

# **The Unknown Masterpiece Study Guide**

**The Unknown Masterpiece by Richard Howard and  
Honoré de Balzac**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of the book was used to create this study guide: Balzac, Honore de. *The Unknown Masterpiece*, translated by Richard Howard New York Review Books Classics. 2001.

“The Unknown Masterpiece” is a short story by Honore de Balzac in which young and aspiring artist Nicolas Poussin and established artist Francois Porbus attempt to catch a glimpse of legendary artist Frenhofer’s masterpiece, ten years in the making but seen by no one. When the story begins in 1612, Nicolas is attempting to make his way in Paris as an artist. He is young, full of passion, and is out to conquer the world. He is to meet with and study under the established royal court artist Porbus, but the visit is interrupted by the appearance of the elderly and legendary artist Frenhofer. Frenhofer is a master painter, is rich and is famous, but in old age has, in Porbus’s mind, gone crazy. Frenhofer is as quick to paint as he is to speak philosophically about art.

At Porbus’s studio, Frenhofer criticizes and encourages Porbus’s work, then launches into a philosophical argument about the nature of art, arguing that painting must involve a love of the subject and a love of the craft itself. Art, he argues, is not merely about copying life, but expressing it and finding the beauty and love in it. He then brings Nicolas and Porbus to his own studio, where Nicolas is awestruck by Frenhofer’s work. Frenhofer refuses any requests, however, made by the two artists to see his masterpiece in progress which he has been working on for a decade, never finding it quite finished or quite perfect. Headed home, Nicolas is determined to find a way to see the painting so he decides he will offer his lover and muse, Gillette, as a model for Frenhofer in exchange for a glimpse of the painting. Gillette is young and stunningly beautiful, as well as unfailingly loyal, gentle, and loving. She is hurt that Nicolas would offer her up in such a way, but accepts this out of love for Nicolas.

Nicolas and Porbus confront Frenhofer with this deal. Frenhofer will not allow his masterpiece—which he considers to be the love of his life—to be used in such a trade. Frenhofer does describe his painting—that of a nude young woman on a coverlet, surrounded by curtains and burning incense, yet he will not allow it to be seen. However, when Frenhofer lays eyes on Gillette he is floored by her beauty and inspired, and so he allows the deal to proceed in order to have only a moment with Gillette. Frenhofer finds in her the love of life and the beauty of existence—things which Nicolas does not see in her, or in anything besides himself. Nicolas and Porbus are stunned by the masterpiece itself: it is chaos—full of shapes, colors, lines, and layers, but nothing identifiable save a single, beautifully-rendered foot. Frenhofer sends everyone on their way. That night, he burns all of his paintings and dies.



# Part 1: Gillette

## Summary

The story is dedicated to an unknown aristocrat in the year 1845.

It is December, 1612. A young man in shabby clothes in Paris can be seen pacing in front of a house on the Rue de Grand-Augustins. He gathers his nerve and knocks on the door, asking to see Maitre Francois Porbus. Inside, he knows Henri IV's court painter is at work. It gives him a feeling of artistic inspiration. The young man is like many other young artists, who feel as if the world is theirs for the taking. Compared to the master, however, the poor but talented young man is nothing. Yet he knows he would never have come to such a place had it not been for a twist of chance. The young man is admitted into the studio of Porbus by an elderly man, whom the young man studies with the eye of an artist—from the old man's worn face to his unfriendly look.

The young artist is amazed by the studio. It is full of paintings, sketches, brushes, paints, props and reference items, canvases, papers, easels, and so on. The room is very well lit. Of central focus is a massive painting underway of Mother Mary on the way to Jerusalem. The narrator notes aside that the painting is for Marie de Medici, and will be sold later in her life when she is poor. The old man who has gone into the studio ahead of the young man considers buying a painting from Porbus, but does not wish to bid against the Queen. The old man rails against artists, thinking that just because they can copy something from real life does not mean they have stolen God's secrets and that there is more to painting than mere copying. Porbus argues that were he to touch the breast of the woman in the painting, he would not feel warmth and firmness, but cold hardness. The old man argues that Porbus has not put his entire soul into his latest work. This is why sculptors, he explains, do not merely take molds of their models. Art is about expressing life, not copying it.

