The Wide-World of Imagery
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In our increasingly visual culture, the visual sense is often given the bulk of attention. When writing poetry or prose about visual art, attention to the visual image makes sense, but in some ways might narrow the field of sensory possibilities. This exercise asks students to consider how other senses can be engaged to make a literary work visceral and three-dimensional. If, as poet Theodore Roethke says, “Poetry is an event, not a record of an event,” all the senses must be in play (or at least more than one!) as students write and revise.

In this exercise, students will write a prose poem about a particular work of art with a focus on varied sensory information. Students should choose at least three senses from the following list through which to write about a work of art: taste, touch, sound, smell, visual, and kinesthetic (sense of movement). Questions to consider: What sounds can you hear in the work of art? What smells and flavors? What sense of movement? What visual images can you see? Which are shadowed, lit up, suggested but unclear? If you closed your eyes, how else could this work of art be portrayed and experienced? Students also can blur the senses (the art of synesthesia), which is particularly fun when exploring visual art. (Some examples of synesthesia: “She danced in a loud yellow dress” or “he flashed an icy gaze.”)

After students have generated a substantial amount of sensory-informed lines/phrases (at least one full page), they will need to decide which phrases are most effective and should be carried into the next draft. Students might also consider which senses seem most appropriate to the piece they are writing. A picture of a kitchen might invite the senses of taste and smell, but the absence of taste or smell might present an opportunity for interesting tension (eg, a candle-light dinner where one spouse confesses to cheating on the other, and they sit in silence and do not eat). What would a perfectly still carnival be like? Sad, dreamlike,
frightening? In the absence of movement at a carnival, what other senses would need to be in play to engage the reader’s imagination?

Our visual sense is very powerful. And though there are other senses to engage when writing about visual art, there also are many elements from visual art itself that can teach writers to enliven their visual perceptivity.

Some of these visual elements include: color, value, shape, line, texture, subject, and point of view.

Questions to consider as you sharpen your visual skills: Are the textures in the image smooth, puckered, or scaly? Are the shapes hard and geometric, soft and nearly edgeless, or scratchy? Are the values highly contrasted, stark, dark, or muddy? How can you use these elements from art to generate additional insights for yourself and your readers?

As you continue to revise your ekphrastic prose poems, have fun, be bold, and take literary risks—and remember to save all drafts. That way, you can return to an earlier version if needed.