

Teaching and Learning the Italian Language through Literature, Art, and Emotions¹

During my career as a teacher of Italian language and literature in US colleges, I realized that introducing artwork in classes of any level requires an extended amount of work and preparation, especially needed if one wants art used in class (whether it be a literary text, a painting or a sculpture, a song or an operatic aria) not to be just a prop for teaching grammar, but to become a content integral to the course, a “lived through process or experience” (Liaw 36) through and from which readers, viewers, and listeners find meaning.

When instructors of world languages in US colleges decide or are required by curricular guidelines to introduce literature in their courses, they face a historic divide between the teaching of literature and that of languages, which is evident in the training of students who intend to become secondary school or college instructors. Some of them feel inadequate in teaching literature in their classes because their instruction has been based only on second language acquisition (SLA) and pedagogy, while others have a very strong background in literary analysis and theory but appear to lack training in teaching language or reading (Bernhardt 197, 206; Burnett and Fonder-Solano, “Teaching Literature” 461). Joanne Burnett and Leah Fonder-Solano discuss the dichotomy “language VS literature” from their respective academic trainings in literature and SLA and explore the differences that their preparation produced in their teaching in terms of pedagogical expectations, class organization, and practices. The authors also narrate and interpret how their encounter produced fruitful changes in their curricular and conceptual framework of language and literature classes (“Crossing the Boundaries”, “Teaching Literature”).

The tendency of the last decade in L1, L2, and FL pedagogy suggests that the introduction of non-pedagogical material for teaching a language, that is, authentic literature, is beneficial for the improvement of content and language in language classes (Bingham Wesche 278). Ronald Carter points out the increasing importance of “the primary authenticity of literary texts” in “first, second and foreign language education” starting in the mid-eighties, and attributes this surge of interest in big part to

the work of Chris Brumfit (12). Instead of seeing literature as a product to consume, or an unnecessary educational discipline, many instructors have started to consider works in prose and poetry as ways to convey knowledge, study, and analyze formal characteristics at their best (i.e., how an author writes a text, in order to give a model to advanced students). By accessing literature, students may be emotionally influenced and prompted to reflect on the unknown. Indeed, reading and writing promote a form of aesthetic experience that involves deep emotional responses, involvement, and social relationship (Liaw 43; Webster and Wolfe 32).

The first part of this essay will contextualize the teaching of literature through art by offering a very brief historical overview of the theoretical debate on the connection between the visual arts and literature. The focus will then be on the use of ekphrasis (which is traditionally explained as a verbal description of a piece of art and visual art) for pedagogical purposes in museums and post-secondary education. Finally, it will explore the use of emotions as a connective element between art and literature. The second part of the essay will describe and discuss the components illustrated and examined in an advanced class for MA TEP (Teacher Education Program) students in Italian entitled “Writing and Reading Workshop on Italian Literature, Art, and Film” that I devised and taught for the first time in this format at Hunter College in the spring of 2019. In this paper, I will only focus on the connection between Italian poetry and portraiture, leaving out the section on prose works and films, and I will also explore the pedagogical value of this connection while teaching literary works to advanced FL students.

Part 1

1. Art and Literature, Art through Literature

Ekphrastic descriptions in poetry and prose of visual works of art are a staple of Western culture (suffice to remember Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield in the *Iliad* 18, 478-607, and Marcel Proust’s description of Elstir’s paintings in *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*). Discussions about the relationship between the visual arts and literature have engaged philosophers, writers, and artists since ancient times, and many have declared the superiority of either one or the other. Of interest in this essay is the nature of

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this relation. Alan Simpson describes the relationship between the visual arts and literature as an “apparent paradox”: “(i) the arts rely on language for their meaning in so far as we can only share whatever may be communicated through the arts employing language, but (ii) language is a limited and incomplete means of description and cannot fully explain or replace the work of art” (48). Elizabeth Benjamin and Sophie Corser’s view of ekphrasis seems to moderate Simpson’s somewhat pessimistic view of language’s limits vis-à-vis visual arts. They argue that ekphrasis “evok[es] an image rather than presenting one, by keeping the artwork within the sphere of literature” (3). Combinations of image and text, continue the scholars, do not aim at refracting one medium through the other, but at balancing the two, thus promoting a process of adaptation (2-3).

