



## Cover Art as Ekphrastic Entry Point in Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*

Assist. Lect. Marwa Ali Al-Shara

The General Directorate of Education in Al-Qadisiyah Province/ Ministry of Education/ Iraq Email: [marwaalialshara@gmail.com](mailto:marwaalialshara@gmail.com)

Lect. Dijla Gattan Shannan

College of Education / University of Al-Qadisiyah, Email:  
[dijla.shannan@qu.edu.iq](mailto:dijla.shannan@qu.edu.iq)

### Abstract

In popular novels, ekphrasis has become incredibly famous in the last twenty years. Artworks by famous artists, especially paintings, are the most common and noticeable things that are examined. The connection between the written and the visual in Ali Smith's work is something that needs more attention. This is especially true when looking at how a copied artwork is used as cover art and then later on as an ekphrastic object in the story. The reprinted picture is used as both a paratextual and ekphrastic object in Smith's *How to Be Both* (2014).

**Key Words:** ekphrasis, cover art, *How to be Both*, George/Georgia, Francesco del Cossa/ Franchesco

فن الغلاف كنقطة دخول Ekphrastic في كتاب علي سميث "كيف تكون كلاهما"  
م.م. مروه علي الشرع  
المديرية العامة لتربية محافظة القادسية/ وزارة التربية/ العراق البريد الالكتروني:  
[marwaalialshara@gmail.com](mailto:marwaalialshara@gmail.com)  
م. دجلة كطان شنان  
كلية التربية / جامعة القادسية البريد الالكتروني:  
[dijla.shannan@qu.edu.iq](mailto:dijla.shannan@qu.edu.iq)

### المخلص

في الروايات الحديثة، أصبح فن الوصف الإيكفراستي (Ekphrasis) شائعاً جداً خلال العشرين سنة الأخيرة. تُعد الأعمال الفنية لرسامين مشهورين، وخاصة اللوحات، من أكثر العناصر حضوراً ولافتة للانتباه في هذا المجال. إن العلاقة بين المكتوب والمرئي في أعمال علي سميث تستحق مزيداً من الدراسة، خصوصاً عند النظر إلى كيفية استخدام عمل فني منسوخ كصورة غلاف، ثم لاحقاً كموضوع إيكفراستي داخل القصة نفسها. تُستعمل الصورة المعاد طباعتها كعنصر مجاور للنص (paratextual) وكعنصر إيكفراستي في رواية سميث (*How to Be Both*) الصادرة عام 2014.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** إيكفراستيس، غلاف فني، كيف تكون كلاهما، جورج/ جورجيا، فرانثيسكو ديل كوسا/ فرانثيسكو



## Introduction

Ekphrasis is a word that was first used in rhetoric, but now it is mostly used in poems from the late Middle Ages onwards to describe places, buildings, people and works of art in vivid detail. The word “ekphrasis” comes from the Greek word “ekphrazein”, and “ek” in it means “come out”, and “phrasis” means “speak, say”, so the word ‘ekphrazein’ means “speak out” (Xinyu 69). Marjorie Munsterberg explains that the purpose of this literary device is to make the reader imagine the thing being talked about as if it were real. However, in many cases, the subject never existed, so the ekphrastic account shows how creative the writer is and how good they are at writing. Most people who read great Greek and Latin texts did not care if the subject was real or made up (Munsterberg 9).

According to Munsterberg, ekphrasis grew over time and gained a certain kind of expressive power that let its verbal visualization grow even further than what was possible with actual visualization. That is because it can add things that are not visible, like sound and movement. It can also bring to the reader's attention details that might not be obvious or noticeable in a certain way, such as how an artistic composition is put together. Additionally, it enables writers to make their subjects seem real to their readers, even though those subjects may not exist in reality (9).

There has been much variance about ekphrasis because of two main ideas: the idea that a text must be “a representation of a real representation”, and the idea that conflict or “paragone” establishes the hierarchy of the visual picture over the written word. Heffernan and Bergmann Loizeaux, for example, have claimed for a way of approaching ekphrasis that demands the specificity of the object of ekphrasis, to a true picture (or representation) that the readers can point to. One of the most important definitions of ekphrasis that has been used for many years is “ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation” (Museum 3).

