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# EKPHRASIS

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It.: *Descrizione*; Fr. *Description*; Germ. (*Kunst*-)*Beschreibung*; Span. *Descripción*. The Greek noun ἔκφρασις stands for a "descriptive speech that brings the subject shown vividly before the eyes" (Theon. *Prog*. 118.7). This definition goes back to the *Progymnasmata* (= preliminary exercises for the training of orators) of the Alexandrian sophist and rhetorician Aelius Theon (1st cent. AD), and is repeated nearly verbatim by later authors of *Progymnasmata*, namely Hermogenes of Tarsus (2nd cent.), Aphthonius of Antioch (4th cent.), and Nicholas the Sophist (5th cent.). *Ekphrasis* was designed originally as an exercise of rhetorical skills: its core feature was neither the description itself nor the thing described (which could even be non-existent), but the vividness (*enargeia*) with which the description appealed to the mind's eye of the audience. Throughout antiquity up to early modernity, ancient *ekphrasis* was not linked to specific objects: it could describe paintings or sculptures as well as persons, places, or even specific events such as battles. In the 20th century *ekphrasis* acquired, thanks mostly to Leo Spitzer, the restricted meaning which is common nowadays among scholars and art critics, namely that of "a poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art" (Spitzer 1955). Contemporary discussions on *ekphrasis* all depend on Spitzer's definition, which became popular especially among scholars of English and Comparative literature. Literary studies developed upon this definition, and considered *ekphrasis* in a more comprehensive sense, including linguistic visualizations of non-present objects (Krieger 1992). Heffernan and Mitchell operate with an even broader concept of *ekphrasis*, which they define as a "verbal representation of visual representation" (Heffernan 1993; Mitchell 1994).

## PRESENTATION OF THE CONCEPT

The current debate on *ekphrasis* focuses on 1) its role in antiquity; 2) its reference to the history of art, especially in the Renaissance; 3) its reference to the contemporary debate on the "pictorial turn".

1) Since the 1990s the rhetorical and the aesthetical backgrounds of ancient *ekphrasis* have been explored in depth (Heffernan 1993; Webb 1999 and 2009; Elsner 2002). These studies focus on *ekphrasis* as a product of a "culture of viewing" which entails an interaction between the viewer and the material artifact, or the reader and the text (Goldhill 1994). Such an interaction can be observed throughout Graeco-Roman literature: ekphrastic texts do in fact occur much before, and independently from, the technical definition of *ekphrasis* (Marino & Stavru 2013). One of the first ekphrastic texts of antiquity is the description of Achilles' shield in the *Iliad* (XVIII, 478-608), which stirred a number of imitations across various literary and iconographic genres. Already in the 6th cent. BC, the pseudo-Hesiodic description of the shield of Heracles referred to the Homeric model. In the 1st cent. BC, Achilles' shield was imitated by Vergil, in his depiction of Aeneas' shield, and in two of the so-called Tabulae Iliacae, the miniature marble reliefs dating back to the same period. Such interdependence of media can be observed also in the poetic genres of a) the epigram, a poem which is either juxtaposed to existing (mostly sepulchral) statues and paintings, or dedicated to fictive artworks (e.g. the poems included in the ninth book of the *Palatine Anthology*, as well as those featured in the fourth book of the *Planudean Anthology*; cf. Gutzwiller 1998); b) the *technopaignion*, a poem of varying verse-lengths which imitates the shape of an object (such as gems and statues, e.g., those included in the 'New Poseidippus' papyrus; cf. Kwapisz 2013). The most important theoretical texts on *ekphrasis* are inscribed within the philosophical and rhetorical tradition of Graeco-Roman antiquity: Aristotle, Stoicism, Pseudo-Longinus, Cicero, and Quintilian (cf. Sheppard 2014). The philosophical and rhetoric movement of the Second Sophistic produced a large number of ekphrastic texts (Dio Chrysostomus, Lucian, and Polemon of Laodicea), the most renowned of which are the *Eikones* by Philostratus the Elder, which featured descriptions of a (probably fictive) Neapolitan gallery of pictures. At the end of antiquity, Nonnus of Panopolis made an important contribution to the genre of ekphrasis in his poem *Dionysiaca*: here the visual, the verbal and the tactile descriptions are mingled in a perfect synaesthesia (Faber 2016). Both Philostratus and Nonnus were key authors for the Byzantine tradition, where *ekphrasis* played a critical role: verbal narratives of religious images could not only intensify visual experiences, but lead the viewers to see religious meanings beyond what could be physically seen or represented. Very important in this respect are the *ekphraseis* of religious buildings, esp. those erected in Constantinople (e.g. Procopius of Caesarea's and Paulus Silentiarius' descriptions of Hagia Sophia and Photios' homily on its apse mosaic), or of artifacts which no longer exist (e.g. Constantinos Rhodios' and Nicolaos Mesarites' descriptions of the Church of the Holy Apostles).

2) *Ekphrasis* plays a key role in both ancient and modern art: in antiquity, *ekphraseis* have often been used in the attempt to reconstruct lost artworks (Friedländer 1912), and, following upon the dictum of the poet Simonides "painting is a silent poetry, poetry is talking painting" (Plut. *De glor. Ath.* 346F), a whole tradition on the 'paragone' (comparison) between fine arts and poetry flourished until early modernity (the classical text in this respect being still Lessing 1766). Modern artists knowingly followed ancient ekphrastic theory or specific descriptions of artworks, mostly those included in Philostratus' *Eikones*; e.g., in the Renaissance: Leon Battista Alberti, Tiziano Vecellio, Raffaello Sanzo, Leonardo da Vinci, Giorgio Vasari, and Giulio Romano (Alpers 1960, Plett 2012); or in the 17th century, esp. Peter Paul Rubens and Diego Velázquez (Alpers 1983).

3) In the 20th century, *ekphrasis* became an important topic for literary studies. It included visualizations of non-visible objects, "the sought-for-equivalent in words of any visual image, in or out of art" (Krieger 1992). Due to its narratological aspects, the "ekphrastic principle" was used to convert the transparency of the verbal medium into the solidity of the medium of the spatial arts. *Ekphrasis* was thus adopted to overcome the mimetic inferiority of language in relation to image by adapting to its plastic forms. The distinction between an "ekphrastic hope" (= *ekphrasis* makes see what is described), an "ekphrastic indifference" (= *ekphrasis* is impossible, as words can cite but not sight their objects), and an "ekphrastic fear" (= *ekphrasis* shows that the difference between the verbal and the visual representation might collapse), became essential for showing the power of contemporary visual culture, and played a major role for the "pictorial turn" theorized by W. J. T. Mitchell.

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