Questioning the Masterpiece (Norwich, 20-22 Feb 14)

Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, Norwich, Feb 20–22, 2014
Deadline: Nov 25, 2013

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Questioning the Masterpiece?

A conference to be held at the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.
Papers on Thursday 20th–Friday 21st February 2014, 10.30-17.00; with a further practical study day, Saturday 22nd February

Call for Papers

On the occasion of a major exhibition, Masterpiece: Art and East Anglia, held to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the University of East Anglia, this conference will interrogate notions of artistic value by focussing on the very concept of the 'masterpiece'. The exhibition is itself ambitious and wide-ranging, takes a broad view of what constitutes a masterpiece, albeit in terms of a single region. For the conference we wish to tackle the concept in terms of its implications for considering works of art from different parts of the world.

The term 'Masterpiece' has moved between being a valuable term for marking out artworks which display exceptional skill and virtuosity, to one which signals an overwhelming aesthetic response in the viewer. The production of a masterpiece may be a primary goal for an artist who may decide upon his or her own criteria for judgement. To others it is a social construct used to further the interests of cultural elites. In the definition of a 'masterpiece', what is the relative importance of the character of the work itself – including the techniques and materials used – and the political, economic and social factors shaping its production and display?

In the past, especially within the Western art canon, the term, having had its origins in craft practice, has tended to refer only to a limited category of artworks – mostly sculpture and painting. We would like to raise questions about the universality of its application. For

instance, what are the implications of an artefact having been disregarded in its own time and place, being reassessed and elevated to masterpiece status by a subsequent critic or culture? Is this likely to amount to culturally imperialistic value judgement or de-contextualisation? Or is it redressing a systemic bias, usefully widening and democratising a concept, to include what might previously have been overlooked? How important is consensus in the definition of a masterpiece and to what extent is its existence determined by the economics of the market, its reputation enhanced by competition among collectors and museums? Is the masterpiece a sign of luxury, or can it be applied to the most humble artefact? Does the concept lose all analytic utility when confronted with the conceptual art of the twentieth century?

Papers are welcome from a range of disciplinary backgrounds – including art history, archaeology, anthropology and art practice – which critically engage with the idea of the 'masterpiece' and will normally be 30 minutes long within a 40 minute slot, allowing for discussion. We regret that we cannot offer a speaker fee, however conference attendance fees will be waived (Normal fees: £100 / £75 concessions; UEA students free). There may be some assistance with expenses available. Please enquire if you need help.

Please submit a title and an abstract of 200 words and brief cv. by 25 November, to worldart@uea.ac.uk with the subject heading Masterpieces conference. For any further enquiries in the meantime contact reddish.jenny@gmail.com, conference assistant.

Reference:

CFP: Questioning the Masterpiece (Norwich, 20-22 Feb 14). In: ArtHist.net, Oct 14, 2013 (accessed Nov 24, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/6154>.