A few early examples show both the variety of approaches used today and what may become an unavoidable overabundance of definitions. For example, Claus Clüver develops a nuanced understanding of ekphrastic prose fiction by examining various examples of the genre in an essay that discusses books like Ali Smith's *How to be Both* (2014) and others. Ekphrasis is a method of representing static visual arrangements as semiotic objects. It discusses how a real or imagined viewer perceives or responds to specific features of real or imagined shapes, or it proposes that these features are present in virtual or imagined reality. It only has spoken



materials (252). With Clüver's meaning, ekphrasis can be used to describe more than just words. It can also be used to describe made-up visual arrangements.

As Brosch says Narratives can guess certain means of seeing and the relationship between the subject and the object of an important act of visual scrutiny by setting up a visual observation ("Ekphrasis in Recent Popular Novels" 406). A lot of the time that words and pictures meet in modern literature, it is because of larger artistic themes that make us think about how we see things, how art is made, and bigger questions about beauty.

Modern fiction that thoroughly incorporates visual encounters to the point that the story's logic depends on visuals uses ekphrasis in creative ways. Smith's *How to be Both* shows how skillfully words and graphics are integrated. Perhaps the most inventive and natural usage of ekphrasis. The experience extends beyond interpreting Renaissance painter Francesco del Cossa's works. Saint Vincent Ferrer (1473–1475) in London's National Gallery and his Hall of Months frescoes in Ferrara's Palazzo Schifanoia (1469–1471) (Murphy 133).

### ***How to Be Both (2014)***

The novel's central ekphrases, which take place in the 1460s and 450 years later, respectively, offer a concise thesis on the narrator's belief in the essential performance self-consciousness of all art. In one part, the story is told by a teenage girl named George. The other part is narrated by the female main character del Cossa, who is both a real figure and a fictional creation in the book and painting. She travels through time to see George. Smith also published a book that explores different ways of putting things together. In some versions, George's character starts the book, while in others, del Cossa's does (Murphy 133).

Readers will have completely different experiences with the text and characters depending on which version they read. The book is split into two parts, and both have the title "one." Ali Smith keeps one part from being more important than the other by confirming what seems to be a statement about relativity. It was Smith's idea to present the novel in two different ways after seeing an illustration of a fresco that revealed an underdrawing of a boy beneath the top layer, which depicted a woman. Smith talked about this in an interview with *The New York Times*. She said, She said that it was hit her to know how stories work with such great metaphor (Lyll). There are usually at least two stories going on in a great story: the one that the readers see and the one that you cannot reach.



Thus, the link between the parts becomes more intricate. In the novel's structure, points of perspective affect how the reader feels and how the characters interact. Text's dual tale raises questions about art's purpose and life and death. George's story is told from a third-person point of view. The main character is a teenager named Georgia, but she prefers to be called George. The story is about how she deals with her sadness after her mother dies suddenly. The story is full of memories, and through George's memories, the reader gets to know his mother, Carol. Carol plays an important emotional role in the book, and her interest in the paintings of the Renaissance artist Francesco del Cossa connects both the stories and the characters. George becomes deeply interested in a painting by Cossa that is in the National Gallery. It is a devotional portrait of a monk named Vincent Ferrer. There are many pages with thorough descriptions of these works of art, and how the characters react to them is an important part of the story. In the other part of the book, Franchesco's ghost tells the story from the first-person point of view. She follows George after visiting the National Museum in London, and in doing so and through many memories she shares with the reader her own life and art. By adding the letter "h" to the name Francesco, Smith makes Franchesco, which is centered on a real Renaissance painter with the same name. This is done to make it clear that this character was fictitious. (Bilge 114)

The way Saint Vincent Ferrer allows the narrator and the spirit of del Cossa to bridge temporal and artistic frames is of great aesthetic and ekphrastic importance. The painting dominates the composition, not just as a plot diversion or epiphany. The main point of Clüver's argument is that Smith's approach is important because del Cossa's works can be thought of as verbal descriptions of many performances just like a ballet, a song, or a play. These representations create in reader's mind what it is called visual images and in the listener's mind what is called kinetic or aural images (249– 250).



