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The Private Life of a Masterpiece

Monica Bohm-Duchen
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Viewing a masterpiece can evoke emotions, enlighten minds, and perhaps cause reactions. It is considered to be an artist's best piece of creative work, but what makes it a masterpiece? This book answers that question by exploring the life history and connections between eight works of art spanning from 1500 to 1950. The author, a London-based freelance writer, lecturer, and exhibition organizer, provides unfamiliar insights into great works of art, covering their presence and influences in Western society.

Exploring the lives of Michelangelo's David, da Vinci's Mona Lisa, Goya's The Third of May, 1808, Manet's Olympia, van Gogh's Sunflowers, Munch's The Scream, Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, and Pollock's Autumn Rhythm, Bohm-Duchen takes the reader into the historical, religious, and political climates of the period when each work was produced. Citing references from philosophers, art critics, and fellow artists, the reader gains a sense of who each artist was, what kind of pressures they faced, their techniques and medium constraints, and other important aspects of understanding why and how the masterpiece came to be.

What is particularly wonderful and exciting about this art book is the layout design; the information is presented clearly and helpfully. By taking note of the color-coding, large illustrations, and highlighted areas (similar to web design), the reader can easily navigate through the chapters to digest and retain both verbal and visual information with equal intensity.

Bohm-Duchen provides and uncovers such strange details as the fact that Picasso was the only person formally arrested in France in connection with the theft of the Mona Lisa; that computer based technology revealed that da Vinci may have used his own face to model the Mona Lisa; and that Manet's application of color influenced Van Gogh's nervous painting style. The author concludes her chapters by explaining how the masterpiece's image is mass reproduced and interpreted in today's art scene.

Disheartening in some ways and refreshing in others, each work of art has something indescribable that entices the viewer with an enduring quality.

The Private Life of a Masterpiece is strong in delivering simple, concise details with fresh insights. Bohm-Duchen could have improved the text by including women artists and their contributions to the art world, but most importantly, she provides the lay reader, and perhaps the student and specialist, with a unique view into the private life of a masterpiece.

SUZANNE WILSON (July / August 2002)

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