrutiny such texts often provide only a series of literary freeze frames, the way cartoons are made up of a sequence of drawings that give the illusion of motion by flipping quickly from one to the next. Ferlinghetti’s text is a poem about the stillness of poetry and painting and uses a technique to draw attention to that stillness.

Compare the stillness of poetry with that in a painting. The Mona Lisa, for example. We have seen that the young woman has been caught in mid motion as she twists in her chair to look our way. In the portrait this movement has been arrested forever. She appears completely at rest and monumentally stable, fixed there for eternity.

Part 3
It goes without saying that we do not see like this. Even as we stare at a motionless object, our eyes are almost always moving, the tiny muscles adjusting the focus, the lids bumping the eyeballs as they blink, our head wobbling ever so slightly as we breathe. It may, however, resemble the way we see memory. In the stillness of an image the eye is free to move and the imagination to wonder. Outside of space and time a poem may use a painting like the Mona Lisa, not to reproduce the experience of viewing the actual image, but as the starting point of a meditation. The American writer Angelina Weld Grimké (1880–1958), in her poem “A Mona Lisa,” gives voice to the human yearning to break through the surface of beauty, the surface of that object we most desire, and cease to be separate from it, whatever the cost. Note again the quietness of the verbs Grimké employs, the delicacy and reserve with which she describes the imagined union.

1
I should like to creep
Through the long brown grasses
That are you lashes;
I should like to poise
On the very brink
Of the leaf-brown pools
That are your shadowed eyes;
I should like to cleave
Without sound
Their glimmering waters,
Their unrippled waters,
I should like to sink down
And down
And down...
And deeply drowned.

2
Would I be more than a bubble breaking?
Or an ever-widening circle
Ceasing at the marge?
Would my white bones
Be the only white bones
Wavering back and forth, back and forth
In their depths?  4

The restrained phrase “I should like”—repeated four times in the first section of the poem—tempers the expression of a much deeper emotion, in fact a willingness to die in the attempt, as the second section makes clear. The weaving indentation and the hit-and-miss rhyme scheme (grasses/lashes; sound/down/drown) reinforce the effect. What is going on here? The speaker seems hesitant to confess the desire, perhaps painfully shy. The verbs convey the same tentativeness: creep, poise, cleave, sink, cease, be, waver, none of which conveys a real sense of action. The strongest verb here is drown, which here is more passive than active in meaning. The verb cleave is modified by the phrase without a sound, emphasizing the silence with which Simonides of Keos described painting and about which Plato complained. Grimké’s, then, is a desire portrayed in the imagination as still and silent as any painted portrait.

What has the poem to do with the Mona Lisa by Leonardo? We saw that Giorgio Vasari praised the painting’s rendition of the model’s eyes, and here the poem begins. Yet this strikes me as pure coincidence. There is nothing else in the

poem that refers to or attempts to reproduce in us the image of the *Mona Lisa*. Stripped of its title ("A Mona Lisa"), would the poem evoke in any reader the experience of viewing the famous painting? It is highly unlikely. The imagery deals mainly with water, hardly an element that takes over Leonardo’s composition. Furthermore, the poem mentions two colors, brown and white, and uses each one twice; neither color dominates in the *Mona Lisa*.

The ekphrastic connection in this case is the title. Just as we may wish—intensely and hopelessly—to penetrate the painted surface and truly know the woman whose likeness we see in the masterpiece, so Grimké speaks of her own longing for someone of flesh and blood. The painting becomes emblematic of all such yearning. With the final question about how many sets of bones would be found in the depths, the poem implies that the speaker is far from the only one who has longed for such a union. It is fair to say that in this poem the *Mona Lisa* is a metaphor, a kind of short hand for and the most perfect example of a beautiful, desired, but unattainable woman.

Grimké’s poem is interesting in its own right, but touches only lightly on ekphrasis. In the recent poem “Mona Lisa,” Nick Carding—a contemporary British poet—combines a yearning similar to that expressed by Grimké with a sense of the painting’s real presence:

> Show me again the rich, flattering sequence of your smile,  
> define its meaning.  
> Let me hear the soft, seductive pattern of your voice  
> at last, explain its keening.  
> Needing some reason for your presence  
> I stand in awe  
> before you at the very edge of understanding,  
> my heart and mind at war,  
> your enigmatic father too demanding.