Saint Vincent Ferrer



Saint Lucia

This imagined superiority of the verbal is made possible by the technique that makes a picture becomes text and text shapes picture. On the inside front and back pages, there are pictures of del Cossa's frescoes that surround the whole book. This suggests that the book is completely connected to the paintings. According to Yvonne Liebermann, the incorporation of two pictures that frame the novel (one at the beginning of the novel and one at the end) emphasizes the merging of “verbal and visual representation”. The pictures are of two people from Francesco del Cossa's *March fresco in the Palazzo Schifanoia*: an indul worker and a musician who might be a man or a woman (146). Brosch agrees that there is much integration, but she reads it ethically, which shows how technological advancements often intersect with other issues. Though the painter's empathetic spirit is interested in her, George's character gets over her loss by remembering how her mother read the artist. Art connects people with diverse perspectives and levels of awareness across ontological gaps without being didactic. Ekphrasis advances the characters beyond the viewing subject-perceived object relationship. It also introduces them to others from their modest role. (Brosch 419)

Sometimes art can be quite simple and presented in a similar fashion. When she visits The National Gallery in London, for example, George studies very closely at del Cossa's Saint Vincent Ferrer (1473–5). But when George is presented with a replica of the photo on ‘the cover of the Penguin UK paperback’ version of this novel, the borders blur between the manufactured worlds and the real world. The subsequent section of the text offers the picture in a way that echoes George's vision and enables the reader to perceive in a different way. The usage of a replica of an artwork as the cover art is one example of a paratextual element; the



artwork's dual role as an ekphrastic object and story device allows us to discern the relative importance of the textual and visual aspects of the work. (Cheong 343).

However, what makes Smith's work stand out, especially 'the Penguin UK paperback' version of *How to be Both*, is that the image on the cover is discussed in the text. When H offers George a replica of the cover art, it becomes more than just cover art; it becomes an integral element of the book, both paratextually and textually. As a piece of paratext, the cover picture can be understood. According to Priet-Arranz the ekphrastic descriptions of the picture on the Penguin paperback' version's front cover was taken by photographer and film director Jean-Marie Périer of Sylvie Vartan and Françoise Hardy, two famous figures in the French *yé-yé* movement. This ekphrastic shift from visual to verbal hides the movement (Priet-Arranz 185):

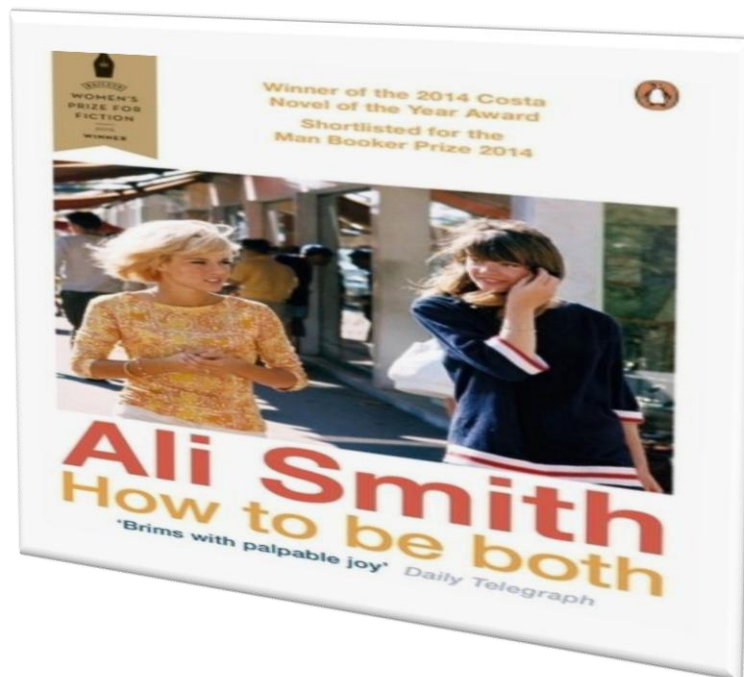
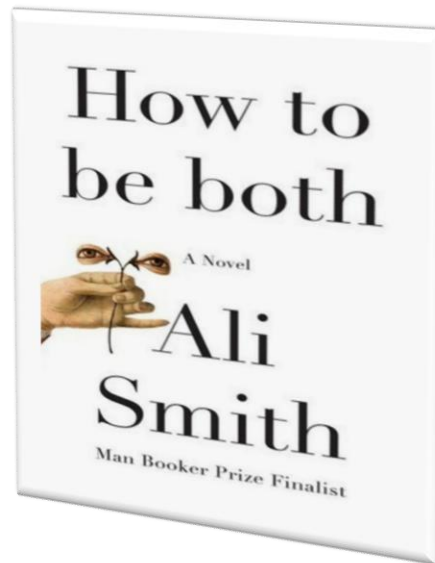
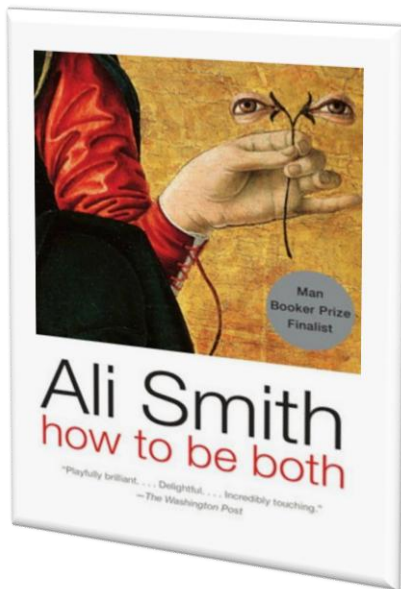
Two women (both young, both between girl and woman) are walking along a road together past some shops in a very sunny-looking place. Is it now or is it in the past? One of them is yellow-haired and one of them is darker. The yellow-haired one, the smaller of the two, is looking at something off camera, off to her left. (Both 81-2)

