



# The Invisible Masterpiece

By Hans Belting

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## The Invisible Masterpiece By Hans Belting

The "invisible masterpiece" is an unattainable ideal, a work of art into which a dream of absolute art is incorporated but can never be realized. Using this metaphor borrowed from Balzac, Hans Belting explores the history of "the masterpiece" and how its status and meaning have been elevated and denigrated since the early nineteenth century. Before 1800, works of art were either imitative (portraits and landscapes) or narrative (history painting). But under the influence of Romantic modernity, the physical object—a painted canvas, for example, or a sculpture—came to be seen as visible testimony of the artist's attempt to achieve absolute or ultimate art; in short, the impossible. This revolution in interpretation coincided with the establishment of the first public art museums, in which classical and Renaissance works were presented as the "real" masterpieces, timeless art of such quality that no modern artist could possibly hope to achieve. The *Mona Lisa* and other celebrated paintings preoccupied artists who felt burdened by this cult of the masterpiece as it came to be institutionalized.

Belting explores and explains how twentieth-century artists, following Duchamp, struggled with their personal dreams of absolute art. It was not until the 1960s that artists, such as Warhol, finally began to reject the idea of the individual, totemic work of art and its permanent exhibition, as well as the related concept of the "masterpiece" and the outmoded art market that fed off it.

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#### Review

“A forceful and highly original history of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century art. . . . With his inexhaustible imagination and his sharply paradoxical turn of mind, Belting is one of the dominant art historical voices of our time.”<sup>20</sup>Christopher S. Wood, *The New Republic*  
(Christopher S. Wood *The New Republic*)

“With deep-throated ardor, [Belting] writes, ‘This then is the hell of art: one chases a phantom.’ Each chapter of *The Invisible Masterpiece* enjoys another milestone along this chase.”<sup>21</sup>*The American Prospect* (*The American Prospect*)

#### From the Inside Flap

The "invisible masterpiece" is an unattainable ideal, a work of art into which a dream of absolute art is incorporated but can never be realized. Using this metaphor borrowed from Balzac, Hans Belting explores the history of "the masterpiece" and how its status and meaning have been elevated and denigrated since the early nineteenth century. Before 1800, works of art were either imitative (portraits and landscapes) or narrative (history painting). But under the influence of Romantic modernity, the physical object—a painted canvas, for example, or a sculpture—came to be seen as visible testimony of the artist's attempt to achieve absolute or ultimate art; in short, the impossible. This revolution in interpretation coincided with the establishment of the first public art museums, in which classical and Renaissance works were presented as the "real" masterpieces, timeless art of such quality that no modern artist could possibly hope to achieve. The *Mona Lisa* and other celebrated paintings preoccupied artists who felt burdened by this cult of the masterpiece as it came to be institutionalized.

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#### About the Author

**Hans Belting** is a professor of art history and media theory at the Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe, Germany, and visiting professor at Columbia University. He is the author of *Likeness and Presence* and *The End of the History of Art?*, both published by the University of Chicago Press.

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