A sense of presence helps make the poem more ekphrastic, despite the relative lack of vivid description: except for the poem’s title, the famous smile in the first verse is the one and only visual key to the painting. Adjectives like *seductive* and *enigmatic* are words used elsewhere to describe the allure of the image; this time, the *enigmatic* refers to Leonardo rather than to his creation, but the mere presence of the word in this context may extend to the *Mona Lisa*. The text comes close to being a poem of missing elements—the keening voice, the understanding that yet lies beyond reach, the “enigmatic father” or artist long dead—that manages to evoke the experience of standing “in awe before you,” the *you* being an unyielding and perfectly self-contained image of a smiling woman.

Consider again the rather static imagery incorporated in verbs of little or no action: *show, define, hear, need, stand*. The most potentially active verb, *keen*, is transformed (we might say deactivated) into the noun *keening*, which deepens the
silence. “Let me hear […] your voice / at last” clearly means that the speaker feels rather than hears the keening. Its placement in the rhyme scheme further intensifies the peculiar use of the word. Not only does keening rhyme in consonance with the preceding meaning; it also rhymes in assonance with the very next word, needing. Such poetic devices are analogous to pictorial techniques such as the use of complementary colors or the juxtaposition of light and dark areas. They enhance aesthetic interest and quite often draw attention to key elements.

Part 4

The American novelist and poet Edith Wharton (1862–1937) plays with ekphrasis in a most intriguing way in her “Mona Lisa.” Instead of focusing on the enigmatic central portrait, as most writers do, Wharton concentrates completely on the weird landscape in the background. In doing so she completely ignores the woman whose smile is world famous. At the same time, the poem is not a meticulous description of what viewers see as they stand before the canvas. It flies off into imaginary territory with an odd and twisted tale of doomed lovers.

Yon strange blue city crowns a scarped steep
No mortal foot hath bloodlessly essayed:
Dreams and illusions beacon from its keep,
But at the gate an angel bares his blade;

And tales are told of those who thought to gain
At dawn its ramparts; but when evening fell
Far off they saw each facing pinnacle
Lit with wild lightnings from the heaven of pain;

Yet there two souls, whom life’s perversities
Had mocked with want in plenty, tears in mirth,
Might meet in dreams, ungarmented of earth,
And drain Joy’s awful chalice to the lees.

The old-fashioned yon and the forced accent that turns the already high-sounding scarpèd into the absurdly high register of scarp-ed are used to good effect here. They introduce us to a kind of Romantic or Pre-Raphaelite vision of medieval English, a world in which anything may happen. Here “dreams and illusions” shine like a lighthouse atop the “keep,” the innermost stronghold in a castle—yet another medieval touch. At the gate of this heavenly city “an angel bares his blade,” an image clearly recalling the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. Can “Joy’s awful chalice” be far from the Holy Grail, object of so many medieval quests? (We will discuss the Holy Grail at some length in the next theme, also in relation to Leonardo da Vinci.) The made-up word ungarmented is an obvious back formation that would seem lumbering and affected in most contexts; here it works perfectly to describe our dream selves having taken off the body, that outer garment of flesh, which in turn was fashioned from the earth, according to the
biblical Book of Genesis—which harkens back again to Adam and Eve. Only in a dream or illusion within this bizarre landscape might such lovers meet and rejoice, although even they must remember such joy is located in the heaven of pain.

Despite the charged imagery, there is a stillness and silence typical of painting and poetry. The verb crown is rather inert in this sense of sitting upon, while the quaint verb essay is even less dynamic than its modern try. The angel does not swing or stab or jab or slice or hack or even menace with the sword, but only shows it unsheathed. The verbs are so inactive, in fact, that when we reach the phrase “drain Joy’s awful chalice to the lees,” the effect is electric: we ascribe all manner of behavior to an otherwise simple if gluttonous verb.

Ekphrastically, the text uses the landscape of the Mona Lisa as its starting point: the blue color is faithful to the original, as is the allusion to cliffs, steep summits, and twilight. The painting’s bridge or aqueduct, the distant ocean or lake, and the meandering road are not mentioned at all. The title, then, is absolutely necessary to an understanding of the ekphrastic relationship, as well as a thorough knowledge of the painting: someone whose familiarity is limited to the famous smile would be confused and disappointed by the imagery in this poem. Wharton’s use of the background as the source of her fantasy rises to the level of a literary conceit—that is, an extravagant, elaborate, intellectualized construction that demands a particular kind of reader, one with much patience and cultural background who also appreciates a clever, fanciful image.