The interaction of words and images that exist between visual and verbal works of art calls attention to the role that authors/artists and readers/viewers have in representing, evoking, imagining and rewriting them (3). The synergy between these actors can be expressed through the theories of reader-response and reception, which Jelena Bobkina and Svetlana Stefanova adopt to explain the importance of students’ active engagement with language learning (679). The connection between the visual arts and literary texts, which will be the focus of the second part of the essay, adds a further layer in the relationship artist/writer and viewer/reader. I argue that this relation can be reinforced not only with the use of ekphrasis but also by exploring the emotions that artworks elicit in the reader/viewer and those that artists/writers intended to evoke in their viewers/readers when they created their artworks.

2. Pedagogical Uses of Visual Arts in Museums and Classrooms

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, educators of museums and galleries in New York and the US have offered their patrons information, ideas and interpretations of the works of art housed in their institutions. In recent decades, museum educators like Rika Burnham, at the Frick Collection in New York City, and Elliot Kai-Kee, at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, have proposed and successfully implemented a practice of interpreting and appreciating art. The experiential dimension of focusing one’s powers of observation on the colors, lines, space, volume, and

light of an artwork is coupled with the circulation of ideas among patrons and with the museum educator. The museum educator plays the role of a facilitator, produces a creative dialogue where viewers become active participants and interpreters of art instead of being passive recipients of historical and stylistic information (Burnham and Kai-Kee). Students of all ages and levels go to museums not only to educate their eyes to different forms of art but also to be active viewers. Their observations are shaped and enriched by their individual, social, and cultural experiences that they have accumulated in their lives.

Teachers of L2 use art at all levels and for different purposes. Students can access works of visual art immediately, respond to them emotionally, and make connections with their own life experiences, and with other forms of art such as literature (Knapp 20). When teaching Italian at the introductory level, I use art to review or introduce colors, food, or grammatical elements, but also to talk about the characters in the painting, their interactions, and the emotions they may convey. With advanced level students, I visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art to show the development of the idea of Renaissance portrait by focusing on specific parts of the painting (facial expressions, gazes, and hands). Students are invited to express their opinions on the painting, after reading historical and cultural information about the period and the artist. Finally, with students at the MA level, I focus on paintings whose ekphrastic description we read in literary works, like the narrative that Isabella d'Este gives of the portrait of her grandmother Isabella of Clermont and her two children painted by the Italian artist Colantonio in Maria Bellonci's *Rinascimento privato* (223-26).² We created our own narrative based on a careful description and interpretation of the painting done in class, and then compared it with the account that Isabella tells in her musing about the portrait of her grandmother.

This last activity inspired me to teach Italian poetry through some of the Renaissance portraits housed at the Frick Collection, by focusing on the emotions couched in the paintings and those elicited in the students by the works of art. Following Schumann's studies of emotions and their relations with motivation in language learning,³ I developed pedagogical activities to teach literature through art to enact emotions. I was also inspired by what John Dewey defines as the aesthetic experience and by Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory as

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elaborated by Louise Rosenblatt. Both scholars insist on the importance of the social dimension for students' learning within the classroom and in the world at large.⁴

Part 2

1. Writing and Reading Workshops in Italian at the Master's Level

Most of the students who decide to embark on a Master's program in Italian at Hunter College do it because they want to become high school teachers of Italian. While taking courses with faculty members in the Italian program, they also attend classes at the School of Education. Many of them need to improve their speaking, reading, and writing skills in Italian. The writing and reading workshop I taught in the spring 2019 had three learning outcomes. By the end of the semester students were expected to 1) use and 2) operate with the tools necessary to interpret and understand verbal media (paintings and cinema) they had studied during the semester by writing short analytical and creative essays; 3) integrate the three media (literature, painting, and cinema) in a cohesive way through a final oral presentation. I decided to employ visual arts as a site for experiential learning as well as to evoke emotions in my students.

2. The Story

After conducting the first class in person, during which I explained the content of the course and students' requirements, I led the following four sessions remotely, through the platform BlackBoard, where I posted weekly assignments and offered regular feedback. The remote classes were devoted to the study of the Renaissance portrait. Students read the sections "Portraiture" and "Presentation of Self and Family in the Home," which are sections of the entry "Presentation of Self" on the webpage *Italian Renaissance Learning Resources* and became familiar with the concept of ekphrasis. Students also read Italo Calvino's *Lezioni americane*, focusing on the categories of lightness, quickness, exactitude, visibility, and multiplicity. As a written assignment, students used what they had learned online, and they employed two of Calvino's categories to describe themselves or another person as if portrayed by a Renaissance painter. One student's ekphrasis described a young woman in profile, in the dark, with a

small lamp that projects a ray of light on her dark hair, face, and eyes.

