

***Musée des Beaux Arts* by W. H. Auden as an ekphrasis**

W. H. Auden's poem *Musée des Beaux Arts* is a powerful example of ekphrasis, a literary form in which a writer describes or engages with a work of visual art. The poem was inspired by Auden's visit to the *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts* in Brussels, where he viewed several paintings by the Flemish Renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder, particularly *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Auden's poem does not merely describe the painting; rather, it explores its themes, extracting a deeper meditation on human suffering, indifference, and the continuity of life. This essay will analyze *Musée des Beaux Arts* as an ekphrastic poem, demonstrating how Auden translates visual imagery into poetic reflection while using key lines to illustrate his approach.

Understanding Ekphrasis

Ekphrasis traditionally refers to the vivid, often dramatic description of a work of art in literature. However, more than just description, ekphrastic poetry often interprets and recontextualizes the artwork, creating a dialogue between the visual and the verbal. Auden's poem does exactly this: rather than offering a straightforward account of Bruegel's painting, it uses the scene as a springboard to explore the broader theme of human indifference to suffering.

The Structure and Tone of the Poem

The poem consists of two irregular stanzas. The first stanza is a general reflection on how "Old Masters" (a term referring to great European painters before the 19th century) understood suffering. Auden notes:

- "About suffering they were never wrong,

The Old Masters: how well they understood

Its human position: how it takes place

While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along."

Here, Auden establishes his thesis: great artists recognized that suffering does not exist in isolation; it occurs alongside the mundane rhythms of everyday life. This idea sets the stage for the second stanza, which directly addresses Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*.

The Ekphrastic Moment: Describing Bruegel's Painting

The second stanza shifts from general reflection to a specific moment, illustrating how Bruegel captures this principle of suffering's unnoticed presence. The painting depicts the mythical figure Icarus plunging into the sea after flying too close to the sun, yet in Bruegel's work, this dramatic event is almost an afterthought. The focus is on the ordinary figures going about their lives: a farmer ploughing his field, a shepherd tending his flock, and a ship sailing away. Auden captures this in his lines:

➤ “In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away

Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may

Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure.”

The phrase “quite leisurely” emphasizes the indifference of those around Icarus. The ploughman, absorbed in his labor, may have noticed the boy's fall, but it does not disrupt his world. This lack of reaction underscores the poem's central message: suffering, no matter how tragic, is often overlooked by those not directly affected.

Auden continues his ekphrastic engagement by highlighting the ship in the painting:

➤ “The sun shone

As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green

Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.”

The imagery of the ship “sailing calmly on” reinforces the idea of life’s relentless continuation. The ship, like the ploughman, represents the world’s indifference to individual suffering. The phrase “as it had to” further emphasizes the inevitability of life’s course—nature does not stop for tragedy, nor do people unless directly involved.

Thematic Depth: Suffering and Indifference

Through his engagement with Bruegel’s painting, Auden presents a meditation on human suffering that extends beyond the canvas. His ekphrasis is not limited to description; instead, he extracts a universal truth: suffering is often invisible to those not directly experiencing it. This theme resonates beyond the myth of Icarus, reflecting real-world tragedies, where lives are lost, yet the world moves on as if nothing has happened.

The poem’s tone is not one of outrage but rather quiet resignation. Auden does not condemn the ploughman or the ship’s crew; he simply observes how suffering exists alongside the routine, suggesting this is an inherent aspect of life.

Ekphrasis as Interpretation and Expansion

What makes *Musée des Beaux Arts* a compelling example of ekphrasis is how Auden goes beyond merely describing *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* to engage with its deeper implications. Rather than simply recounting the painting’s details, he extracts a broader philosophical meaning, transforming visual imagery into a meditation on human experience.

This approach aligns with the purpose of ekphrastic poetry: not just to depict, but to reframe and reinterpret. While Bruegel's painting offers a visual commentary on Icarus's unnoticed fall, Auden's poem expands on this theme, applying it to a wider human context. In this way, Musée des Beaux Arts exemplifies how ekphrasis functions as a bridge between visual and literary art.

Conclusion

W. H. Auden's Musée des Beaux Arts is a masterful ekphrastic poem that not only describes Bruegel's Landscape with the Fall of Icarus but also amplifies its meaning. By reflecting on how suffering is often ignored by those who are not directly affected, Auden uses Bruegel's imagery as a lens through which to explore human indifference. Through careful poetic choices, he transforms a moment of visual art into a profound meditation on life and suffering. This makes Musée des Beaux Arts not just a description of a painting but a work of art in its own right, proving the power of ekphrasis to transcend artistic mediums.