

# What is a Masterpiece?



Leonardo da Vinci, *Portrait of Lisa Gherardini* (called *Mona Lisa*), about 1503–6, Musée du Louvre

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The definition of an artistic masterpiece was linked by tradition to craftsmanship and conformance to rules. But in the early 19th century, the idea developed that great works of art are manifestations of individual genius, especially of tempestuous young talents who break the rules and explore new modes of expression. That was certainly the case with the two artists in this gallery—Antoine-Louis Barye and Théodore Géricault. The same could also be said of Leonardo da Vinci, three centuries earlier. His strange and haunting *Mona Lisa* is unques-

tionably one of the most famous works of art in the world and the star of the Louvre’s collection. (As a national treasure, it is not permitted to leave France.)

Whether as a tour de force of technical skill or an entirely unique and personal expression, some works of art seem to belong to a higher category of achievement. Sir Kenneth Clark, former director of the National Gallery in London, thought that great paintings exhibit a density of memories and emotions, “an imaginative power.” In the end, the art-viewing public at any given time in history decides which images are meaningful and which works of art they will call masterpieces.