

The Masterpiece over Time



Robert Nanteuil, *King Louis XIV*, 1662, Minneapolis Institute of Arts

In many ancient cultures, artisans created their best works as offerings to the gods. The time, consideration, and precious materials they lavished on those works testified to their religious devotion. Over the centuries, artisans’

focus shifted from pleasing the gods to meeting technical standards. The French word for masterpiece is *chef d’oeuvre*. Its earliest usage in print appears in a 13th-century book about the trades in Paris. The text explains that when an apprentice finished years of training in a master’s workshop, he demonstrated his knowledge of trade secrets and his technical skill by submitting a *chef d’oeuvre*.

Centuries later, during the reign of King Louis XIV (1643–1715), the Royal Academy was created to harness the arts as instruments of the State. Suddenly, knowledge of history and literature became an essential element of the artist’s tool kit, and the ability to conceive visual metaphors for complex social ideas was as important as the ability to cast bronze, carve stone, or paint.

The modern meaning of “masterpiece” emerged in the late 18th century when the term began to be used for works that transcended the rules and expectations imposed by the Royal Academy. Artists came to be admired as creative geniuses who struggled against convention, producing works that surprise, delight, and sometimes even shock viewers into seeing the world around them in new and different ways.