



Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam* (detail), The Sistine Chapel

A Masterpiece? That is the Question

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The questions posed by one of our clients were: What is the definition of masterpiece? Can an artist have more than one? Can a masterpiece be early in the artist's career or is it typically later? Does the artist declare something a masterpiece or do the critics? I would like to know more about what determines if a work of art is considered a "masterpiece," and I wouldn't be surprised if others are curious as well. In a follow-up e-mail he added ...while you are at it would you consider articulating the difference between a minor piece, a major piece, and of course a masterpiece?

It appears that this topic will take some time to explore, so I will start here with a definition of a masterpiece. Various dictionaries define the word thus: "a person's greatest piece of work, as in an art. The

greatest work, as of an artist. Also called masterwork. The most outstanding work of a creative artist or craftsman."

Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language defines it as: "a thing made or done with masterly skill; great work of art craftsmanship; *chef-d'oeuvre*; the greatest work made or done by a person or group."

Can an artist have more than one? If you go by the strict definition, then the answer would be no, but we all know that there are exceptions to every rule. I do believe that when it comes to a general, run-of-the-mill artist from any period there is probably a point in time when all the stars are in alignment and they create what would be described as their masterpiece ... the single most important painting they ever created;

one that, more than any other work, captures the very essence and meaning of that artist and their work. However, when it comes to an artistic genius, an artist who is/was constantly challenging the barriers before them, then it is more than likely that they will create more than one masterpiece during their lifetime. And what about those artists who work in various mediums: oil, bronze, collage, etc. Wouldn't they have masterpieces from each? I will pick this topic up in the next issue, but if you think about artists like Michelangelo, Picasso, and Matisse, you will see where I am headed.

