

WRITTEN ON SKIN

A Complex Combination of the Arts

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The Interaction Between the Arts

What do a novel, a play, a symphony, a painting, a sculpture, a modern dance, a ballet, a music video, and a feature film all have in common? They are all works of art. What we refer to in general as “the arts” includes literature, music, the visual arts, drama, and dance. From the beginning of recorded history, humans have used the arts to make sense of the world around them, to process emotions, and to create beauty. The arts are often separated out, for example, in school. In an art class, you might draw and paint while in a music class you might sing or play an instrument. Many great thinkers have considered the purpose of each individual art. They ask questions like, “What is the greatest power of each art? What can a painting do that a poem cannot? What human emotion can a dance depict better than a sculpture can?” It is worthwhile for us to consider these questions as well.

However, the arts are also very interconnected, and they have always been. One work of art often responds to another work of art, even across genres. These works of art answer questions such as: Is it possible to use one art to describe another? How can one art add to the power of another art? There are poems like **W.H. Auden’s** “Musée des Beaux Arts” which react to a painting, in this case “The Fall of Icarus” by **Pieter Bruegel**. The French artist **Edgar Degas** was famous for his paintings and sculptures of dancers. The famous ballet “The Nutcracker” was based on a short story by **E. T. A. Hoffmann**.

In addition to these examples of one art responding to another art, there are multimedia works of art such as film. If you went to a superhero film where the actors read their lines dramatically but there were no capes or special effects, you would be disappointed: films almost always rely on visual elements as well as the literary



Landscape with the Fall of Icarus by Pieter Bruegel (1555)

text of the script. Without triumphant chords playing on the musical soundtrack, the hero’s victories would seem less exciting.

Opera as a Multimedia Art

Opera is a multimedia art just like film – all of the different arts come together in an operatic work. Opera is based on a double foundation of music and poetry. A composer writes the music that the instruments and singers play, and a librettist writes the words that the singers sing. The composer and librettist work together to make the combination of words and music effective. Sometimes, it might be good for the words and music to do similar things at the same time to emphasize a point. For example, if the librettist has written the word “fly,” a composer might ask the singer to sing this word on a collection of notes that go upward in pitch so that the music imitates the word and sounds like it is flying. This is called “word painting.” On the other hand, it is sometimes more dramatic for a composer to take a word written by the librettist and add a different meaning to it through music. For example, if a singer is singing the word “happiness,” and the composer has the orchestra play loud, angry-sounding, dissonant chords during this word, the audience will probably guess that the character in the opera is not in fact happy, or that there is some sort of trouble brewing for that character.



Dancers Bending Down by Edgar Degas (1885)

In addition to the very important relationship between literature and music in opera, the visual arts and dance, are also extremely important. The costumes, props, scenery, and lighting of an opera are all visual elements that greatly add to the audience's experience of the opera. If the stage grows dim, we might expect night to be falling; if a character wears a crown, we might assume he is a king or a prince. These are visual cues that tell us a lot by themselves, and they combine with the text and the music to flesh out the story the opera is trying to tell. In addition, there is often dance in opera. Even in operas in which there is no dance, there is always the movement of bodies. Singers gesture with their hands, and they show their feelings through their body language and facial expressions. As audience members, we take in all of these different artistic elements simultaneously, and each part adds to the whole, bringing the story to life in a way we can experience with our eyes and our ears, our minds and our hearts.

Written on Skin

Written on Skin is an opera, so we know already that it will combine the arts in different ways. However, it also goes a few steps farther. *Written on Skin*, like many other operas, is based on literary source material. In this case, the opera is based on a story about a married woman who has an affair. The woman's husband finds out about the affair, and he kills the woman's lover. The husband cuts the lover's heart out of his body and feeds it to his wife for dinner. The wife is so upset by this horrific act that she throws herself out of a window, to her

death. The story is full of love and passion and betrayal and defiance, all strong emotions that translate well to the operatic stage. These emotions are all universal, and the story could have been told at any time and in any place. This particular story, however, was told for the first time in the 12th century in Provence, France, and it was recorded as a true story of the life of a troubadour named **Guillem de Cabestany**, who was the lover whose heart was eaten.

Troubadours were medieval singer-songwriters who entertained at court. *Written on Skin* is therefore an opera based on a work of literature about a musician. **George Benjamin** and **Martin Crimp** took the story of Guillem de Cabestany as an outline for their opera, but they made a lot of additions and changes. One of the major modifications that they made was to change the profession of the lover. Rather than a troubadour named Guillem de Cabestany, the lover in *Written on Skin* is a writer of books, called simply "the Boy." A written and illustrated text is at the core of the opera, and it even gives the opera its title. (In the Middle Ages, books were written on parchment, which were specially prepared skins of animals such as sheep, goats, and cows.) This change in the lover's character from someone who creates stories in music to someone who creates stories in images and words on the page adds another dimension to the opera. Opera always has to do with music, because in an opera, music is being played and sung constantly. If *Written on Skin* had been about the creation of music as well, the piece might have fallen flat from lack of variety. *Written on Skin* is about the relationship between the different arts (words and images on a page), and it presents a fusion between the different arts onstage, pulling the audience inside the dramatic story with words, music, art, and movement.