The second week of class, students became acquainted with the Frick Collection by watching an introductory video to the museum available on the institution's website⁵ and by visiting on their own the museum. Students paid particular attention to the room called "Living Hall," which houses some notable Renaissance portraits. The written assignment consisted in choosing two of the portraits installed in the "Living Hall," and writing an imagined dialogue between the characters represented in the paintings. Students also had to describe two emotions evoked by the portraits and apply one of Calvino's categories in their writings.

Several students decided to create a dialogue between the portraits of Thomas Moore and Thomas Cromwell by Hans Holbein the Younger. This written exercise allowed the class to get acquainted with a crucial period of British history and to dramatize it according to their emotional filters. By searching for information on the characters depicted in Holbein the Younger's two portraits, students learned about the animosity that existed between the two historical figures, who played a central political role during the reign of Henry VIII in England. I posted edited versions of each student's assignments on BlackBoard, and encouraged them to give feedback and ideas to their classmates on how to improve their writing. One student wrote that she had experienced pain, confusion, and fear while looking at the portrait of Thomas Moore:

Quando guardo il dipinto in cui si trova Sir Thomas Moore provo dolore ... mi sono sentita confusa e mi sono anche un po' spaventata. Il suo sguardo insicuro e cattivo e la sua postura nel dipinto dimostrano un lato oscuro del suo carattere e secondo me questo succede forse anche per il modo in cui il pittore lo ha dipinto.⁶

For the third week of class students read two chapters of Anne Higonnet's *A Museum of One's Own: Private Collecting, Public Gifts*, which offer a history of private art collections in the US, among which the Frick Collection, researched on the life, major works and painting style of one of the painters whose

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portraits are exhibited in the “Living Hall,” and posted their findings on BlackBoard.

During the fourth week we visited the “Living Hall” together and with the help of Caitlin Henningsen, Associate Museum Educator (who received her training in the pedagogical theory and practice of Rika Burnham), we spent more than an hour observing two paintings by Titian, *The Portrait of a Man in a Red Cap* (ca. 1510) and *Pietro Aretino* (ca. 1537).



Fig. 1. Titian. *Portrait of a Man in a Red Cap*. ca. 1510, The Frick Collection, New York.

Fig. 2. Titian. *Pietro Aretino*. ca. 1537, The Frick Collection, New York.

Students made fascinating observations about the portraits, based on the knowledge they had acquired in the previous classes, their observation of the paintings, and the “close look” method performed by the educator. Students’ appreciation of lines, shapes, space, texture, and colors, through which they were invited to read the paintings, allowed them to better express their individual emotions vis-à-vis the character in the portrait and the emotions that the painter intended to evoke with his painting, which often were not the same. The visit created also a strong sense of community, which was evident when several classmates decided to continue the visit to the museum on their own.

Following the footsteps of Natalie Hess, who states that “a poem can be used as a vehicle for thought, and as an instrument

for shaping language” (19), I introduced a selection of Italian poems to the class. The reader from Francesco d’Assisi to Alda Merini that I had composed included poems by Francesco Petrarca, Gaspara Stampa, Giacomo Leopardi, Salvatore Quasimodo, Eugenio Montale, and Amelia Rosselli. I made my selection based on what I describe as a “portrait-like” dimension: in these poems, the lyrical “I” gives a physical, moral or psychological description of himself or herself, or of another character. As a written assignment, students chose two poems from the reader, and wrote an essay, in which they described the emotions evoked by the poems. Students also had to reflect on the difference between the emotions they felt while reading a poem and looking at a painting. In her response, one student commented on Giacomo Leopardi’s *L’infinito* and *A se stesso*, whose terms “amaro,” “brutto,” “spento,” and “ascoso” evoked in her the emotions of sadness, pain and melancholy. She also wrote that the immediacy of the painting, with the visibility of the sitter’s physical and facial features, and of the surrounding space, helped her identify her emotional response faster than when she read a poem, whose content she found sometimes difficult to understand and to relate to on an emotional level. Finally, students chose one of the paintings from the “Living Hall” and placed it in dialogue with one of the poems they had read. One student who chose to pair Montale’s poem “Ho sceso dandoti il braccio almeno un milione di scale,” with Titian’s *Portrait of a Man in a Red Cap*, found a correspondence between the tone of Montale’s poem and the atmosphere of Titian’s portrait. Both seem to be lost in their memories and to be melancholic. But, unlike the young man in Titian’s portrait, the lyrical “I” of the poem lost hope. As the student felt more sadness reading the poem than looking at the painting, she concluded that while the latter captures a moment, the poem represents the passing of time and its effects on the reader through its structural elements. In doing so, she also described the tension between visual and verbal arts that Lessing highlighted in his treatise *Laocoön*:

[I]l giovane nel ritratto sembra essere in attesa di qualcosa o qualcuno; non ha perso speranza . . . solo quello della poesia si è rassegnato alla perdita del suo amato indimenticabile. Perciò, sentivo più tristezza dalla poesia che dal ritratto. Mentre il quadro cattura un momento, una poesia può

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rappresentare, attraverso i suoi elementi narrativi, il movimento del tempo ed i suoi effetti sulla soggettività.

