

Speaks the Masterpiece

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Beata Jerzakowska

Speaks the Masterpiece

Fine Arts in Audio Description

ADAPTATION
for the American audience

Nick Z. GodBossel



AE Academic Publishing
2018

Original title: *Posłuchać obrazów. Podręcznik z audiodeskrypcją do reprodukcji malarskich, uzupełniający kształcenie literackie i językowe uczniów niewidomych*, Wydawnictwo Rys (Poznań, 2016). Consultation for the Polish edition: methodologist Dr. Anita Gis; art historian Dr. Piotr Szaradowski

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Image: a reverted reproduction of "Narcissus" by Caravaggio, oil on canvas, 1594–1596, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome, Italy.

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1st edition: published by Æ Academic Publishing, 2018/2019

Publication co-financed by Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland

LCCN: 2018915233

ISBN: 978-68346-135-7 (ARC)
978-1-68346-136-4 (paperback)
978-1-68346-137-1 (mobi)
978-1-68346-138-8 (ePub)
978-1-68346-139-5 (audiobook)

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*In memory of
my Father*

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Note from the Publisher

It is our immense pleasure to invite you to explore European fine art — audio described, adapted and presented here in one collection spanning seven centuries across the continent. The publication creates a verbal map of paintings, often in relation to their creators; we present changing manifestations of art in history. More importantly, we invite you to open the potential of your mind's eye through snapshots in time, first captured through the painter's eye, and now painted with words in search of your imagination. It is our desire for these audio descriptions to be used by those who want to broaden their perceptual experience — to explore not only fine arts but also new concepts and untapped depths within. The hope is that with accurate, researched, yet innovative audio descriptions we may stir cultured discussions with, incisive questions from, and even insightful contributions by those in the blind community.

HOW. We stand of the opinion that while conventions can offer value, audio description has not and never will have universal appeal, an opinion of which this publication is an excellent example. Just like translation, audio description is heavily set in the context; the way we perceive the world influences the way we perceive the masterpiece and the way we report it to others. It is thus an interesting experiment in the art of audio description, where our author, Beata Jerzakowska, a Polish audio describer of the modern era, depicts European art the way she sees it through her Polish eye. Her words are then filtered through a peculiar *tertium comparationis* of an American translator and American sighted and visually

impaired editors from the other side of the globe. What the author calls twice removed (see the Introduction) now becomes thrice removed: the artistic idea as conveyed by the painter from past centuries, rendered by the Polish audio describer and transferred into another linguistic and cultural reality by the American team.

ADAPTATION. Given the above, this large enterprise required adaptation rather than mere translation from one language to another, for two major reasons: a different contextual reality and a different intended readership. The book was originally planned as supplementary material for a narrower demographic in Poland, thus assuming that the paintings, so carefully selected, will immediately evoke very specific cultural, literary and historical associations. Different contextual reality usually implies a different foundation of knowledge, hence the need to adapt for the intended American audience. Some paintings will still be easily recognizable while others are likely a completely fresh take. Consider, for instance, Jerzy Duda-Gracz and his "Tower of Babel," whose characteristic figures are interpreted as construction workers by some, and prisoners by others, depending on associations, or lack thereof, that one may have with this image, so characteristic of the Polish streets of mid 80s and so absent to a 21st century American recipient. That being said, in all subjectivity, we attempted to arrive at the most objective description of the masterpieces, informing when need be, but leaving as much room for interpretation as possible by the recipient themselves.

As regards our intended readership, we moved from a highly specialized Polish demographic with the original book to a wide spectrum of blind Americans, whom we want to catalyze with the elemental insights and captivating intricacies of the selected European art; those who are already enamored

with fine arts, but also – if not most of all – those whose first reaction might be: “I don’t think that’s for me”, or “Art’s not my thing.” It is before their minds’ eyes that we labor to echo, and inspire appreciation for, this enriched fabric of enlivening experience. Just as Lech Majewski, director of “The Mill and the Cross,” used animation in his acclaimed movie to enliven the canvas of Bruegel’s painting “The Procession to Calvary,” we also hope to enliven the mental canvas of the blind’s perception by our stories painted with words.

