# What Makes a Masterpiece?

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Today we’re going to discuss masterpieces.  What makes a work a masterpiece?  What makes a work museum worthy?  Sometimes it’s the form or the content, or a technique, an innovation, or most likely a combination of all of those factors.  Today we’ll look at five works often considered masterpieces and what makes them so.

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We’ll start with Leonardo da Vinci’s “Mona Lisa.”   A seemingly simple portrait, this has decorated mouse pads, umbrellas, pillows, and coffee mugs.  Why?  Well, first - innovation.  Leonardo introduces a ¾ length pose, which was unusual.  Prior portraits were head and shoulders.  The second is technique.  Da Vinci blurs or smudges the edges of his work in a new technique called sfumato.  Look at Mona Lisa’s neckline, notice how the garment blurs into the skin, and how her hair sort of merges into the garment.  Third is content.  A woman with an enigmatic smile in front of a dreamy, other worldly, unidentifiable background is an unusual subject.  Last are the legends.  Many think this portrait was based on Leonardo’s own facial features, and even though he was commissioned to paint this work, he reneged on the deal and kept this work with him until his death.

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The next masterpiece is Georges Seurat’s “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grande Jatte” from the Art Institute of Chicago.  Seurat was a French Post-Impressionist painter who was interested in light, color, and structured views of urban life.  He developed a new technique called pointillism or divisionism which involved placing dots of color closely together to make forms.  The Art Institute has framed the work with the border visible, allowing viewers to experience the process by seeing the unfinished dots.  As for Seurat’s content, he depicts an afternoon at a public park, but instead of people laughing, talking, running, and playing; they are calm and formal.  Some scholars wonder if this was an idealized vision or intended as a proper behavior lesson to park attendees.  The addition of the monkey might allude to the concept of evolution and refer to the idea that society must progress in a more orderly fashion.

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The next famous image is Claude Monet’s “Waterlilies.”  Monet willed these fantastic works to France on the condition that they must be displayed as conceived; by themselves in an oval shaped room.  The result is well, a masterpiece.  His colors are deep and vibrant, the texture is thick and juts off the canvas.  Monet completely eliminates the horizon line; it’s as if the viewer is looking straight down into the water.   Upon close inspection, his brushstrokes are loose but effectively manage to convey flowers delicately floating in water.  The works are displayed in two large oval rooms of the L’Orangerie which sits across the gardens from the Louvre Museum so make sure you stop in if you ever visit Paris.

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Next, we’ll look at a well-known sculpture.  This is the “The Thinker” by Auguste Rodin.  He is often considered an Impressionist sculptor because the Impressionists were known for painting light effects.  Rodin’s works are both expressive and concerned with lighting.     He was a late 19th/early 20th century French artist and there’s a great museum dedicated to him in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.  “The Thinker” shows a man deep in thought; the texture is rough, almost mottled, allowing the light to flicker around his body.  This innovation earns him the masterpiece title.  Notice, too, that the rough texture gives the figure its expressive qualities.  The figure seems tortured, almost shaking, as he attempts to solve something that’s weighing heavily on him.  If someone were to ask you to paint or sculpt someone thinking, how would you do it?  It’s hard to show the thoughts in someone’s head, but Rodin manages to convey that, by the iconic pose of the head in hand.

## Slide 6

Our last image is an architectural masterpiece from Paris, France; the Eiffel Tower.  It was completed in 1889 after a little more than 2 years of construction.  The Eiffel Tower was designed by Gustave Eiffel, has 3 levels, 7 million visitors per year, and is 984 feet tall.  When built, it was intended to be a temporary installation for a universal exposition because Paris has a very low skyline; nothing could be taller than the local cathedral.    Residents also felt it stuck out like a sore thumb, but soon changed their mind and the tower is now a well-known symbol of the city of Paris.   The tower is constantly being repainted.  It takes 7 years to paint the entire tower and then work immediately starts again.  Visitors can take an elevator to the top or climb 1,665 steps.   In keeping with its location in the city of lights, the Eiffel Tower has 336 sodium lamps that light the tower from within and 20,000 bulbs that glitter for 5 minutes every hour in the evenings.  It’s a spectacular sight!

Thanks for joining me on this look at masterpieces!

Created and narrated by Sue Stelford, ARTS 112 Course Developer.