The North American versions of *How to Be Both* use their cover art from the novel's earlier works. Since the connections between cover art—which can be influenced by the original artwork's medium—and its recurrence in story form can give rise to new themes and acknowledged problems, different editions' cover art designs will offer diverse interpretations of the novel. The Penguin UK publication cover art differs from the cover art for "the Random House USA, Anchor, Knopf Doubleday, and Penguin Random House Canada paperback editions." It displays a close-up of Saint Lucia holding "eyes on a sprig in her hand" from del Cossa's Saint Lucy (c. 1473/74). The Pantheon Books hardcover front cover is not as colorful and features a white backdrop with a cutout of St. Lucia's hand holding her sprig. This photograph was re-printed in Franchesco's area as the first entry in his section. For anyone reading these versions, the relations between this image and passages dealing with Francescho's choice to paint her eyes rather than on a plate or in the palm of her hand will be read differently (Cheong 346-47):

eyes opening at the end of the sprig like flowers will, cause the great Alberti writes that the eye is like a bud, which made me think of eyes opening like plantwork, cause St Lucia is the saint of eyes and light and is usually seen



blind or eyeless and many painters give her eyes but not in her face, instead they put them on a platter or set them in the palm of her hand – but I let her keep all her eyes, ... . (Both 346)





### The different versions of the cover art

It is clear that *How to be Both* has graphic art from the very beginning. The cover is a copied photograph. Images of a guy in white and a figure in red from another work by del Cossa, *Allegory of March: Triumph of Minerva* (1476–1484), adorn the inside of both the front and back covers. George gives a detailed description of the picture, but the white-painted man broke the rules of the still image when he showed up as a character with whom Francescho has a sexual relationship. The link is clear to the reader when Francescho meets one of the workers whose physical features match those of the painted figure. The strength of his wrists and forearms has caused his sleeves to be torn. Due to his exceptional strength, his knees have punctured the fabric, the line of dark follicles that extends above, his eyes are reddened by the labor; his groin is visible. However, in this show, one character is based on a real painter and another character is based on a painting by the real painter. In this constructed world, though, these people seem to live on the same level as the real world. (Cheong 350) Because it is fundamental to the plot, the ekphrastic description of the photo functions as a literary element inside the narrative. However, the reprinted image is not part of the story and is instead a paratextual element. This makes the line between text and paratext less clear.



