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ekphrasis i: Jeanne deLarm-Neri (MFA '12)

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ekphrasis i Poetry Handout

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A Judgment Scene of 1440

The king basks on a sun-bright wall:
A stunning ship on a molten stream,
Yet framed in shadows brown and deep
To accent the gold of his feathery crown.
He weighs a ball in the dish of his hand,
Views the body, set where thrown
At the hem of his robe, bathed in blood,
Prime to be kicked, or buried, or burned.

The monarch reviews the probable dead
On the fern-flared rug of palm-leaf green.
Angelic figures press their hands,
Speaking prayers, docked at his feet.
Linen women in smiling sails;
They are placid boats, waiting for word.

The dead man wonders about that word.

The judged one sprawls, stomach down,
Flattened head cradled in hands,
Arms pinned under mottled cloak,
Scarlet vibrant as life, but prone.

Standing, the courtiers flank the king,
Wear enviable coats, pleated, waisted,
In figured dress and thin hosed legs,
They step like birds, preen and strut,
Heads and hands in tilted stance.

They chat about corpses with mold-green hats.

Somewhere inside the dead man's dream
He ponders where the ball will land,
Where the stream will finish its thirsty run,
And where he will awake.



Priamo della Quercia (attributed to)

(Italian, active 1438 - after 1467)

Scene from a Novella (cassone panel), K269, early 1440s

Tempera and tooled gold on panel, 17 x 18 ¹/₄ inches (43.2 x 46.4 cm)

Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, via the Discovery Museum, Bridgeport

Andromeda Before The Galaxy

The flesh of Andromeda -- curvy,
well-fed, peachy as clouds at dawn --
glows at mutant Perseus and sea monster
alike in this painting of blue balance.

Her toes perch at water's edge like shells
as if to dive in calm, prepared for her lot.
She meets the globular serpent's eye
and slim curved teeth, its wings
scaly with claws of an eater.

Its slimy paintbrush tail swings
and strokes the rough sea stone
where her one wrist hangs by iron,
manacled to bleak shale by some mortal
apologetic employee of her kingly father
and her mother primping in a dark mirror.

The girl waves eternally (if oil paint lasts that long)
to Perseus galloping through powder blue sky,
resting his winged ankles, riding Pegasus'
horse-flesh birthed from dead Medusa.

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That twisting snakey woman-head drips
gorey wisps, hanging its lantern from his hand.

The Greeks named the human actions so,
weaving sin and sacrifice. Beyond the monster
a beige city rests in icy azure fog.

The brain propels the beast,
incarnates the gaping maw.

Andromeda's father waits, somehow
unhorrified by giving up his child
to this anxious beast eating his country,
fruit of the human mind consuming itself,
sniffing pastel sweetness, treading water and
devouring the painting's center.

The painting's minute passes.

Perseus, liberated from canvas constraints,
cuts through tough neck hide.

Andromeda climbs, blue satin fluttering.

They fly to the twisted city.

They deposit the heads of monsters.

Athena and Theseus May Have Met

Thank the curating gods,
The title plaque names you two,
Your heads missing from a cracked
Frozen fragmented frieze.
We modern docents wondered.

Athena, your wise grey eyes powdered,
Wafted away long ago in circling zephyrs.
What remains is your fine-lined skirt,
Tough marble garlands at your side,
A drape, your square hollowed waist
The site of some ancient hardware,
Maybe a candleholder, braced
By your two feet surveying the deck.

Theseus, your torso hangs suspended.
One killer bicep fits you to the wall,
Your legs gone. Gossamer pleats
Fall to your truncated thigh,
Heart muscle flexed to fly, to betray
The one sandalled foot left behind.

You claimed Athena emerged from guiding dreams.
Commanded you to sail off alone,
Ariadne left gasping on sand,
The mystic Aegean between you
And your island of escape.

Remember, her lust for you shadowed caution.
Her brain cooked up the twine idea.
The puzzle of Daedelus' maze required
More sense than Icarus' wax wings.
She pulled you from subterranean corners.
She overlooked the dulled gleam
In your now-absent eye.

Three feet remain – none of hers.
Athena and Theseus extend limbs,
Nearly tap human and superhuman
Nubs, exchange an airy message.
The code erodes, atom by atom.

Keep The Saints Close By

I need to hold him in my palm,
Scrape my thumb on his bald cool head.
St. Nicholas, small as a candy-store doll,
An icon of metal with nut-shaped face.