Part 5

The American poet Sara Teasdale (1884–1933), a contemporary of Edith Wharton, employs ekphrasis to make a simple, obvious, but painful truth. Art objects may be beautiful, affording us hours of aesthetic pleasure as we contemplate them or weave imaginary lives around them. Whatever interest, emotion, and appreciation we invest in art objects, however, Wharton’s sonnet “The Return” makes clear that they are supremely indifferent to us. They cannot love, cannot appreciate or reciprocate sentiments. The Mona Lisa is as unfeeling as the rest.

I turned the key and opened wide the door
To enter my deserted room again,
Where thro’ the long hot months the dust had lain.
Was it not lonely when across the floor

No step was heard, no sudden song that bore
My whole heart upward with a joyous pain?
Were not the pictures and the volumes fain
To have me with them always as before?

But Giorgione's Venus did not deign
To lift her lids, nor did the subtle smile
Of Mona Lisa deepen. Madeleine

Still wept against the glory of her hair,
Nor did the lovers part their lips the while,
But kissed unheeding that I watched them there.\(^5\)

In addition to the **Mona Lisa**, the poem mentions the famous **Sleeping Venus** by Giorgione (below; see also the **Great Masters** textbook, page103), a Venetian contemporary of Leonardo da Vinci. Tranquilly dozing completely naked in the open countryside, Venus lies undisturbed by human events. The return of a lonely woman from vacation after the long hot months of summer likewise has no effect. A portrait of the penitent Mary Magdalene—there are too many to choose from—does not trade her tears for a smile at seeing her long-lost owner, nor does a reproduction of a pair of lovers break off their kiss. None of the treasures reacts at all. So the answer to the somewhat pretentious use of *fain* (glad) for the sake of the rhyme, must be a silent but resounding *no*. Unmoving and unmoved, uncaring, and unspeaking, the paintings must remain exactly what they are forever. All the activity belongs to the human being at the center of the poem, who turns the key and flings open the door after having raced up the steps, singing. Although the speaker never tells her reaction to the indifference that greets her, we feel her disappointment. The only emotion here—pain—also belongs to the human being. Paintings, however superb they may be, feel nothing.

In terms of ekphrasis, the poem tells us little about the art works. Teasdale counts on the reader’s knowledge of them. The only detail of Giorgione’s **Venus** given to us, is that her eyes are closed. The **Mona Lisa**, of course, smiles. The Magdalene is portrayed weeping into her hair. The lovers—surprise!—are kissing. The titles are enough to get across Teasdale’s point. Even for those unfamiliar with the other pictures, the **Mona Lisa** alone perhaps conveys the needed information.

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\(^5\) Selendy Communications. “Poems of Sara Teasdale.”
Part 6
The Mona Lisa, despite her eternal silence, can yet be made to comment on society—if not her own, then on ours. The Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos (1925–1974) is widely regarded as a trailblazing feminist in the arts and letters of Mexico in the 20th century. In her most famous works, she explores the plight of women in a world beyond their control. Here we consider a poem entitled “Looking at the Mona Lisa,” which immediately sets up a discourse of the viewer and the viewed. The subtitle is interesting. In parentheses and in italics Castellanos has written: “(In the Louvre, naturally).” The word naturally adds irony, perhaps even sarcasm. Of the previous poems, only Teasdale’s has considered the environment of the image, that is, the physical space in which the image is viewed. Among ekphrastic prose descriptions of the Mona Lisa, such as those read in art history books, it is rare to find a mention of the painting’s location. Most often the museum is tagged onto the reproduced image apart from the descriptive text, as in our Great Masters textbook, page 79:

| Mona Lisa  
| (La Gioconda) |
| (1503–1505)  
| oil on wood  
| 30 x 20 in (77 x 53 cm) |
| Louvre, Paris |

The descriptive text is on the opposite page. Although the description mentions the extensive travels of the Mona Lisa, it sees no importance in the museum in which the painting is exhibited today.

Castellanos, however, considers the museum important enough to include it in the title, where the proper name is second only to the Mona Lisa itself. Important enough, in fact, to slap with a snide comment: naturally. We must read the poem before we can begin to decode the source of such resentment.