The young man here interrupts to defend Porbus's work but realizes he has spoken out of turn and reveals himself to be Nicolas Poussin. Porbus tells the young man to work, so the young man sketches Porbus's figure of Mary. The sketch impresses the old man, who takes up paints himself to adjust Porbus's painting. He works primarily on the figure of Mary, then begins adding touches—only a few brushstrokes here and there—to the rest of the painting. As the old man works, he describes to Nicolas all he does. The old man grows sweaty and impassioned, obviously loving the work he is doing but saying no model holds a candle to his own Catherin Lescault. The old man reveals that only a master like Mabuse could paint such work, and he himself is the only student Mabuse has ever had. The old man finishes, and Nicolas realizes the painting does indeed now look much better. The old man buys Nicolas's drawing so that Nicolas can in turn buy a proper coat. The old man then brings both Porbus and Nicolas to his own house, which is massive and full of paintings, including some by Mabuse which the old man says are even lacking in certain ways. Nicolas himself is stunned by the old man's own paintings. They are beautiful and full of life.



Porbus is curious about the old man's ongoing, current painting—his masterpiece. The old man says no one can see it, as it is not yet finished. He has been at work on it for ten years. The old man (revealed by name to be Frenhofer) explains how he has done all he can to make the painting exquisite, such as substituting lines with contours covered by layers of blond halftones while arguing drawing does not exist because there are no lines in nature. However, Frenhofer says the masterpiece is also his doubt, as too much knowledge leads to negation; and what are ten years when one is dealing with nature. As Frenhofer begins speaking with himself, Porbus explains to Nicolas that the old man has gone into conversation with his genius.

Porbus reveals that Frenhofer served as both student and patron (financer) for Marbuse, which is why Marbuse only ever took on Frenhofer as a student. Porbus explains that Frenhofer sees higher and farther than other artists; that he is as much a philosopher as an artist because he was born into wealth and had a good education; and that this has made him a lunatic. Porbus argues that lines do matter in nature, and that a painter should only philosophize with a brush. Nicolas does not pay attention. He now only wants to see the masterpiece, and has been inspired to become rich and famous. He heads home where the beautiful young Gillette, his lover and muse, is waiting for him. Nicolas asks her if she would consider posing for someone else, but Gillette refuses, saying she would feel unworthy of Nicolas to be exposed to someone else, and that she worries Nicolas would no longer love her. Even now, all Nicolas can think of is his art. He insists that Gillette model for Frenhofer, and she reluctantly agrees.

## Analysis

The premise of Balzac's story is relatively simple: Nicolas, a young and aspiring artist bent on wealth and fame is to study with court painter Porbus based on some unidentified chance occurrence—but this is all thrown into chaos by the arrival of Frenhofer. Nicolas and Porbus, aware of Frenhofer's other works, are obsessed with the chance to see the masterpiece just as Frenhofer himself is obsessed with finishing the masterpiece. It is clear that Frenhofer is both talented and brilliant, but even more, that he is passionate. His passion draws together both his skills and his intelligence to form something extraordinary in his work. The quick and efficient fixing of Porbus's painting demonstrates just how exceptional an artist Frenhofer is, and the difference between the three men is telling: Porbus considers what he does to be only a job, and his detached way of painting is quickly seized upon and criticized by Frenhofer. Nicolas himself is young, headstrong, and out to conquer the world. He sees art as a way to become rich and famous. Neither of the younger artists sees art as a way to communicate life.

Readers should note that two of the story's themes are rooted in Frenhofer's frenetic philosophical discourses on art—first, that art is not merely about copying life, but actually expressing it—its beauty and its love; and second, that love of life is just as important as love of art. Frenhofer loves his work, while Porbus sees it as a means for a paycheck and to improve his abilities to copy life and experiment with technique;



Nicolas in turn merely sees art as a means to an end. Balzac's work can be compared with Robert Browning's poem "The Faultless Painter" published many years later in which a painter of perfection, Andrea del Sarto, is able to perfectly capture a subject on canvas, but lacks any love in the work, while Raphael draws a formless claw but actually loves his work, and there the difference is established. The language that Balzac uses to make these arguments about love of life and art are rooted in both a sound education in the arts, and in passion. Note that Frenhofer frequently becomes excited amid using passionate and educated terms and references—such as his allusion to Prometheus's fire having gone out of the work, betraying a spark of genius that dies out due to a lack of passion.

