Ancient Greek ekphrasis: Between description and narration
Koopman, N.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
8. Summary and Conclusion: Ekphrasis between Description and Narration

ὁ Σιμωνίδης τὴν μὲν ζωγραφίαν ποίησιν σιωπῶσαν προσαγορεύει, τὴν δὲ ποίησιν ζωγραφίαν λαλούσαν.1

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on; Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd, Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, 11-42

8.1 Research question and methodology

This study contains an investigation into the nature of five ancient Greek ekphraseis. Ekphrasis is defined as the verbal representation of visual representation.3 This means that an ekphrastic text embodies two layers of representation: a primary verbal layer and a secondary visual layer. Ekphrasis is thus doubly mimetic: the text represents an image which in turn represents something else. This study focuses on ekphraseis of which the images represent figures engaged in actions.

The main aim of this study is to investigate to what degree these ekphraseis can be regarded as narrative and to what degree as descriptive. For definitions of narration and description, this study draws on modern narratological and linguistic theory. Both concepts are defined by making use of a prototype approach: a given object has a certain amount of narrativity and/or descriptivity. Both are a matter of degree: an object can be more or less narrative and/or descriptive. Thus, this study does not aim at determining whether an ekphrasis is either narrative or descriptive. Rather, it establishes which elements that are prototypically associated with narration and description are present, and thus where on a gradual scale between narration and description the ekphrasis is located.

1 “Simonides calls painting silent poetry and poetry talking painting”, Plut. Mor. (De glor. Ath.) 346F. Simonides’ famous dictum is also found elsewhere.

3 Text in Allott 1972: 534-5.

3 This is the modern definition of ekphrasis, as formulated by Heffernan.
Following Herman's *Basic Elements of Narrative* (2009), this study distinguishes three prototypical elements of narration: (1) event sequencing (a prototypical narrative contains a sequence of events), (2) world disruption (these events introduce some sort of disruption into the storyworld), and (3) ‘what-it’s-like’ (what is it like for the characters in the storyworld to experience these (disruptive) events). The prototypical features of description have been taken from Wolf's "Description as a Transmedial Mode of Representation" (2007): the attribution of qualities to elements of the storyworld and a focus on what these elements look like. Descriptions are full of details, which are prototypically of a visual nature. The following table illustrates the prototypical features of narration and description:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prototypical features of NARRATION</th>
<th>- event sequencing (temporal organization)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- world disruption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- ‘what-it’s-like’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prototypical features of DESCRIPTION</td>
<td>- attribution of qualities to persons, objects, or places <em>(existential phenomena)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- a multiplicity of details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- focus on sensory appearances and impressions (surfaces)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- spatial organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 8.1: Prototypical Features of Narration and Description*

The ekphrasis of this study have been analysed as follows. First, the primary verbal layer, the *text*, has been investigated. I started with a linguistic analysis of the discourse modes to establish the organization of the text. This analysis helps to establish the presence of some of the prototypical features of narration and description. If the text has narrative structure, it features a sequence of events. This means that the first basic element of narrative is present. In this case, the text advances temporally. If the text has a descriptive structure, fabula time has stopped. As a consequence, the text progresses spatially and by enumeration. After the textual organization had been established, it was further investigated which prototypical features of description are present.

Next, I examined the secondary visual layer, the *image*. It was investigated which of the three basic elements of narrative were represented or, otherwise, evoked by the image. The starting point for this investigation were the results of the linguistic analysis. Particular attention was paid to the relation between the linguistic structure of the text
and the nature of the image. The question of what is explicitly represented and what is merely evoked by the image was also of central concern.

In the following section (8.2), I first discuss the text (8.2.1), after which I turn to the images (8.2.2). I end with a general conclusion (8.2.3). In section 8.3, I address the issue of the ekphraseis’ visualization. In section 8.4, I discuss the relevance of the findings of this study for the understanding of the concept of ekphrasis in general.

8.2.1 Ekphrasis between Description and Narration: The Text
Ekphrasis consists of two levels of representation, a primary verbal layer and a secondary visual layer. The primary layer concerns the text. The five ekphraseis of this study – the shield of Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad* (18.478-608), the shield of Heracles in pseudo-Hesiod’s *Shield* (139-320), the goatherd’s cup in Theocritus’ first *Idyll* (27-60), the cloak of Jason in Apollonius Rhodius’ *Argonautica* (1.721-68), and the basket of Europe in Moschus’ *Europa* (37-62) – have, for the most part, a descriptive textual organization. This means that the text does not feature a sequence of events. Only the shield of Achilles has a main narrative textual organization: the narrator presents the shield while it is being made by Hephaestus. The sections dealing with what is depicted in the shield’s images, however, mostly have a descriptive textual organization, too.

