



Changing Definitions of “Masterpiece”

The term “masterpiece” originated in medieval Europe, in reference to a work that met a craft guild’s standard of excellence for calling its maker a “master.” It is important to note, however, that exceptional works of art (masterpieces) had been created in earlier times and in other parts of the world with their own definitions of beauty and criteria for excellence.

Neither of the two chairs on view here—the Cook Islands chief’s stool and the Eames lounge chair—was initially called a masterpiece. Of fine form and high function, both are now understood to be masterpieces, but for different reasons. The chief’s stool, beautifully carved from a single block of wood, was so special to the Cook Islanders that only the chief could sit on it. In contrast, the Eames chair was manufactured to be inexpensive and widely available. The stool, therefore, is an exclusive masterpiece, while the lounge chair is a masterpiece for the masses.