This activity meant to make students aware of the different way emotions are experienced when observing a painting or reading a poem because of the verbal and visual media.

The study of Italian poetry continued for several weeks, during which we analyzed the metrical forms of some medieval and early modern poems in the reader (*lauda* and *sonetto*). Once we analyzed the metrics, the rhetorical figures, and the images evoked in some canonical verse forms, students analyzed Amelia Rosselli's "Una tua faccia ha sì contorni umani," a poem about the ephemeral and erratic nature of a lover's affection, and Alda Merini's "Se avess' io," in which the poet describes the contrast between her desire to express love in a light and joyful way and her realization that her creative essence is housed in a body heavy with pain and memories. Students received the following guidelines to analyze the poem:

1. What is the subject of the poem? What does it narrate?
2. To whom is it addressed?
3. Which emotions does the poem evoke and how?
4. Identify the rhymes, the rhetorical figures, and the overall structure of the poem.
5. Study the terms used by the poet to convey a specific emotion.
6. Study the images used by the poet to convey a particular emotion.
7. Look for and upload on BlackBoard a painting that evokes in you at least one of the emotions that you felt while reading the two poems.

Students pointed out the difference in the portrayal of a love relationship in both poems, in terms of lexicon, structure, and images. Some experienced emotions of disappointment and horror while reading Rosselli's poem and linked it to Munch's painting *The Scream*, while others felt fear and anxiety and connected the same poem to another of Munch's paintings, *The Vampire*. Some felt joy in reading Merini's poem and paired it with Matisse's painting *La Danse*, while others felt nostalgia and sadness at the

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loss of lightness that comes with aging and thought of the painting *What Warms the Soul?* by contemporary Kazakh artist, Moussin Irjan, which depicts a young woman whose face is partially covered by her hair, clasping herself as to protect her body from the cold.

For the final creative assignment on poetry and portraits students wrote a sonnet taking as a model Petrarch's canonical sonnets. What follows is a *terzina* by a student who wrote a sonnet inspired by Titian's *Portrait of a Man on a Red Cap*:

Un giovane innamorato dell'amore
sente il silenzio di ogni rumore,
trafitto, come Eco da Narciso.

Students' sonnets conveyed specific emotions that one of the paintings at the Frick Collection evoked in them: disgust, love, humiliation, hope, sadness, anger, shame. Students wrote very compelling and sophisticated sonnets, two of which were read by their authors and enthusiastically received by the public at the annual poetry reading organized by the Romance Languages Department. Before performing their poems in front of a larger audience, students uploaded the sonnets into BlackBoard for constructive comments and criticism from their classmates, thus making the activity a collaborative effort. Two students wrote sonnets inspired by Holbein the Young's *Thomas Moore*, which is next to Holbein the Young's *Portrait of Thomas Cromwell* in the "Living Hall."



Fig. 3. Holbein, Hans the Younger. *Thomas Moore*. 1527, The Frick Collection, New York.



Fig. 4. Holbein, Hans the Younger. *Thomas Cromwell*. 1532-33, The Frick Collection, New York.

Given that the installation of paintings in this space is still the one that Henry Clay Frick (the founder of the collection) originally established, the students were struck by the fact that the portrait of Moore is in close proximity to that of Cromwell, who masterminded the demise and capital execution of Moore during the reign of Henry VIII. One student wrote a sonnet in which she tried to convey the betrayal, shame, and humiliation that she thought Moore might have felt while watching Holbein the Younger's portrait:

La mia anima soffre e scende
in silenzio delusa e colpita,
resto con una profonda ferita
dalle trappole che la vita estende,

e il percorso ingiusto che prende
percìò la mia vita è finita
la mia reputazione sparita
questo mio destino mi offende.

Questa mia debolezza è nata
per svegliarmi da un brutto sogno
dove ero perso per molto tempo,

con la mia dignità calpestate
sono sepolto in questa vergogna
che mi fa compagnia nel frattempo.