Even though the text that represents the images does not feature a sequence of events, it does feature events. These are expressed by imperfects and thereby characterized as ongoing. The many ongoing events in the text indicate that the narrator is referring to actions that are depicted in an image: 1. actions in an image can be regarded as ongoing, since they can never reach their endpoint; 2. the ongoing actions are not part of a sequence of events, given that an image cannot create an explicit sequence of events; and 3. these ongoing actions are all presented as happening at the same time, as they are a verbal representation of actions depicted in a single image.

That the text referring to the images mostly contains ongoing events is due to the fact that the narrator focuses mostly on what the images represent, the so-called res ipsae. The physical properties of the object, the opus ipsum, are paid relatively little attention to. References to the opus ipsum can be made in passing (e.g. *Il*. 18.577, χρύσειοι δὲ νομῆες ἅμ' ἐστικόωντο βόεσσι, “golden herdsmen were marching with the cattle”). The narrator may also explicitly draw attention to the opus ipsum (e.g. *Il*. 18.574, αἳ δὲ βόες χρυσοἴ τετεύχατο κασσιτέρου τε, “and they, the cattle, had been made of gold and tin”). In such cases, the text contains states, expressed by imperfects and
pluperfects. References to the opus ipsum are often located at the beginning of the ekphrasis, or at the beginning of a new image. Such references remind the narratees that the actions presented belong to an image.

The descriptive organization of the text, then, is mainly due to the tenses that are used: imperfects and pluperfects. The text mostly proceeds by enumeration: the various ongoing events are enumerated. Spatial indicators are found, too. These are used to introduce a new image and locate it on the object (ἐν μέν, ἐν δέ, etc.); they also make clear the spatial relationship of the various figures vis-à-vis each other.

Only in the ekphrasis of Europa’s basket does the text that refers to the images have a completely descriptive structure. In the other ekphraseis, the text sometimes diverges from a descriptive structure. In the shield of Achilles, lines 525-32, 544-6 and 599-602 have a narrative structure: they feature a sequence of events. In lines 525-32, where a number of aorist indicatives occur, the aorists presumably refer to actions that are not depicted in the image. They provide background information that refers to actions temporally anterior to what is depicted in the image. These events thus belong to the primary textual layer only: they are not depicted on the shield. However, lines 544-6 and 599-602, which contain iterative aorists, do refer to what is depicted. The iterative aorists indicate that the actions must be thought of as repeating themselves ad infinitum in the image.

In the shield of Heracles, lines 252b-7 and 261-3 have a narrative structure. Lines 252b-7 express a sequence of iterative events. Most likely, these lines must be interpreted as lines 544-6 and 599-602 of the shield of Achilles. Alternatively, they could refer to actions that are not depicted, or, since the shield of Heracles has magical properties, may even refer to actions that are not merely imagined as ongoing but actually ongoing. In this case, the figures would really move – as do other figures on the shield, such as Perseus and the Gorgons in 228-37. Lines 261-3 contain finite aorists. These cannot refer to non-depicted events, as in the shield of Achilles. One could again argue that the figures are really moving. Alternatively, the narrator has created a sequence of events in response to a static image. It remains unclear how the figures are depicted in the image.

In the three Hellenistic ekphraseis of this study, only the goatherd’s cup features a passage with a narrative structure that refers to what is depicted on the cup, lines 36-8. Again, it concerns a sequence of iterative events. We see, then, that passages with a narrative textual organization are rare in archaic ekphraseis, but almost wholly absent from Hellenistic ekphraseis. On the other hand, two Hellenistic ekphraseis, the
goatherd’s cup and Jason’s cloak, feature passages which have neither a descriptive nor a narrative but a discursive textual organization (A.R. 1.765-7, Theoc. Id. 1.42). In these brief passages, the narrator directly addresses the narratee.