ADDITIONAL FEATURES. We have put a lot of thought into the additional features that are new to this American edition. Aside from consulting with many subject matter experts to ensure descriptions’ accuracy, and engaging with a wide spectrum of blind Advance Readers from every walk of life around the country, the additional features include a glossary of color, a glossary of terms, a glossary of painters and the list of museums that house the masterpieces audio described in this publication. We believe these added features will enhance the experience and appeal to not only those for whom this is the very first excursion into the world of fine arts, but also art connoisseurs. The glossary of color is not limited to the seven basic hues. Rather, it includes more descriptive color terms that are used in our ADs, colors that bring their meaning closer. They are meant to expand the whole complex domain of associations that every recipient of the AD can and is able to experience when acquainting themselves with each work, time, period, and school of art. The glossary of terms is intended to help understand what common objects and terms from faraway pasts or unfamiliar cultures look like and may possibly mean in the context of the masterpiece. Thus, you can discover the meaning of a *rogatywka*, so important to Poles fighting for their country, or a *cingulum*, ubiquitous to every man and woman of the

cloth. The projected glossary of names, if need be, shall explain a little further who stands behind the name to provide a wider context, a peculiar sounding board for the reception of each selected masterpiece. Last but by no means least, the list of museums is provided with a very practical purpose in mind. When working on this publication, we were tempted to travel the world and visit the places that the masterpieces are housed in. Should our recipients be interested in experiencing the art themselves, they will have a ready-made guide to find the paintings we've described.

Wishing you as much pleasure in discovering the realm of European art as we had while preparing these audio descriptions,

The Æ team

San Diego, December 2018

Preface

Art is a great ear and a great eye of the world: it hears and it sees – and is to shame, irritate, evoke remorse.
— Joseph Conrad

It seems that we intuitively know what art is and what remains outside its scope; and yet, art is an elusive concept. Undoubtedly, art is an inherent element of life. A broad understanding of art that emerged in the Middle Ages strove to encapsulate art as an ability to create an object in compliance with defined rules.¹ In those times, such creation was the industry of professionals rather than artists acting under the influence of powers that stimulated inspiration. Only as late as the 17th century, Charles Batteux, a French writer popular mainly as the author of publications on aesthetics,² claimed that the common feature of all arts is the imitation of nature by selecting what is beautiful in it.³ In his opinion, fine arts included painting, sculpture, architecture, music, poetry, dance and the art of speech. In the 19th century, the term fine arts fell into disuse, as the very notion of 'art' connoted the meaning of 'beauty.'

In time, the notion of art broadened its scope and, next to the seven artistic forms of expression by Batteux, it would also expand to include gardening, photography, film,

¹ Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje sześciu pojęć* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1982), 21.

² Charles Batteux also coined the term *les beaux arts*, or *the fine arts*.

³ Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje*, 33.

material culture and the media,⁴ as well as such new forms of the old arts as non-figurative painting, electronic music, and experimental novel.⁵

All definitions developed to date emphasize the fact that art is a conscious act of human activity. The question remains of what differentiates art from other creations. It is not difficult to separate art from nature, but what criteria are to be applied when distinguishing it from other human creative activity?

In mid-20th century, an American philosopher, Morris Weitz, postulated that art need not be defined, because it is possible to communicate about it without a precise definition. He claimed that closed concepts are only found in logic and mathematics, while attempts to incorporate all artistic creation in a tangible and unequivocal definition is illusory.⁶

Today, the concepts of *creative activity* and *art* also remain ambiguous. It is worth noting, however, that what differentiates their modern interpretation from that of the 17th century is the fact that *finery*, a subjective notion, is neither art's distinctive feature nor is it its essential condition.⁷

Art is resultative of intention and activity, since the artist who creates a work of art must be motivated by an idea. Following Władysław Tatarkiewicz's line of thought, we assume in this volume that artwork is a conscious product of human activity if, and only if, it recreates the reality, shapes the form, and expresses an emotional experience, while being capable of delighting, moving, or shocking.⁸ This traditional

⁴ Including popular art, e.g. posters available in the urban space.