Porbus seems to idle around his studio while Frenhofer becomes personally invested in touching up Porbus's painting. Note that Porbus expresses no outrage: the painting itself means nothing to him; otherwise he should object to another artist touching his work. Meanwhile, Frenhofer seizes upon a work that is not his own and immerses himself in it, in love with the expression of beauty and the expression of life in paint. Nicolas watches, less impressed by the passion and love of Frenhofer than by Frenhofer's abilities—and his ironic desire to copy Frenhofer despite Frenhofer's insistence that things are not to be copied, but expressed. Nicolas can see that Frenhofer both loves the things he paints and loves the act of painting itself—both illustrated in the paintings at his house—but Nicolas does not actually understand what Frenhofer means.

Nicolas's inability to understand Frenhofer's insistence on passion in the work is expressed through Nicolas's continued desire to copy Frenhofer, and to be rich and famous. Porbus considers that Frenhofer is too involved in the philosophy of art, but he does note that Frenhofer can see farther and higher into art than most. However, Frenhofer—according to Porbus—has ventured into lunatic territory. Life and art are inseparable from one another for Frenhofer. For Frenhofer, this is natural and necessary. For Porbus, it is simply crazy to allow both to bleed into one. Yet even then, neither Porbus nor Nicolas can recognize that this is why their own work does not compare to Frenhofer's.

When Nicolas returns home, he can think only of himself, and so he cannot be a true artist. An artist thinks of love, of beauty, of life, of things other than himself—but to Nicolas, all these things are expendable to get what he wants, including the love of the young and beautiful Gillette. Nicolas is actually willing to trade Gillette for a chance to see the masterpiece—demonstrative proof that Nicolas does not appreciate either Gillette's love or her beauty. To Nicolas, these things are expendable. He will not let anyone else see her nude, except now because it is useful to him to allow someone else to see Gillette. Out of love for Nicolas, Gillette agrees to model for Frenhofer.

## Discussion Question 1

How do Frenhofer, Nicolas, and Porbus each approach painting as work? Where do they differ? Why is this so?



## Discussion Question 2

Frenhofer argues that art is not about copying life, but expressing life, and that an artist must put his love and his soul, into his art. Why do his arguments appear to make so little headway or have so little impact on Nicolas and Porbus?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Frenhofer refuse any and all requests to see his uncompleted masterpiece? Why are Nicolas and Porbus so insistent upon seeing it?

## Vocabulary

irresolutely, obliging, stratagems, coquetry, neophyte, disposition, je ne sais quoi, diabolical, extravagant, tenebrous, sagacity, beguile, destitution, deferentially, reverie, connoisseur, vehement, preternatural, inexplicable, capricious, bourgeois, superabundance



## Part 2: Catherine Lescault

### Summary

Three months pass. Porbus visits Frenhofer, who has exhausted himself yet again while attempting to complete his masterpiece. Porbus speaks to Frenhofer mockingly when Frenhofer says he believed he had completed the painting, only to be hung up on the details and the model. Porbus explains that Nicolas has a gorgeous, flawless young girl who would be willing to serve as a model, provided Frenhofer would let them look at the painting. Frenhofer is stunned by this. He considers his masterpiece his wife and would never dare show her off to someone. He demands to know what husband or what lover would put their beloved to such shame. The painting cannot leave the studio until it is finished, Frenhofer argues. He will not allow Nicolas to become a rival for it.

Frenhofer does go on to describe the masterpiece: it features a woman lying on a velvet coverlet surrounded by drapes, and with an incense burner working. Frenhofer says the painting is completed, but he must travel to be sure. Meanwhile, Nicolas and Gillette arrive. Gillette is upset that she has been brought to Frenhofer's, still not comfortable with the idea of posing. At last, she admits defeat and goes in, saying that if she is to be used, then at least she will be remembered on a palette. When Nicolas and Gillette appear before Frenhofer, Frenhofer is stunned. He sees how beautiful she is, and likens her to a slave being sold. Nicolas recognizes the look of longing in Frenhofer's eyes, and immediately becomes jealous and regretful. Frenhofer, transfixed by Gillette's beauty, immediately consents to letting Nicolas and Porbus see the masterpiece only to be with Gillette a moment longer. Porbus urges Nicolas to be quick so Frenhofer does not go back on his word. Porbus declares that the fruits of love wither quickly, but the fruits of art are immortal.