Are you laughing at me? You’re right.
If I were Sor Juana*  
or La Malinche,* or, not to depart from national folklore,  
some incarnation of the Güera Rodríguez*  
(as you can see, extremes are my lot, just like Gide*),  
you would see me, perhaps, as one observes  
a representative specimen  
from some social sector of a Third World country.

But I’m only one of those dumb little tourist ladies,  
one of those who gets a travel agency  
to set up a tour for her—
and a monolingual to boot!—
who’s come to contemplate you.

And you smile, mysteriously
as is your obligation. But I can read you.
That smile is mockery. It mocks me and every
one of us who believe that we believe that
culture is a liquid one imbibes at the source,
a special symptom one contracts
in certain contagious places, something
one acquires by osmosis.

(Poesía no eres tú [Poetry Is Not You], 1972)\(^6\)

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*Notes to the poem:

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695), a nun in colonial Mexico renowned for her intellect and literary style, was forced to renounce such pursuits.

La Malinche was a Native American woman who served the Spanish conquistador Cortés as consort, advisor, and translator.

La Güera Rodríguez, Maureen Ahern explains in her own note to the poem, was the mistress of Augustin de Iturbide (1783–1823), Mexican general in the struggle for independence from Spain and self-proclaimed emperor of Mexico, 1822–1823.

André Gide (1869–1951), a French author controversial in his time for views on art, politics, and morality, won the Nobel Prize in 1947.

The speaker is obviously well educated, with a historical and political consciousness far above average. Face to face with the most famous painting in the world, she pulls out of thin air three names from the past, women from a different continent. Apart from Mexico and their sex, the three women have little in common: they lived in different centuries. Beyond the lack of a common denominator among themselves, these women have nothing to do with the Mona Lisa. Sor Juana Inés did compose a sonnet on a painted portrait of herself, which she dismissed as less than a “lifeless shadow” in the translation by Roderick Gill,\(^7\) but here the speaker seems to take the Mona Lisa seriously as a vital presence. Apparently, then, the connection is womanhood: La Malinche, Sor Juana, the Güera Rodríguez, the subject of the painting, and the speaker (“one of those dumb little tourist ladies”) are all women.

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The self-loathing of the speaker overpowers her ability to see the **Mona Lisa** for what it is. The only ekphrastic detail, the famous smile, becomes a laugh of derision, an open-faced mockery of the viewer’s intensions and pretensions. The painting here represents high culture. The speaker, having made a pilgrimage to the aesthetic icon in order to acquire some kind of cultural blessing, finds herself as bankrupt as before. The **Mona Lisa** has nothing to give. And the Louvre Museum, far from being a temple of art and culture, becomes a dirty source of infection, one of those “contagious places” where we contract culture like a disease, simply by exposure.

**Part 7**

Let’s review the uses of ekphrasis in the five poems we have just read. In Grimké’s “A Mona Lisa,” the painting scarcely matters as a visual image; the poet uses the painting to represent an impossible object of desire. For Nick Carding, the **Mona Lisa** is itself, the silent portrait he longs to bring to life; yet he devotes little space to the viewing experience of the painting, assuming the reader knows it well enough to follow the threads of the poem. Edith Wharton’s poem ignores the portrait, appropriates the landscape in the background, and creates a flight of fancy as weird and dreamy as the craggy mountains and dusky air. In “The Return,” Sara Teasdale sets the **Mona Lisa** among other pictures to show the pain of unrequited love. And Rosario Castellanos, confronting the **Mona Lisa** in the Louvre, raises questions about the meaning and purpose of art and the kind of culture the “best people” are supposed to possess. It would be possible, even advisable, to spend far more time inside each of these poems, for each has much more to offer than its ekphrastic relationship with the **Mona Lisa**. They are here only to show the variety of roles ekphrasis plays in a written text.

We have also seen that written texts often take on silence and stillness as they approach visual texts like paintings, which are forever silent and still. You may notice this happening in your own writing about pictures. Poetry tends to reveal such features in concentrated form: concision and concentration are two of the advantages of using poetry to analyze ekphrasis.

Yet we are still searching for a poem that brings to life the visual experience of a particular painting. Simonides of Keos and Horace insist that there is an essential similarity: *Ut pictura poësis*. Not necessarily poetry in the sense of verses and rhymes, but poetry as the intensification of language, its original purpose and form. A vivid text full of imagery, in verse or in prose, is poetic by definition. Is poetry painting that talks, as Simonides of Keos said? Is painting silent poetry?