⁵ Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje*, 35.

⁶ Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje*, 46.

⁷ Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje*, 33.

⁸ Tatarkiewicz, *Dzieje*, 40–44.

approach is in line with the understanding of those works of art whose descriptions constitute the present volume.

Yet, it needs to be emphasized here that the postmodern world of today reformulated its approach to art anew. The very concept is no longer limited to high art. It also includes spheres of human existence, and visions of the world that not so much inspire admiration as evoke a whole range of varied emotions, from delight to negation, or even rejection – which is by no means to say that art is dead. Indeed, its death was already projected when in 1915 Kazimir Malevich painted his *Black square*. It was then declared that painting had reached a place it could not go beyond. And yet, despite such speculations, artists would and still do continue to innovate. Art is not dead; it simply evolves.

What has changed is the creative process, aesthetic evaluation, techniques employed, and, frequently, the subject matter, as well as prevailing attitudes toward art. When in 1964, in the Stable Gallery, Andy Warhol exhibited *Brillo Boxes*, i.e. his famous sculpture of soap pad boxes, with the claim that a work of art does not have to 'look like' anything. It can resemble carton packaging or soup cans.⁹ The boundaries between an art exhibit and a cardboard box became blurred. Similar blurring also occurred in other disciplines. Debates were held on the differences between music and noise, dance and movement, literature and writing.¹⁰ As a result of these thought experiments, from 1956 and on, there emerged the poetry of everyday life, objecting to the

⁹ Cf. Grzegorz Działowski, "Sztuka po końcu sztuki" [Art After the End of Art], *Sztuka i Filozofia* 15 (1998): 178.

¹⁰ Działowski, "Sztuka po końcu sztuki," 178.

distortion of reality,¹¹ as well as the aesthetics of ugliness¹² and fascination with naturalism. Such art does not necessarily delight with its beauty in a classical understanding but it does impress with the efficacy of message and artistry of expression.

Rather than pleasure, modern art needs to provide judgments on the content and form of expression. In consequence, now that art has gained maturity, everything may become a work of art. Similarly, artists are free and not subject to any pressure. They are not bound by rules which would dictate what the work of art must be like; their artwork must only communicate a message, embody its own meanings, and come into existence as a result of original inspiration.¹³

Given this background, it seems essential to emphasize that the notion of art is now much broader and that it also includes applied arts, which originated in the interwar period and became popularized in the years 1945–1960. Consequently, there is a prevailing concept of a triad system in culture, juxtaposing high (elite) culture with folk and mass (popular) cultures. With the dominant conviction that art may use any manifestation of culture as its medium, the modern artistic creation has become extremely diversified.¹⁴ It encompasses not only works created with the use of traditional techniques, but also those employing new ones, such

¹¹ This trend was created, among others, by Miron Białoszewski and Zbigniew Herbert.

¹² Representatives of turpism were, e.g., Stanisław Grochowiak, Andrzej Bursa, Rafał Wojaczek.

¹³ Dziamski, "Sztuka po końcu sztuki," 178.