Gillette realizes she is only a woman, and she sees the way that Nicolas lovingly looks at one of Frenhofer's other paintings, realizing Nicolas has never looked at her in such a way. Nicolas tells Frenhofer he will kill Frenhofer if Frenhofer does anything to bother Gillette. Gillette disrobes to stand beside the masterpiece so that she and the masterpiece may be compared. Nicolas and Porbus then rush in to see the masterpiece as Frenhofer sings its praises, declaring that nothing else can compare to it. Nicolas and Porbus, however, see only daubs, lines, and layers of paint causing a strange chaos of nothing identifiable, except for a single, beautifully formed foot which has escaped everything else. They realize they are looking at an imaginary woman. Nicolas comments offhandedly there is nothing on the canvas. Frenhofer hears this, and demands to know the truth from Porbus. Porbus confirms there is nothing on the canvas, which staggers Frenhofer. He suddenly feels an imbecile and a failure but then recovers, accusing the other two artists of lies in the attempt to steal "her" from him. Frenhofer declares he can see her, and she is utterly beautiful.





Gillette then begins crying, saying she would be vile to still love Nicolas. Frenhofer covers up his painting, and sends Nicolas and Porbus home. That night, he burns all of his paintings, and dies.

## Analysis

Nicolas and Porbus put their plan into action, using Gillette as a pawn in their attempt to see the unknown masterpiece. Frenhofer loves life and beauty as much as he does his art, and he is transfixed by the presence of life and beauty in Gillette. His longing for Gillette is not sexual but pure, whereas Nicolas and Porbus have an almost sexual desire to see Frenhofer's painting. Note that Nicolas is willing to use and expose Gillette as an opportunity to see Frenhofer's masterpiece, while Frenhofer is not willing to risk exposing his masterpiece for a model (until he sees Gillette in person). Readers should note very carefully that Frenhofer likens Gillette to a slave being sold at auction, clearly not being valued for her humanity. It can be argued that Frenhofer's love of his art is deeper, more real, and purer than Nicolas's love for Gillette. Indeed, it can be argued that such a pure love may mean Catherine Lescault may not actually exist—or may be an assemblage of the different parts of different women.

Nicolas is willing to use Gillette's love for him against her, while Frenhofer does not wish to violate the sanctity of the love of his work for anything. Frenhofer is unable to even conceive of anyone who would use their love in such a way—a clear moral condemnation of what Nicolas is forcing Gillette into doing. Further, his argument of rivalry against Nicolas is not merely of having an artist of equal measure, but of having an artist in competition for his masterpiece. Nicolas is now a threat against the masterpiece, like an adulterous man moving in on a husband's wife. The love of art here is pure. Frenhofer can see the beauty and the love in Gillette when Nicolas cannot. His art may be formless, but it is beautiful and he loves it. Gillette may be beautiful and well-formed, but Nicolas does not love her.

To Frenhofer, his painting and Gillette have become one in the same. Gillette essentially returns him to life as beauty in art and beauty in life intersect. For Nicolas, there is a singular moment of jealousy over Gillette, not as a question of love, but as a question of possession. Love and beauty cannot be possessed, only celebrated and given freely. Love and beauty are to be expressed—not possessed, in other words. There is a communication of such love and beauty between Frenhofer and Gillette—something which Nicolas knows he does not have. Having achieved perfection, the attainment of the highest form of love, of beauty, of art on Earth, Frenhofer destroys his creation, destroys the work of his life, and in so doing, destroys himself. He knows he will never be able to capture such beauty, such life, and such love on canvas as he has seen in Gillette—and to know that Nicolas has such beauty in his reach but refuses to recognize and value it is incomprehensible and unacceptable to Frenhofer.