The numerous assignments on paintings and poetry constituted the basis for the final oral presentation, which included the students' creations, and a picture that somebody else took of them in the style of a Renaissance portrait, to which they attached a verse or prose piece of their inventions.⁷ By asking another person to take a photograph of them as sitters, students had to show their knowledge of the main elements of a Renaissance portrait (posture of the head and hands, gaze, ornaments, and headgear) with which they had become familiar during their visit to the Frick Collection. In this final exercise, they allowed another person to represent them, who was able to emphasize certain aspects of their identities through light, colors and frame.

Conclusions

When I asked students to give their informal feedback on the course, they unanimously proposed fewer classes remotely, as they liked the sense of community they had experienced with their classmates and the teacher during in-person sessions. They enjoyed writing creatively, when given a structure as a model.

Students immediately put to use the terms they had acquired through the study of Renaissance portraiture and of Italian poetry by creating an ekphrastic description of themselves as a portrait and by writing poems inspired by famous paintings housed at the Frick Collection (as seen above). MA students who were already teaching in secondary schools used some of the pedagogical tools acquired in this class and adapted them in language and culture/literature units with positive results. They successfully reproduced written sonnets expressing the emotions they felt viewing Renaissance portraits. They used the knowledge acquired during the class as a source of information, and as a creative trigger that helped them to write in prose and in verse about emotions that they felt in relation to visual and literary works of art. One student who is a professional opera singer wrote:

Sono molto contenta che sto diventando sempre più una poetessa nella mia vita quotidiana. Stranamente, scrivendo e

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leggendo le poesie ha scintillato una creatività poetica in me che serve molto: nella mia musica, nella lettura dei libretti, nei miei post su facebook (!) e nell'altro corso su Petrarca. La sfida di aver scritto un sonetto la settimana scorsa mi ha dato la voglia di scrivere altre poesie.

By talking about emotions represented in the visual and verbal media students learned how to detect them in works of art and how to explore their own through class discussions, creative writing, and paintings. They also created a community by commenting their writings posted on the academic platform BlackBoard. Students lived an aesthetic experience not only as individuals in relation to a text or a painting, but also as a community, in and out of the classroom. My experience with this class confirms the position that many experts held vis-à-vis the importance of the interaction between reading and writing, that is, reading complex literary texts contributes in an essential way to students' interpretive skills and improves their empathic dimension towards the emotional and imaginative dimension of literature (Hirvela 117). Asking students to experience emotions in this layered way (through painting, poetry and their own creative writing) allows them to create an empathic relationship with the work of art while appreciating the difference in which emotions manifest themselves through different media. Creating an empathic connection with art gives students the confidence to create an interchange between the model (the poem or the painting) and their creative writing, in which they communicate emotions. Benjamin and Corser write that “[t]he relationship [between visual and verbal arts] prompts evaluations, and therefore a self-consciousness of both or either medium. The interaction of literature and art is therefore inherently critical, even theoretical” (2). Students became authors who evaluated and reappraised the poems they had read, and also created original “transactions”, to use Rosenblatt's term (4-7), while comparing the poems to the paintings, which inspired them to write their own poetry and express emotions.

Monica Calabritto

HUNTER COLLEGE AND THE
GRADUATE CENTER, CUNY

ENDNOTES

¹ My sincere thanks go to the editors of this issue, whose comments and suggestions helped me improve this essay significantly.

² The portrait of Isabella of Clermont and her children is part of a large altarpiece that Colantonio painted on the life of Saint Vincent Ferrer for the Church of San Pietro Martire in Naples in the second half of the fifteenth century.

³ Paolo Balboni discusses the notion of motivation in teaching Italian literature to international students by elaborating on John H. Schumann’s model of stimulus appraisal L2 pedagogy (9). Schumann argues that the human brain appraises certain stimuli based on five elements, identified by psychologist Klaus Scherer as “novelty, intrinsic pleasantness, goal/need significance, coping potential, and norm/self-compatibility” (21). A person’s stimulus appraisal system adapts itself to the society values in which she lives, including her preference or aversion for a foreign language. If the appraisal is positive, it creates an “incentive motive” in the student to learn a language (22).

⁴ Rosenblatt writes that “[t]eachers and pupils in the classroom are transacting with one another and the school environment: their context broadens to include the whole institutional, social, and cultural environment” (12).

⁵ “Introduction to the Frick Collection.”

⁶ When I transcribed this composition and others that students had written, I decided to keep the minor mistakes for authenticity purposes.

⁷ I borrow the idea of the portrait picture from Maria Loh, a colleague in Art History at Hunter College, who successfully used it in her art history classes.

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