¹⁴ Bożena Kowalska, *Od impresjonizmu do konceptualizmu. Odkrycia sztuki* [From Impressionism to Conceptualism. Discoveries of Art] (Warszawa: Arkady, 1989), 123.

as photography or computer graphics. Applied art, though, has a different aim; and the relationship between its creator and recipient is partly altered, as the latter is not only the viewer, listener, or participant, but also the user. However, the distinction between high and mass culture is slowly fading. In consequence, many of these classifications lose their relevance,¹⁵ while certain changes in phenomena are assessed or even labelled differently.¹⁶

In *Speaks the Masterpiece*, art is understood in its broad meaning. The book presents a collection of painting reproductions which constitute the canon, accompanied with texts on those paintings. The texts are intended to become a type of applied art themselves. A peculiar guide to the paintings, they will equip blind recipients with a chance to familiarize themselves with a given masterpiece but also to experience an aesthetic encounter in the process. The texts are an attempt to write about art in such a way that the recipient is allowed to approach its visual experience as close as possible. In a sense, the texts transfer painted images into words, within the standards required of such texts. They are obligated to strictly comply with the subject matter, i.e. the content of the painting, but also, to some extent, they are expected to lead their recipient toward an interpretation of the idea inscribed in a given work.

¹⁵ Wojciech J. Burszta, "Kultura popularna jako wspólnota uczuciowa" [Popular Culture as Emotional Community], in *Kultura popularna* [Popular Culture], ed. W. Godzic (Kraków: Rabid, 2002), 11–18.

¹⁶ Rather than mass, popular, or low culture, the term "dominant culture" is used. See: Kazimierz Krzysztofek, "Prawa globalnej cyrkulacji kultury mediów" [The Laws of Global Circulation of Media Culture] in: *Kultura i sztuka u progu XXI wieku* [Culture and Art on the Eve of 21st Century] ed. Sław Krzemień-Ojak (Białystok: Trans Humana, 1997), 16.

Like every creative act, a painting's admirer may require specific training in order to participate in the art and acquire what it has to offer. It is not easy to understand a painting even when its reading seems uncomplicated at first; upon closer acquaintance, the work of art may often surprise, speak deeply to, and reveal its hidden meanings. René Magritte, a Belgian surrealist painter, claimed that painting "is the visible image of an invisible thought."¹⁷ By virtue of fine arts,

what is invisible sometimes is visible. Yet, whoever believes that the invisible gains something in the process and becomes more important than the visible, is wrong. Within our experience, the tangible visibility inescapably hides another visibility, which increases the mystery twofold.¹⁸

Ultimately, works of art reflect what appears in the artist's invisible thoughts. Those visions are processed, committed to canvas, and presented to the audience with intent to engage them in a dialogue. Naturally, such interactions require an effort on the part of the recipient, they induce a variety of reflections and, at the same time, form a potential source of enormous satisfaction. After all, each and every art recipient's viewing and perspective, to include those of a painting, are subjective. Therefore, the visualized image that appears in the mind's eye of one viewer will be a mystery to another.

¹⁷ In: Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, Translation of *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (Berkeley/ Los Angeles: UCP, 1983), 57.

¹⁸ Cezary Sikorski, "O poezji, obrazie i ekfrazie" [On poetry, Image and Ekphrasis], 8, <http://lyzkamleka.poezja-art.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/ekfrazja-O-poezji-ekfrazie-i-obrazie.pdf> [Date of Access: 25th February 2016]

Thus, if the visible facilitates the understanding of the invisible, particular care is especially necessary when verbalizing what is perceived during the recipient's very first encounter with a work of art.

Special competencies are required from the recipient who wishes to discover, understand, and experience fine art; competencies that oscillate not only around the ability to see but also to perceive. Experiencing fine arts merely by looking at paintings may prove incomplete. It is worthwhile to refer to the context in which the work was created, establish the purpose of the artistic creation, and get acquainted with the creator, as the background of their life experience may hold a hidden key to the interpretation of their work. A work of art frequently forms a record of the author's temperament, select experiences, struggle against limitations, as well as their artistic consciousness. It is, then, important to be aware of the artist's auto-commentary, their attitude to the existing order of ideas and their own creative process. *Speaks the Masterpiece* is an invitation to set out on an exciting journey around the following virtual gallery filled with painted masterpieces. A journey which is conscious, satisfying and, quite possibly, aesthetically moving.