A passage with a descriptive textual organization is not necessarily devoid of all temporal elements. In the Homeric shield ekphrasis, aorist participles, subordinate temporal clauses and temporal adverbs are all found. In the shield of Heracles, the use of aorists participles and subordinate temporal clauses becomes rarer. In the Hellenistic ekphraseis of this study, only one aorist participle and one subordinate temporal clause are found.\(^4\) Temporal adverbs remain in use. Thus, it would seem that in Hellenistic ekphraseis the text reflects the image more directly, in that it does not contain any temporal elements which might \textit{a priori} be regarded as alien to an image. This is also clear from the kind of adverbs that are used. In the Homeric shield ekphrasis, the text contains the temporal adverb \textit{έπειτα}.\(^5\) Hellenistic ekphraseis, on the other hand, do not contain \textit{έπειτα}. Rather, we find \textit{έτι} or \textit{ηδή}.\(^6\) Whereas \textit{έπειτα} suggests that different actions are happening after each other, \textit{έτι} and \textit{ηδή} refer to the temporal scope of a single action.

The text of the ekphraseis does not solely refer to the images. The Homeric shield ekphrasis is a \textit{dramatized} description: the shield is described while it is being made by Hephaestus. It is the only ekphrasis of this study which does not constitute a pause, since both fabula and story time advance. As stated above, the lines in which the actions of Hephaestus are related have a narrative structure.

In the other ekphraseis, part of the object’s history is related.\(^7\) These passages have a narrative structure, but Theoc. Id. 1.57-9 has a discursive structure. Lines dealing with other parts of the object – such as its decorations, for example – generally have a descriptive textual organization.\(^8\)

Descriptive details are found throughout the ekphraseis. They are not confined to passages with a descriptive structure only, but also occur in passages with a narrative organization. In the investigation of the other prototypical elements of description, then, the text of the ekphrasis as a whole must be taken into account. It is one of the

---


\(^5\) \textit{Il}. 18.506, 527, 543.

\(^6\) For \textit{ηδή}, see A.R. 1.731; for \textit{έτι}, see A.R. 1.732, 736; Mosch. \textit{Eur}. 45 (\textit{εἰσέτι}). Both adverbs are also found in the shield of Heracles: \textit{ηδή} in 172 and \textit{έτι} in 176 and 241.


main functions of descriptions to provide an idea of what the storyworld looks like; descriptions typically focus on concrete objects that can be visualized. In this sense, the ekphrasis can indeed be called descriptive: the narrator devotes all his attention to an object so that the narratee may get an idea of what it looks like.

As has been stated above, the narrator focuses mainly on the res ipsae; the opus ipsum receives comparatively little attention. This means that the main focus in ekphrasis does not lie so much on the surface of the object as on the actions represented by that surface. This means that the attribution of qualities, the prototypical mode of descriptive presentation, occurs mainly in passing (e.g. in Il. 18.577, χρύσειοι δὲ νομῆες ἡμὶ ἐστικώντο βόεσσι, where the attributive adjective χρύσειοι is found). Passages of any length where the narrator explicitly attributes qualities are relatively scarce (e.g. in Il. 18.574, αἳ δὲ βόες χρυσοῖο τετεύχατο κασσιτέρου τε, where the predicative adjectives χρυσοῖο and κασσιτέρου are found). The qualities that are attributed do not necessarily pertain to the opus ipsum; most often, they refer to the res ipsae.

The amount and type of detail varies per ekphrasis. On the whole, the archaic ekphrasis contain more descriptive details than the Hellenistic ones; these details are, furthermore, more often of a visual nature. This is not simply due to the fact that the archaic ekphrasis are much longer: they contain more details per line. In this regard, archaic ekphrasis have a higher degree of descriptivity than their Hellenistic counterparts.

However, when comparing the archaic ekphrasis on the one hand, and the Hellenistic ekphrasis on the other, one notices that the structure of the text that represents the images becomes more prototypically associated with description: not only do passages with a narrative textual organization almost disappear, the passages with a descriptive textual organization contain fewer temporal elements. As has been noted, the amount of descriptive detail decreases. Both developments result in images that are, in my view, easier to visualize. I further discuss this issue in section 8.3.

8.2.2 Ekphrasis between Description and Narration: The Images
The secondary layer of ekphrasis concerns the images. The images that are represented by the text have various degrees of narrativity and descriptivity. On the whole, one

---


10 Compare Il. 18.517-19 (opus ipsum) with Hes. Sc. 264-70 (res ipsae).
notices that in Hellenistic ekphraseis images with a high degree of narrativity predominate. This is mainly due to the fact that they feature world disruption. In the early ekphraseis, on the other hand, most images have a low degree of narrativity. In these images, world disruption is absent. One notices, then, that there is no one-to-one relationship between the nature of the text and the nature of the image. Texts with a high degree of descriptivity may refer to images that have a high degree of narrativity.

