

What Is a Work of Art?

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WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers what defines a work of art by exploring how the Western concept of the artist has contributed to the idea of the masterpiece, as well as the difference between an artifact and a work of art. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Masterpieces

A **work of art** is an object that has been designed for its aesthetic appeal, or an object that has come to be appreciated as a work of art.

In the Western conception of art, every work of art is either a **masterpiece**—an exceptional work of art—or a step toward becoming a masterpiece.

For Western scholars, the masterpiece is the culmination of an artist's oeuvre. The artists of high caliber that you'll be studying either create masterpieces or create works that are stepping stones toward becoming masterpieces.

Closely related to the ideas of genius and masterpiece, **originality** is the idea that a work of art is the result of an artist's unique vision and not of outside influences, such as other works of art.

To help put these concepts to work, you'll examine three works of art that are considered masterpieces:

- Peter Paul Rubens' *Descent from the Cross*
- Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*
- Michelangelo's *Pietà*



TERMS TO KNOW

Work of Art

An object that has been designed for its aesthetic appeal, or an object that has come to be appreciated as a work of art

Masterpiece

A work of outstanding skill or artistry

Originality

The idea that a work of art is the result of an artist's unique vision and not of outside influences,

such as other works of art

1a. Peter Paul Rubens' *Descent from the Cross*

Peter Paul Rubens was a Baroque painter who was highly regarded for his ability to evoke a sense of movement and drama in his paintings. He was also known for his ability to paint human anatomy.

If you take a look at the color scheme in this painting, you're immediately drawn to the center—the body of Christ as it's being removed from the cross:



Descent from the Cross by Peter Paul Rubens

You can see how the artist renders the body in a very corpse-like manner; the body looks dead. The reason that this is considered a masterpiece is because it encompasses a lot of the characteristics that have come to be associated with Peter Paul Rubens.

1b. Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*

This is the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci, probably the most famous painting ever.





Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci

It is considered one of da Vinci's masterpieces for a number of reasons, one of which is that it showcases his ability to represent a lifelike quality in the subject's face and hands. He's accurately reproducing the appearance of human skin, making it look almost glowing.

Da Vinci was a scientist as well as an artist, and his interest in the natural world strongly correlates to his experimentation with natural phenomenon in his work.

This painting is a good example of that, as it uses a landscape as the backdrop—something unusual for the time. Furthermore, da Vinci plays around with that landscape via aerial perspective, which is where objects that are farther away appear less clear.

1c. Michelangelo's *Pietà*

This last piece is the *Pietà* by Michelangelo, widely regarded as one of his finest sculptures.



Pietà by Michelangelo

This example strongly exhibits the genius characteristics that were associated with Michelangelo: his grasp of classical ideals, his use of understanding perspective and proportion from the viewpoint of the observer, and his skill in general as a sculptor.

2. Non-Masterpieces

There are some works of art that would not be considered masterpieces because they don't exhibit the kind of qualities viewers and critics have come to expect from these particular artists.

This is a chalk sketch by Leonardo da Vinci.



Chalk sketch by Leonardo da Vinci

Like the other examples you're about to see, this is an excellent work if only for the fact that it was produced by an artist of historical significance. However, this wouldn't be considered a masterpiece in its own right, but rather a stepping stone toward becoming a masterpiece.

Here's another example of a sketch, this one by Michelangelo.



Sketch by Michelangelo

And here is a sketch by Peter Paul Rubens.



Sketch by Peter Paul Rubens

Again, these are both works of art, but not quite masterpieces.

3. Artifacts vs. Works of Art

Finally, it's important to know the distinction between artifacts and works of art. **Artifacts** make up a large category of objects, as they include anything created by a human being that is of significance.

All pieces of artwork are artifacts, but not all artifacts are artwork.

➔ **EXAMPLE** A painting, such as the *Mona Lisa*, and a stapler would both fit within the category of artifacts. But only the *Mona Lisa* would count as an example of artwork, unless the stapler was absolutely amazing in some way.

This is similar to how all masterpieces are artwork, but not all works of art are masterpieces. Masterpieces are a very small subcategory of artwork, which itself is a small subcategory of artifacts.



BIG IDEA

A masterpiece is more than just an artifact. It is a work of art and has contributed to the Western concept of art, which is that every work of art is either a masterpiece or a step toward becoming a masterpiece.



TERM TO KNOW

Artifact

An object made by a human being, in particular an object of historical or cultural interest



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that a work of art is an object that has been designed for its aesthetic appeal, or an object that has come to be appreciated as a work of art. **Masterpieces** are works of outstanding skill or artistry, and contribute to the Western conception that all works of art are either masterpieces or steps toward becoming masterpieces. Three examples of masterpieces are **Peter Paul Rubens' *Descent from the Cross***, **Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa***, and **Michelangelo's *Pietà***.

You also saw some examples of **non-masterpieces** from these same artists. While the sketches you viewed are certainly quality works of art, they don't yet exhibit the same outstanding level of technique that has come to be expected from these artists.

Lastly, you learned the important distinction between **artifacts and works of art**. While artifacts include all objects made by human beings, particularly those of historical or cultural significance, not all artifacts reach the level of artwork.

Good luck!

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