Art viewers are equipped with basic, indispensable tools, which enable them to treat the encounter with a work of art as an exciting adventure. Already in primary school and further throughout our education, we are expected to experience art and explore its meanings. Like detectives led by their mentor, we are to discover the work of art, sense its mood and its integral axiology, as well as decode its meaning by uncovering – one by one – clues characteristic of a given period, style, and the very artist's MO.

14th/ 15th
century



Jan van Eyck (a1390–1441)

The Arnolfini Portrait

Date of origin:	1434
dimensions:	32.2 × 23.6 in [82.2 × 60 cm]
medium:	oil on wood panel
current location:	National Gallery, London, UK

The complex painting with innovative realistic perspective is a full-length double portrait that most probably depicts either a wedding scene or a moving-out ceremony of the two principal characters. They stand in the interior of a room furnished according to the standards of affluent Netherlandish families. Colors are toned down, with a prevalence of red and green backdropped by golden browns and cool grays accented by red and green. The room is adorned with a stained-glass window which shows a plant in summer bloom outside and allows a neutral sun light inside. The interior is not only realistic but also rife with intentional details, typical of the Renaissance period. Van Eyck masterfully uses light by applying thin and smooth paint layers and diversified colors. A small convex mirror at the center creates a notable port-hole of innovative detail.

The foreground is occupied by a married couple, shown head to foot in a formal pose. Placed symmetrically, they cover nearly half the surface of the canvas. They are presented realistically, without embellishment, their faces devoid of expressive emotion. The man stands on the left, obliquely facing the viewer's right shoulder. Sources claim it is Giovanni di Niccolò Arnolfini, an Italian merchant of Lucca,

doing business in the Netherlands. He is a reserved and serious middle-aged man with a small face, sloping shoulders, soft hands, and subtle facial features. From under drooped eyelids half covering his pupils, the man's unfocused gaze falls straight ahead of him, in the space between the viewer and his companion. Any hair he might have is hidden under a large spindle-like black hat – wider than his shoulders and nearly as tall as his head. The merchant wears elegant robes; his black billow-sleeved arms extend out from side slits of a calf-length fur drape coat, maroon with brown trim. His feet are clad in high navy-blue boots. Elbow remaining at his side, the man raises his right forearm in a wave-like gesture that shows the edge of his hand to the viewer and his palm toward the woman to the right, who lowers her gaze upon it. Perhaps it is a gesture of a marital oath, or perhaps a gesture towards the entering guests – guests who may even include the viewer. The man reaches to hold the woman's outstretched right hand in his left.

The woman next to her husband takes up the right half of the painting, her body obliquely facing the viewer's left shoulder. It is probably Giovanna Cenami. She is delicate, flawlessly attended to, and composed. The lowering of her gently cleft-chin and narrowed eyes seems to make her slightly bashful or demure; she smiles slightly. Her head is covered with a white lacy coif. Draped in bunched folds, it extends below her shoulders, covering the upper part of her forehead and showing dark-blond hair, styled to form a conical shape over her left and possibly also right temple. Giovanna wears gold rings over the second digits of her left pinky and ring fingers. Her elegant sideless surcoat of the epoch is heavily draped, cut high and girdled with a brown belt. This outfit emphasizes the importance of the event. The garb consists of two layers: outer and inner. The outer

layer is emerald green, its wide sleeves and high neck are edged with white fur, the ridges flow across the floor and fill the lower part of the frame. The woman clasps the folds to her abdomen; the draping of the gown and the protective gesture of her hand might suggest advanced pregnancy; the pose and manner of thick gathered fabric are also indicative of wealth display. The inner layer of the dress is sky blue; it peeks through at the bottom and by the long sleeves extending from under the outer layer.

In the lower left corner of the foreground lie discarded light-colored wooden male pattens — outdoor overshoe sandals which would protect shoes from the grime of the street. Deeper into background lies a second pair of randomly placed pattens, these are red, clearly meant for a female. A small shaggy brown dog stands looking at the viewer in the center between the married couple. It is shown in slight right profile. Is it exhibiting the features of marital fidelity and married love?