The first element of narrative, event sequencing, is present in two ekphraseis. In order to depict a sequence of events, an image must contain repeated figures who are involved in different actions. This indicates that different temporal moments of the same story are depicted. The separate images depict a single ongoing event, but the events together suggest a sequence. In the shield of Achilles, I have argued that the city at war in lines 509-540 consists of six different images (some of which are set in different locations); the attack on the herd of cattle in 573-86 consists of two different images. Likewise, Europa’s basket contains three moments from the Io myth, depicted in three images. One may compare these passages with a picture series.

Many images do not contain a sequence of events, but merely suggest one. The shield of Achilles features a number of single images in which more than one temporal moment is depicted: different figures are involved in different actions within one and the same image. This type of representation suggests that the actions are to be understood as following one after the other: the image implies a sequence of events. A similar image is perhaps found on the shield of Heracles. Only archaic ekphraseis contain images of this type, which can be regarded as a subtype of polyphase single images.

Most images depict a single moment in time: they are monophase images. Often, the image suggests either what has occurred before and/or what will happen after the depicted moment. Some images contain a pregnant moment: here, the moment depicted is strongly suggestive of what has just gone before and what will happen in the immediate future. In the case of an image with a mythical subject, the narratee will use his knowledge of the myth to supplement the depicted event. The fact that an event has been going on before or will continue afterwards can be made explicit in the text by adverbs such as ἤδη or ἔτι.

---

11 E.g. the ploughers in the field in 18.544-7.
12 The battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs in 178-90.
13 E.g. the battle between wild boars and lions in Hes. Sc. 168-77; the chariot-race in A.R. 1.752-8; the metamorphosis of Io into a woman in Mosch. Eur. 59-4.
The narrative element of world disruption, i.e. the introduction of a disruption or disequilibrium into the storyworld, is present in all ekphraseis. Generally, the archaic ekphraseis contain many images which do not contain world disruption. The Homeric shield ekphrasis has only two images (out of nine) that feature world disruption; the shield of Heracles features four images (out of thirteen) that depict disruptive events.\(^{14}\) The number of images that contain world disruption is higher in the three Hellenistic ekphraseis of this study. All three images on Europa’s basket depict disruptive events. Two out of three images on the goatherd’s cup feature world disruption. On Jason’s cloak, three images (out of seven) feature disruptive events.\(^{15}\)

The element of ‘what-it’s-like’ (i.e. what it is like for someone to experience the events of the storyworld) is present in all ekphraseis. This element might, a priori, seem alien to images, since images cannot directly refer to feelings or emotions. First, however, it should be noted that all ekphraseis contain elements that are, strictly speaking, alien to the visual arts. Ekphrasis, as a verbal imaginative response to a static image, may therefore also include feelings and emotions. Second, images can refer to feelings or emotions indirectly. For example, in Sc. 242-8 the women who are rending their cheeks and the old men who are praying indicate feelings of anxiety and fear.

In order for an image to have a high degree of narrativity, the element of world disruption must be present. Disruptive events – events which disrupt the normal order of things – are a prototypical element of a story or narrative. As stated above, in the shield of Achilles only two images feature world disruption, the city at war in 509-40 and the attack on the herd of cattle in 573-86. They are the only images with a high degree of narrativity. Interestingly enough, their narrativity is further increased by the fact that they also feature event sequencing.

The other images on the shield of Achilles lack world disruption. An image without disruptive events depicts the world as it is. This is a prototypically descriptive feature. Indeed, many images depict events that often happen in the life of human beings. The events follow a script (a more or less standardized sequence of events): everything happens according to expectation. In addition, the figures involved in these events are

---

\(^{14}\) The city at war in Il. 18.509-40, and the attack on the herd of cattle in 573-86; the battle between boars and lions in Sc. 168-77, the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs in 178-90, Perseus fleeing the Gorgons in 216-37a, and the mortals at war in 237b-70a.

\(^{15}\) The woman and two men in Theoc. Id. 1.32-8, and the boy and two foxes in 45-54; the fight between the Teleboae and sons of Electryon in A.R. 1. 747-51, the chariot-race in 752-8, and Apollo who is shooting at Tityus in 759-62.
many and anonymous. For example, in the ploughing image on the shield of Achilles (541-9) we find those events depicted that regularly and normally occur when people are ploughing. Everything goes as it should go. Nothing goes wrong: the image does not, for example, depict a plough that breaks. Images which follow a script can be said to have generic narrativity. At the same time, they possess descriptivity: they provide a picture of the world in its normal state.