He glances his blue disk eyes to the right,
At another room, a thousand years back
When his refugee skeleton lay intact,
A kindly skull in a Byzantine space.

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Normans boated his conquered bones,
Seven centuries dead, even then –
And this tongue-sized enamel slipped in a sleeve,
Hung from a frame on a holy man's neck.

They say his bones exude a myrrh
Like rosewater pressed to a heated cheek.
We need to touch, or dab, or drink –
So far we are from saints.



**Bartolommeo Bulgarini (workshop of)
(Italian, 1337-1387)**

St. Anthony Abbot, ca. 1350, K1224A

Tempera and tooled gold on panel, 13 ¹/₈ x 8 ³/₄ inches

Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, via the Discovery Museum, Bridgeport
(2009.01.03)

The Lady Breathes

Grey irises rimmed in organ red,
Her eyes watch me cross her room.
I skirt her canvas. The varnish sheen
Shifts as I stroll to her side.

She flattens, her sixteenth century soul
Corralled within the cartouche frame.
Her posed mouth smiles, her winter braid
Loops and captures her auburn coif.

Her collar folds in filaments,
A gold epiphany in the hand.
Broccatto sleeves stand up in pink.
They wrap the lady, cord her.

They brace her bust, upholster bones
Like the armatured seat of a divan.
Allow me to slacken those brocade twines
And let the lady breathe.

Sheer wisps fall off shoulder blades,
Slide behind the oak carved sash.
Skin crazes in earth-drought lines.
The atmosphere cracks her surface,

Forces it open till pearls stand alone,
Drape her neck, loosen her hair.
The canvas empties of weft. Silk-free,
The painted lady beams.



Nicolò dell'Abate (circle of)

(Italian, ca. 1509-1571)

Portrait of a Lady, K1751, ca. 1550

Oil on canvas, 15 ⁷/₈ x 14 ¹/₄ inches (40 x 36.2 cm)

Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, via the Discovery Museum, Bridgeport

The Ivory House

1

The hand-sized ivory house attracts me.
Iron hinges link together two moon-glow
parallelograms, once tucked in a pocket
swinging under blue linen robes,
a noble book for travelling veneration.

Paper would die. Ivory preserves
the cubed fragmented medieval wall
with bathtub casket for finger-sized Jesus,
tiny-faced actors, the staged cross.

2

His oval face, his straight nose,
symmetry of eyes and high brow,
graceful point of bearded chin,
patrician wavy hair, the clench of pain,
the droop of death. He hangs
helpless. Legs turned around,
the necks of geese harvested,
pointing the wrong way.
The glass case blocks my doltish touch.

6

Old Simeon fans his hands,
shielding the still-smiling infant.
We must fall upon the Rock, he mumbles.
The light bucket rope hangs thick
as thread and sweeps, twists
behind a lacy arch, the unseen future.
Anna, a wimpled Chaucerian seer,
offers a basket of tiny prophetic eggs.

7

Jesus grows up, skipping years.
He sags, tied to a pole,
naked chest the size of human knuckles
beaten by dancing ogres with undulating
sticks. The walls wave with crazing.
I want to crawl
through the glass case. Understand
the oil light of hanging buckets.
Listen like a child spider to adult speech.

3

Angel wings and lash-thin fingers,
The diving dove and Mary;
She tilts back, eyes wide,
holds a book at her flat belly
in one alarmed gated hand.
The nested garden door unlocks.

4

The manger dog lies nose impaled
In straw, no camels, ox or cow.
The baby rests smiling on Mary,
her breast a globe between them.
Joseph peers mammoth, beard carved curly,
human palms and hand lines helpless, open.
Mary's feet push against the diptych wall.
Rust from hinge nails speck her naked toes.

5

And the ivory star beams rays,
splays like a hand wrapped in tatting.
Mary sits enthroned in open air.
A coifed king holds a tube of myrrh,
a king points lash-thin fingers to the star,
a king kneels to new Jesus
a tapestry parchment rolled and ready to unfurl.

8

He wears the crown of the newly-risen.
A coil of fabric encircles him.
God, tunic-clad like a serf
swings from a heaven limb,
divines Mary's rayed hair.
Her hands fit together flat in prayer,
Hinged at the wrists, palms like wax
prepared for scratches, melting,
erased, ready for a scripting stylus.

9

His wide foot glides from the tomb.
Rips of rust and nails have healed.
Crushed knights roll. These tomb guards
visit from future chain-mail fights.
He tenderly avoids them;
they know not what they do.

The book loops shut with brass chain.
Jesus, owned.

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