Such a beauty can never truly be expressed in paint. A moment in the presence of such love and beauty as Gillette is worth a lifetime for Frenhofer. His masterpiece and Gillette can be seen in one another, and here, life and art are one. Thus the unknown



masterpiece comes to symbolize love, life, and beauty all combined in the love of art. The masterpiece itself can be judged by readers to be a work of insanity or genius—the product of a mind unable to translate mental images, life expressions, and beautiful forms to canvas, and so it has come out in chaos or the over-thinking of something to the point that it becomes unrecognizable.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is the unknown masterpiece as described by Gillette? What is it like in reality? Is this a work of genius or a work of insanity? Explain.

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why do you believe Nicolas becomes jealous when he sees the look that passes between Frenhofer and Gillette? How does Frenhofer look differently upon Gillette than Nicolas? Why?

## **Discussion Question 3**

After the encounter with Gillette, Frenhofer burns his paintings and later dies. Why? What is intended by this?

## **Vocabulary**

cajoled, chastens, stupefaction, inviolate, rejuvenated, exaltation, conjugation



# Characters

## Nicolas Poussin

Nicolas Poussin, known early on as the young man, is an up-and-coming artist who has arrived in Paris not long before the beginning of the story. Nicolas is poor but full of selfish passion. He is an artist, but is less interested in creating beauty than in making a name for himself and becoming rich in the process.

Nicolas is the lover of Gillette, whom he keeps not as a question of love but of jealousy in possessing her beauty the way he seeks to possess art—for his own appetites. Through an undescribed chance, he is given the opportunity to meet with and study with Porbus—but the meeting is derailed by Frenhofer's arrival. Nicolas becomes obsessed with seeing Frenhofer's unknown masterpiece to the point that he is willing to trade Gillette's love for him for a single glimpse of the work, betraying a hollow soul.

## Frenhofer

The old man, Frenhofer, is a famous and wealthy artist of legendary renown who, in his old age, has been seen to go crazy by some as he struggles away on the masterpiece he has been working at for a decade. Frenhofer has a deep love for love, life, beauty, and art, and how all are one in the same to him. Frenhofer considers such things pure, and considers the love of his life to be his masterpiece, something he will not show the rest of the world exposed and unfinished.

However, Frenhofer is floored by the appearance of beauty in his life once more by the way of Gillette, for whom he surrenders a glimpse of his masterpiece to Nicolas and Porbus. Having experienced such beauty as can never be conveyed in paint, Frenhofer burns all of his paintings and dies.

## Francois Porbus

Francois Porbus is a painter of the royal court. Porbus looks at his work as the means to a living. He is an excellent artist, but there is no love, no soul, and no life in his work. He paints exactingly, merely to copy and make money. He admires the work of Frenhofer, but is more content to mock and deride Frenhofer as an over-the-hill lunatic who is long past the prime of his art.

## Gillette

Gillette is a beautiful young girl, described as flawless, who is the muse and lover of Nicolas. Gillette is unfailingly kind, loyal, and loving, and her pureness is something which Nicolas does not deserve. She recognizes too late that Nicolas does not truly love



her the way she loves him; and she senses in Frenhofer's eyes the kind of love that she herself has been denied by Nicolas.

## **Marbuse**

Marbuse is an unseen, long dead, but well-respected and occasionally mentioned painter in the story. Marbuse only ever had one student—and that student was Frenhofer. Marbuse is described as a master of exceptional quality, surpassed only by Frenhofer.

## **Catherine Lescault**

Catherine Lescault is the model used by Frenhofer for his masterpiece. She is young, beautiful, and central to the masterpiece's composition. An argument can be made that Catherine does not exist, as she is a perfect vision of beauty seemingly composed in Frenhofer's mind and related to canvas by expression of paint—but her beauty is shattered by Gillette's.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Unknown Masterpiece

The unknown masterpiece symbolizes love—specifically the love of life, of beauty, of love, and of art, and how all intersect in art itself. Frenhofer argues in the story that art is combination of love of the subject and love of the painting itself. Only when both forms of love are combined is a real work of art made. The real work of art is pure. It does not merely copy love, life, and beauty, but expresses these things. The unknown masterpiece therein is pure love. Whereas Frenhofer wishes to protect this and present it in whole form to the world, Nicolas and Porbus wish to see the unfinished masterpiece, coveting it almost sexually. Visually, the masterpiece is supposed to depict a young nude woman surrounded by curtains on a coverlet with burning incense, while in reality, the picture features as its only recognizable part, her foot, as the rest is chaotic and full of colors, shapes, and lines without any seeming purpose beyond what Frenhofer can see, meaning perhaps that true beauty can never be done justice outside the source of the beauty itself.