In the shield of Heracles, four images contain world disruption. All four lack event sequencing. Nevertheless, on account of the fact that they depict disruptive events, their narrativity is high. As in the shield of Achilles, the images which lack world disruption possess descriptivity, too. Some of these images depict an individual or have a mythical subject matter, but this does not mean that they are therefore more narrative than images with a multitude of anonymous figures.16

In the three Hellenistic ekphraseis, images with a low degree of narrativity are less frequent; images with a high degree of narrativity predominate. Europa's basket, which depicts the story of Io and therefore has a mythical subject matter, does not only contain three images that all feature world disruption, these images also form a sequence of events. The goatherd's cup also features three images, which depict individuals. Their subject is not drawn from myth, nor do they form a sequence of events. Two images have a high degree of narrativity, since they feature world disruption. The image with the fisherman (39-44) lacks this feature, and also possesses descriptivity. The images on Jason's cloak are all of a mythical nature. Three images feature disruptive events. The other four images do not, on account of which their narrativity is low. Of these, two images also have a certain amount of descriptivity, since they depict figures in situations in which they are frequently found. The other two refer to particular moments from a myth.17

8.2.3 Ekphrasis between Description and Narration: Conclusion
The five ekphraseis of this study are situated in more than one way between a prototypical description and a prototypical narration. Their textual organization has both narrative and descriptive properties. The images, too, have both narrative and

16 Individual: fisherman in 213-5; mythical subject matter: Ares with Fear and Rout in 191-6, Athena in 197-200, and the immortals and Apollo in 201-6.

17 The Cyclopes who are forging a thunderbolt for Zeus in 730-4, and Aphrodite who is holding up Ares' shield in 742-6; Amphion and Zethus who are laying the foundations for the walls of Thebes in 735-41, and Phrixus who is listening to the ram in 763-7.
descriptive properties. However, there are some tendencies that can be discerned. Even though there are a few exceptions, the text has a predominantly descriptive organization. The images, on the other hand, possess a certain amount of narrativity, since they represent one or more figures engaged in ongoing actions. Ekphrasis, then, has both narrative and descriptive properties, but it is in the primary verbal layer that descriptive elements predominate, while narrative elements predominate in the secondary visual layer.18

8.3 Ekphrasis and Visualization
It might be self-evident that in an ekphrastic text – ekphrasis being the verbal representation of a visual representation – it is the narrator’s aim to enable his narratees to visualize the object that is described. However, in the case of the Homeric shield ekphrasis it has been claimed that this is not the narrator’s aim, on the grounds that the shield would be unvisualizable. A similar argument has been advanced in the case of the goatherd’s cup and Jason’s cloak. On the other hand, it has also been suggested that Jason’s cloak can be visualized. The shield of Heracles, though very similar in a number of respects to the shield of Achilles, is also considered to be visualizable. What to make of these contradictory views?

In my view, all ekphraseis of this study can be visualized. Just as with the distinction between narration and description, visualization is not a question of either/or: some ekphrastic passages may be more easy to visualize than others. At the same time, visualization is an elusive concept; whereas some narratees may be able to form a mental image of the shield of Achilles, others may perhaps not be able to do so. It also very much depends on one’s approach to ekphrasis. I contend that ekphrastic texts at least aim to represent images. The dominance of the imperfect tense makes this idea plausible. In antiquity, too, readers would attempt to visualize the object, as witness the scholia, for example.

In all five ekphraseis of this study, the narrator provides relatively little information regarding the object as a material object. Many particulars, such as size, are not explicitly mentioned. The position of the images on the object and vis-à-vis each other also remains unclear. All attention goes out to the images as separate entities; focus is on the res ipsae, and not on the opus ipsum. Hence, whereas the separate images are

---

18 This means that in table 1.1 (section 1.3.1) option 1b best captures the nature of the ekphraseis of this study.
often meticulously described, the lay-out of the object as a whole remains relatively unclear. The narratee must therefore exercise his imagination to turn the ekphrastic text into an object. Contemporary listeners or readers will have used their knowledge of art in order to do so. True, the objects of ekphrasis may be unrealistic: it is doubtful if they could have ever existed as they are described. Nevertheless, many of the constitutive elements of the object are known from (contemporary) art, and these realistic elements may have been used by the contemporary listener or reader to visualize an object that is, in its totality, unrealistic.