The main axis of the painting is set along the wall in the background, above and behind the clasped hands of the married couple, towards a round convex mirror on the wall and a richly ornamented brass candleholder hung directly above like a chandelier. The round convex mirror is encircled by a serrated disk frame in the pattern of wide blunted sun rays. Notched rays feature roundels with miniature scenes from Christ's Passion. Each scene is believed to be painted with a brush the thickness of a single human hair. The scenes relating to death are on the right half, nearest the woman, and the scenes relating to life are nearest the man. This background mirror provides a fisheye reflection of both the interior room space as well as van Eyck himself – a man wearing a red head cover, standing next to another person in blue. Above the mirror, on the wall under the hanging

candlestick, artfully written words read: "Jan van Eyck was here in 1434." It is the artist's original manner of expressing himself in the painting before the time when paintings were signed. On the wall left of the mirror hangs an impeccably painted rosary of clear glass beads. To the right of the mirror stands a high-back chair. Carved into its frame are three discernible elements: a lion visible below the couple's hands from alongside the seat cushion; a gargoyle which appears as if directly overlooking their hands from the armrest; and a carved Saint Margaret intertwined with a dragon, just above and right of the mirror at the top of the high-back. Hanging next to Saint Margaret is a little broom.

The painting clearly abounds in symbolic meaning. Saint Margaret is the patron saint of childbirth and expecting women. The scenes of Passion around the mirror may foretell the upcoming difficulties awaiting the married couple — difficulties that may be defeated with prayers symbolized by the rosary. The small broom may mean the prose of everyday life running a household. The only candle in the candleholder, placed closest to the man, may embody God and yield the sacramental dimension to the portrayed scene, or, perhaps, it burns to welcome guests, as was the custom of those times. The mount closest to the woman has wax dripped down the sides as if it previously had a burning candle which long burned out. Beside the woman, on the right edge of the work mounts a large canopy bed covered with red drapery and comforter. On the window sill at the painting's left edge rests an apple. Below the sill stands a chest with oranges on it. Is the red color of the bed a symbol of physical love? Does the apple symbolize the original sin? Are the oranges an exhibition of wealth or do they symbolize purity and innocence, or the call for the vocation of marriage?

Despite its seeming austerity, Jan van Eyck's issue of rich

symbolic detail leads to speculation that the artist might have employed a visual mechanism or aid to recreate the tiny details. The painting astonishes not only with the painter's craft, but also with a fidelity to the world of the affluent living in the 15th century Netherlands, which it recreates. It is interpreted in manifold ways; some historians agree that it is a wedding scene, others claim that the work originated after the premature death of the portrayed woman.



Hans Memling (1435–1494)

*The Last Judgement*⁶⁸

Date of origin:	1466–1473
dimensions:	87 × 63.4 in [221 × 161 cm]
medium:	triptych, oil on wood
current location:	National Museum in Gdansk (MNG), Gdańsk, Poland

The triptych painting portrays a Biblical Last Judgement scene on a large center panel bookended by two narrow panels. It was made at the dusk of Medieval times and the dawn of the Renaissance. The central panel shows how stripped souls are weighed and judged by Jesus and his panel of saints from up above as a serene angel weighs the bare-naked souls down on earth with a scale. The left panel shows the author's imagining of the ascension of worthy souls as they file up crystal steps to a celebratory paradise entryway. The right panel shows a flame lit dark cavern cliff of condemned souls' brutally transitioning down to portholes of Hell where they're eventually stuffed in to the fiery cracks of condemnation.

The painter uses smooth brush strokes and remarkable detail throughout the whole work. The two left panels have a color palette dominated by dark browns, moss greens and nude flesh tones below; midnight blues, dark murky greens and humming grays in a band across the middle; and pulsing golds, bold reds, and emerald greens above –

⁶⁸ The original title: "Das Jüngste Gericht"