**del Cossa's *Allegory of March: Triumph of Minerva***

The Penguin Canada hardcover and Penguin UK paperback both have a close-up of the same photograph on the cover. More obvious allusions to photography and the photograph itself may lead the observer to focus on the photograph's aesthetic



qualities rather than the painting itself. The close-up may expose more of the photograph, but the fragmentary image emphasizes that what is outside the frame is unknown and unknowable. In this novel ekphrastic description is knowledgeable by a self-conscious wish to connect with the forms of making that painting and photography imply concerning the novel Form, through particular works of art, but also by Smith's recurrent inquiries about literature and art. *How to be Both* is addressed for different audiences from different nations and the reader may not care much about these publishing houses' cover art selections. However, the cover image significantly impacts the reading and perception of this book. Because books are mass-produced, unlike most visual or plastic artworks, their aesthetic value does not reside in their physical characteristics; thus, books might be considered an art object (Cheong 347).

As part of *How to be both*, George outlines the topics and defines the image's composition by referring to the light, objects, and terrain. She even detects where one of them is gazing, alerting the reader to what may be off camera and unreachable. Thus, viewing a photo requires identifying what is included and excluded. The camera's technical operations are important, but the photographer's eye frames the photo. These expressions can be read just linearly and at first make meaning identically, but by following them, people feel George's gaze travel in our brains. The inquiry of in which time and place did it occur interrupts the narrative, emphasizing the necessity of context in order to comprehend the photograph (Cheong 347). The photograph suggests time as well as geographical distance, which may affect how the readers see it as an artifact and what it shows. The time between a photograph is taking and its viewing is vital to its interpretation, despite their distinct approaches to photography. George's description may seem impartial as Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag suggested. This ekphrastic writing may not improve the reader's view of the photo, but it does show some of the essential contrasts between word and image, particularly in the reader's reception.

## Conclusion

Ali Smith uses ekphrasis as a way to organize his work and to extend the concept of ekphrasis by making the readers think about the limits of what art is. At the same time, it represents a critical juncture in the development of the novel, a moment when the graphic turn has taken over the form. The author's emphasis on experience and emotion is demonstrated through the usage of artworks in the book including republished images, paintings and ekphrasis. Ekphrastic descriptions,



which are both textual and paratextual elements of the book, are read in tandem with the reprinted picture in the narrative. All these parts of the story such as the construction of the novel, and the relationship between words and visuals finally represent the author's anxiety about the novel form.

## References

- Bilge, F. Z. (2019). Dual Narratives and Multiple Points of View in Ali Smith's *How to be Both*. *Gaziantep University Journal of Social Sciences*, 18(IDEA Special Issue), 113–121.
- Brosch, R. (2018). Ekphrasis in Recent Popular Novels: Reaffirming the Power of Art Images. *Poetics Today*, 39(2), 403–423.
- Cheong, A. (2022). The ways of seeing and making in Ali Smith's *How to be Both*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 63(3), 344–356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2021.1893512>. (Accessed at 8/8/2025)
- Clüver, C. (2019). On gazers' encounters with visual art: Ekphrasis, readers, 'iconotexts'. In D. Kennedy & R. Meek (Eds.), *Ekphrastic encounters: New Interdisciplinary Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts* (pp. 237–256). Manchester University Press.
- Heffernan, J. A. W. (1993). *Museum of words*. University of Chicago Press.
- Liebermann, Y. (2019). The return of the "real" in Ali Smith's *Artful* (2012) and *How to be Both* (2014). *European Journal of English Studies*, 23(2), 136–151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2019.1632680>. (Accessed at 8/8/2025)
- Lyall, S. (2014, November 25). An Onion of a Novel, Demanding to be Peeled. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/26/books/ali-smith-on-her-new-book-how-to-be-both.html>. (Accessed at 8/8/2025)
- Munsterberg, M. (2009). Writing about art. <http://www.writingaboutart.org>. (Accessed at 5/8/2025)
- Murphy, N. (2024). Ekphrastic encounters and contemporary fiction. In *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Art* (pp. 125–137). Taylor & Francis.
- Prieto-Arranz, J. I. (2025). *Ethics and Aesthetics in Ali Smith's Fiction* (1<sup>st</sup> edition). Routledge.
- Smith, A. (2015). *How to Be Both*. Penguin Books. (All subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text, following the abbreviation *Both*).
- Xinyu, C. (2023). "Ekphrasis": A study of transmedia narrative in the works of A. S. Byatt. *World Journal of Educational Research*, 10(4), 68–75. <https://doi.org/10.22158/wjer.v10n4p68>. (Accessed at 12/8/2025)