In my view, there is a difference between the archaic ekphraseis on the one hand, and the Hellenistic ekphraseis on the other. The Hellenistic ekphraseis are easier to visualize than their archaic counterparts. The archaic ekphraseis are more crowded. They contain many images, which in turn contain many figures. The Hellenistic ekphraseis contain fewer images, which generally focus on a limited number of individuals. The nature of the text in the Hellenistic ekphraseis also makes visualization easier. Their textual structure is more prototypically descriptive than that of the archaic ekphraseis.

At the same time, the text of the Hellenistic ekphraseis contains considerably less detail. Though this means that in this respect the text is less prototypically descriptive, the inclusion of more detail does not necessarily make visualization easier. In my view, there is a certain optimum between too little and too much descriptive detail. In the Hellenistic ekphraseis, most attention goes out to the ongoing actions in the image, rather than to what the figures or other elements of the image look like. I would suggest that by leaving this information to be supplied by the mind’s eye the image becomes easier to visualize. This is a tentative conclusion that needs further investigation.

8.4 The Findings of this Study and the Notion of Ekphrasis
Ekphrasis, as the verbal representation of visual representation, is doubly mimetic. Its two levels of representation belong to different media, the verbal medium and the visual medium. Ekphrastic passages must therefore overcome a difficulty: how to represent something that exists in an order that is different from that of the medium of representation, i.e. how to represent the visual by verbal means. To complicate matters further, ekphrastic passages do not simply represent spatial objects, but spatial objects that represent some form of visual narrative.

This study has investigated the form and nature of five ancient Greek ekphraseis. Modern scholarship has noted that ekphrasis may have many different
Description, which is an almost invariable part of the definition of ekphrasis in classical scholarship, is regarded as one of its possible forms. I have argued that in order to investigate the form of ekphrasis insightfully, a distinction must be made between text and image. This study has demonstrated that five major ancient Greek ekphraseis have a predominantly descriptive text, although in a number of passages a narrative or other type of text also occurs. This means that description is an important Realisationsform in ancient Greek ekphrasis.

In all five ekphraseis, the narrator first introduces the object as a purely physical object. The descriptive nature of the text therefore comes as no surprise: objects are usually described. Even though the narrator next focuses on the narrative images on the object, the nature of the text remains largely descriptive: it does not contain a sequence of events. In the five ekphraseis of this study, most events depicted on the object are presented as ongoing, and they are merely enumerated.

In the five ekphraseis of this study, in sum, the represented visual medium is suggested by the representing verbal medium by means of a predominantly descriptive organization. This textual form can be regarded as one possible way of representing the visual medium in the verbal medium. Of course, the visual medium can only be partially represented by the verbal medium: something is always lost in translation. The text can never represent the object in all its aspects.

At the same time, the representation of the visual by the verbal medium also creates opportunities for the verbal medium to exploit its own strengths. In the ekphraseis of this study the verbal medium repeatedly goes beyond the possibilities of the visual medium. Images cannot depict movement, sound, thought or emotion. All these elements are frequently found in the ekphraseis of this study. The text represents a static image, and at the same time endows it with life. Indeed, it is the narrative depicted by the image (the res ipsae) that is the narrator’s main point of interest in the ekphraseis of this study.

The relation between word and image can be interpreted in various ways. Some scholars regard their relation as one of rivalry. I, for my part, have not found any overt signs of rivalry (paragone) between text and image in the ekphraseis of this study. On

---

19 See Schaefer and Rentsch 2004: 152-3, discussed in section 1.3.2.
20 In Latin literature, it would seem that the text referring to the images is mostly descriptive, too. Thus, Adema 2008: 168-9 writes that “[t]hose parts of the ekphrasis which concern the features of and depictions on the art object are indeed most likely to be presented in the description mode (...)” (emphasis mine).
the contrary, the text uses all its verbal means to create a spectacular vision of an object with its accompanying images. It is all a game of make-believe, since the object has no existence outside the text – it owes its very existence to the text. Therefore, ekphrasis can be regarded as a demonstration of the power of the word. At the same time, the power of images must not be underestimated. Ekphrastic texts can only be understood by listeners or readers who use their knowledge of images and of other visual artworks to make sense of what is described.

We would do well to remember Simonides’ maxim that “painting is silent poetry and poetry is talking painting”. In ekphraseis, it is not the rivalry between the visual and the verbal media, but their combined strength that should be emphasized and appreciated. By combining the verbal with the visual medium, ekphrastic passages produce aesthetic pleasure that is as complex as it is captivating. The imagination is of paramount importance: “heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / are sweeter”. Ekphrasis is talking painting of silent poetry.