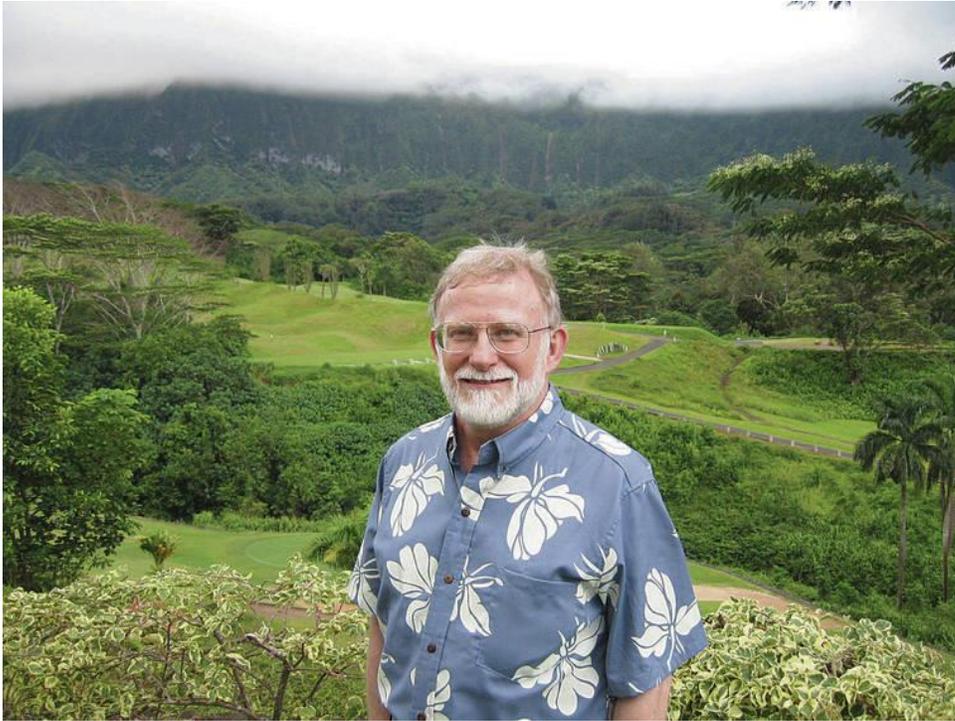


# For Joseph Stanton, a picture is worth a poem

By [Steven Mark](#), September 12, 2019



Joseph Stanton, poet and retired University of Hawaii at Manoa professor, has written poems inspired by paintings and other artworks.

Poet Joseph Stanton has some advice for those who have a way with words, or want to develop one: Check out a museum.

The renowned poet and art historian, who recently retired from the University of Hawaii at Manoa, will be giving an extended workshop at the Honolulu Museum of Art over the next seven weeks called “Starting with Art.” The focus of the three-hour classes, which start Saturday, will be on writing poetry in response to a work of visual art, such as a painting in the museum’s collection, but also other forms of art, like music, theater or film.

“One is starting with the work of art as a kind of inspiration, and so there’s a full range of things one can do,” he said. “One could write trying to describe the work adequately, which is something an art historian would do, but also one can be prompted to look toward personal feelings one has. One could try to capture the work of art by making it a kind of a ‘frozen moment.’”

This type of poetry is known as ekphrastic poetry, a genre in which the poem is written in reaction to a work of art. John Keats’ 1819 poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is one of the most famous examples in classic Western literature, but the genre has gained extra attention recently.

“It’s become quite a popular area of writing, but I like to say I was ahead of the curve, because I started writing such poems around 1975,” said Stanton, who among many accolades has won a Ka Palapala Po‘okela Award, the Cades Award and the Tony Quagliano International Poetry Award.

Stanton has many poems in major anthologies in Hawaii and the mainland. His most recent book, published this summer, is “Moving Pictures.” It features images of paintings, such as Van Gogh’s “Wheat Field,” along with Stanton’s poem that it inspired.

Stanton, a native of St. Louis, MO, “started out as a literary person, and was really working on literary things for the early part of my life and career, but then I kind of fell in love with the whole idea of art,” eventually getting a Ph.D. in art history.

“I really had my foot in both camps, so to speak, and became kind of unusual, someone who’s an art historian writing poetry about art,” he said. “Most people who do this are literary people or from other fields.”

Ekphrastic poetry has become a way for Stanton to bring together many of his passions and interests. He has written an evolving series of poems about the quiet works by the artist Edward Hopper, setting a scene for Hopper’s noirish “Night Shadows” image, an etching of a lone man seen from above walking on an empty sidewalk, with the line “It is early in the century but late at night.” His poem about the Hopper painting “Automat,” adds a touch of hope to the image of a young, well-dressed woman sipping a cup of coffee or tea in what could otherwise be a lonely diner, commenting: “She’s full of what her life might be, what / her lover whispered when he saw her home.”

STANTON ALSO has found inspiration from sports, especially baseball. He grew up a big fan of the St. Louis Cardinals, and has written a collection, “Cardinal Points: Poems on the St. Louis Cardinals,” about the team. He regularly goes to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., to give papers and talks about the game. It has become an ever-evolving passion.

“I’m interested in baseball, and I’m interested in art inspired by baseball, which has kind of become a popular culture thing but also many fine artists have done it in various ways, and then I’m interested in other people who have written poetry about baseball,” he said.

Stanton, 70, recently retired from his position teaching American studies and art history at UH. He used to teach a course on writing about sports, which was extremely popular — but no picnic for students, many of whom would sign up thinking it would be easy.

“People would beg me to get in,” he said, “but then of course once they found out how much work it is, and how much I demanded of them in terms of their writing and how much knowledge they needed to have, then maybe some of them would get worried. But I have ways of teaching that, even though I can challenge people, I can find a way to get them to rise to the occasion.”

For his class at the museum, he will focus on the museum's collection of surrealism and impressionism, "to celebrate the collection of the Honolulu Museum of Art," he said. The classes will consist of writing exercises and walking tours through the museum, with Stanton offering his insights into the works.

"It's also about encouraging people to write in response to art, whatever they do in their own practice, whether it be music, it could be Hawaiian chant," he said.

### **"STARTING WITH ART"**

*A 6-class workshop by poet Joseph Stanton*

>> **Where:** Honolulu Museum of Art

>> **When:** 1-4 p.m., Saturdays, through Oct. 26 (no class on Oct. 12)

>> **Cost:** \$165, \$155 (for museum members)

>> **Info:** Call 532-8705 by Friday

>> **Note:** Stanton will be reading from his book "Moving Pictures" at 2 p.m. Oct. 13 at da Shop, 3565 Harding Ave.