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One Picture, A Thousand Words: One Poem, How Many Pictures?

Today we live in the Civilization of the Image. Images have become so pervasive that it's now a commonplace to say they bombard and surround us everywhere we go. Literature, or the "Art of the Word," is undoubtedly adapting to our hyper-visual environment in new and creative ways. But we mustn't forget that literature has a long history of dialoguing with the visual and plastic arts—such as ekphrastic literature, which traces its roots to Homeric times, and employs descriptions of visual art as a major poetic device. Ekphrasis (meaning "description" in Greek) achieves the experience of two media simultaneously, and is pivotal to the tradition in which my poetry draws inspiration. For this reason, I've decided to use this occasion to discuss ekphrastic poetry.

Ten years ago, I had the honour to prepare a thematic selection of Contemporary Macedonian Poetry for the Struga Poetry Evenings Festival, titled *Ut Pictura Poesis – Poetry in dialogue with Plastic Arts*. This time, to start the discussion, I've selected "A Visit to the Museum,"¹ a short piece by one of the most important Macedonian poets from the twentieth century, Blaže Koneski:²

*Their arms touched each other
in silent excitement
at the entrance to the small hall.
They sat together, closely, on the bench.
They had no need to talk about their life –
they just stared at Claude Monet's Red Water Lilies,
and behind them, in silence, Picasso's Guernica.*

This poem might be read as a simple poetic testimony of an ordinary event in an important museum. When read more closely, however, a metaphor emerges concerning the dialogue between the Visual and Verbal, the plastic arts and literature. From the viewpoint of the poem's spatial arrangement, we can imagine our protagonists sitting between the two Images, two representative works of fine art. At the same time, our reader, entering this poetic museum, is *confronted* with the titles of the two paintings in the final two verses of the text. Actually, every reader is always placed between words and images in ekphrastic poetry. In his book *Museum of Words*, James Heffernan reminds us that the ekphrastic poetry of our times "represents works of art within the context of a museum, which of course, includes words that surround the pictures

¹ The poem is translated from Macedonian into English by Zoran Anchevski.

See: Martinovski, V. ed. (2006). *Ut Pictura Poesis – Poetry in Dialogue with the Plastic Arts*. Struga: Struga Poetry Evenings.

² Blaže Koneski (1921 –1993) was one of the most distinguished [Macedonian](#) poets, writers, [literary translators](#) and linguistic scholars. His major contribution was to the codification of standard [Macedonian](#). Honorary Doctor of the Universities of Chicago, Krakow and Skopje.

See: <http://www.blesok.com.mk/avtor.asp?lang=eng&id=400#.WbC-nfMjHIU>

we see, beginning with picture titles.”³ Hence, when you walk into a museum you not only absorb the images, but also the surrounding texts on the walls.

Clearly, this poem too—in which works of art are merely named, not described—shows that the creation of meaning in the text is impossible (or incomplete) unless the reader is familiar with the paintings in question! In fact, a proper reading hinges on their placement. Notice the poem’s strong “cinematographic” effect: to realize this effect, the readers must project the specified paintings onto their mental screen, and—at least for a minute—find themselves *in-between* these works of art. Essentially, in “A Visit to a Museum,” knowledge of the artwork is a precondition for understanding.

Only the reader who has *viewed* Monet’s and Picasso’s paintings, or is aware of their background or contribution to art history, can *read* the *narratives* of the poem’s protagonists. “*They had no need to talk about their life*” since that role is played by the images between which they find themselves. The images (or more precisely, paintings’ titles) replace words. Meanwhile, through the mediation of words the reader is offered the chance to recollect the artwork. The reader learns which painting they’re regarding (the idyllic landscape), and which lies behind (the horrors of war).

Hence the question: could the reader understand or interpret this poem without the visual semantic potential of Claude Monet’s *Water Lilies* and Picasso’s *Guernica*? Artwork might therefore be seen as a visual catalyst of the poem, and the poem—thanks to the art of language—a chance to see and reinterpret the works of art and life. Isn’t this one of the main roles of art in general?

³ See: Heffernan, A. W. J. (1993). *Museum of Words. The Poetics of Ekphrases from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.