



# Feel It With Your Eyes: Writing Inspired by the University of Kentucky Art Museum

*Chad Gilpin*

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The oldest human paintings we know of, those in the caves at Lascaux, France, predate written language by about 12,000 years. But at least since the time of Homer's description of Achilles' shield in the Iliad, poets and writers have been engaged in ekphrasis. From the Greek, meaning "to explain," ekphrastic writing enacts a response to visual art, and the genre has given us classic works like John Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn," W.H. Auden's "In the Musee des Beaux Arts," Emma Lazarus' "The New Colossus," and Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray. Since the birth of modernism at the beginning of the last century, there has been a rich, symbiotic relationship between writers and painters. Think of Picasso and Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, Frank O'Hara and Joan Mitchell. American writers particularly have felt at home in the artist's studio, the gallery and the museum. The painting often inspired the writing, and the writing often informed, celebrated, and explicated the painting. In the age of motion pictures, as movies used to be called, the static image of the painting, drawing or sculpture often gets ignored or overlooked. Yet, argues John Berger, in that stasis, that stillness, we find a timeless quality so absent from our digital age. To respond in writing to such an image becomes inevitably a contemplative gesture. And because writing does take place in time, that gesture both honors the timelessness of the visual work and releases it into the present of the writer. In that way, the work of art remains vital, alive, and relevant. What you will find in the following pages is not art criticism. Rather, these seventeen writers have each responded in prose and poetry to one work of art in the University of Kentucky Art Museum's capacious permanent collection. Those responses are ekphrastic, narrative, autobiographical, epistolary, polemic, comic, fantastic, and many other things. What do these seventeen pieces of fiction, nonfiction and poetry ask of us as readers and viewers? They ask us to look at these visual works again, to see them anew, with fresh eyes—and ears. First and foremost, they ask us for our undistracted consideration. As the sign on the door of the Art Museum exhorts: Admission is FREE—pay attention.

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