

Review

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Kathleen Walsh-Piper

Image to Word: Art and Creative Writing

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Writing and art are natural partners in life and learning. There is even a name for this relationship: *ekphrasis*. According to the *Grove Dictionary of Art*, the teachers of rhetoric in ancient Greece coined this term to denote “a vivid description intended to bring the subject before the mind’s eye of the listener.” *Image to Word: Art and Creative Writing* by Kathleen Walsh-Piper (The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2002) uses *ekphrasis* both as an approach to art appreciation and an impetus to creative writing.

This slim book—which includes a CD-ROM with color images of the black-and-white illustrations—is a resource for educators from the elementary grades through the college years. While Walsh-Piper frames her suggestions in terms of age-appropriate grade levels, the activities also seem potential-laden for educators working with students struggling with reading and writing, and with individuals for whom English is not the first language.

Walsh-Piper concentrates on ways to use creative writing as a means of formal critical analysis, but also as the doorway to aesthetic experience. In other words, writing creatively about art becomes a way to tap into the creative expression that constitutes that work of art. Creative writing becomes a way to look at the world more deeply, thought-

fully, and imaginatively. Through its focus on expressive vocabulary and the deliberate engagement of all the senses, *Image to Word* is also a means by which teachers in a variety of disciplines can craft a learning experience that validates each student's unique perceptions while helping them acquire the writing and critical thinking skills essential to successful communication.

That *good* writing requires *creative* writing is at the heart of this enterprise: creative writing is "writing that springs from the heart and surprises us—writing that reveals something we know but had not fully realized or expressed before, writing that is inventive in its use of language." Walsh-Piper is also convinced of the "special synergy between writing and looking," the interplay between the images and the words they inspire. While most of the examples in the book take the form of poetry, Walsh-Piper suggests that students also explore prose fiction, autobiography, play-writing, and even expository writing.

The chapters are organized thematically. Each outlines a series of activities that act as points of departure on which teachers can model their own approach.

After a general overview of the project, Walsh-Piper focuses first on vocabulary, starting with the words that evoke and describe sensation. Students, for instance, might compile lists of "sounds and movements" related to a particular work, lists that the students subsequently explain and share. One expects that this is also the moment to familiarize students with a thesaurus, teach the differences between denotation and connotation, and connect these concepts to effective communication.

She also explores the roles of imagination in learning. On the one hand imagination encourages invention and originality, and she uses both modern art and African objects to explore irrational and nonlinear modes of thought. On the other hand, imagination is a means through which the recognition and assimilation of information can narrow the physical and cultural gap between the object and the viewer.

While most of the activities seem best suited to the upper elementary grades through high school and beyond, Walsh-Piper sug-

gests several techniques that compensate for the less developed verbal skills of younger students. Children can, for instance, start by drawing a picture that shows their story and then use words to tell the same story. Teachers can also provide sentence fragments that refer to specific features of a work of art for children to complete.

In avoiding formulaic and detailed instructions, the book focuses on the development of skills and intellectual growth rather than the manufacture of predictable products. Walsh-Piper says, "Writing about works of art breaks down barriers to looking by asking viewers to *pay attention* to what they see and how they react." Replace the word "looking" with "learning" and her thesis seems even more valuable.

The ideal setting for Walsh-Piper's project is, from her point of view as a museum professional, the museum gallery, because "real works of art have a presence, a power to act as a catalyst for ideas and emotions." She points out, however, that original art in the form of murals and sculpture are available in government buildings, offices and churches, parks and cemeteries. There is even a reminder that coins are "miniature sculptures that contain a wealth of images, words, and symbols." For this reader, newspapers, magazines, billboards, websites, even teeshirts might also be sources of imagery. Educators who focus on *ekphrasis* as "a vivid description intended to bring the subject before the mind's eye of the listener" will find many applications for Walsh-Piper's ideas and techniques in a variety of subject areas and existing curricula, as well as a way to move upwards and onwards.