## The Painting of Mother Mary

The painting of Mother Mary symbolizes the love Frenhofer has for his art, and the lack of love Porbus has for his art. The painting seems more an experiment in techniques, skills, and accuracy on Porbus's part while he is in pursuit of a paycheck, as Porbus does not care at all when Frenhofer begins to personally work on the painting. Frenhofer moves frenetically and passionately over the painting, sweating and becoming exciting in speech as he beautifully changes the painting into something lovely.

## Nicolas's Sketch

Nicolas's sketch is symbolic of emerging talent. The sketch demonstrates that Nicolas has talent, and may yet develop that talent into something worthwhile provided he can allow love into his work. Frenhofer sees promise in Nicolas—but that promise of becoming is threatened and undermined by Nicolas's singular ambition to be rich and famous at the expense of all else. The sketch is unfinished and therefore uncertain of how it will be completed. The same is true of Nicolas's career in art.



# Settings

## Porbus's Studio

Porbus's studio is located in Paris on the Rue de Grand-Augustins. Porbus, as a court painter, lives in a large and beautiful place, with the focal point being the studio. The studio is full of paintings in process and completed paintings, sketches, drawings, paints, props and reference items, various other art mediums, and is very well lit. Porbus's studio becomes a place of learning and inspiration for Nicolas, and becomes the place where Frenhofer demonstrates his capabilities on one of Porbus's paintings.

## Frenhofer's Studio

Frenhofer's studio is located some distance away from Porbus's studio. Frenhofer's home and studio are massive, reflecting his wealth. The house is full of paintings, both by Frenhofer and by other artists. However, his studio is kept barred from view, for it is where he works on his final masterpiece. Only later in the story is the studio gained access to, but then the focus is not on the studio, and only on the masterpiece.



# Themes and Motifs

## Art is More than Merely Copying Life

Art is more than merely copying life, Honore de Balzac argues in “The Unknown Masterpiece.” Balzac makes this argument through the character of Frenhofer, who in turn presents the argument to Nicolas and Porbus. Art, Frenhofer insists, is about expressing life, love, and beauty—the things which the art of Porbus lacks, and which Frenhofer’s own masterpiece contains.

Art is not merely painting, Frenhofer contends – the skills, techniques, theories (such as the idea that no drawing exists because there are no lines in nature) – are important and essential, but not the only thing necessary in a work of art. Frenhofer contends that an artist must pour his soul into his work to fully express the subject he is capturing: love of the subject and love of the craft go hand in hand. He explains that just because a man knows some grammar and some words does not make him a poet. What matters is how these things are assembled, and why.

It is clear that Porbus does not love his work. He merely sees it as a paycheck and a place with which to experiment in style and technique. He stands idly by, unconcernedly watching as Frenhofer adjusts his painting. A real artist would not allow another artist to touch his painting without reservation, if at all. Frenhofer becomes emotionally invested in Porbus’s painting, sweating and speaking excitedly as he works. Comparisons are to be drawn to Robert Browning’s poem *The Faultless Artist*, in which Andrea del Sarto paints a perfect hand—which turns out cold and soulless—and Raphael draws a formless claw, full of life—which is rendered with love.

Frenhofer’s own masterpiece—which cannot make sense to Nicolas and to Porbus who merely want to copy beauty rather than understand it—is understood perfectly by Frenhofer who believes the chaotic painting to be perfect. This is why he is able to see the deeper beauty in Gillette despite her staggering physical beauty, whereas Nicolas and Porbus have merely seen her as a means to an end. Gillette is beauty, love, and life in a singular work of art—the human being—while beauty, love, and life form a work of art in Frenhofer’s masterpiece.

## The Importance of Love of Life

Author Honore de Balzac impresses on the reader that love of life is equally as important as love of art in “The Unknown Masterpiece.” There is more to life than money, fame, and sex—or the use of art to achieve these things—just as a painting is incomplete without love, life, and beauty. The argument for the love of life is made through Frenhofer.

Frenhofer notes early on that art is dependent upon love of what is being painted, and love of the act of painting itself. To love life means loving something or someone deeply.



For Nicolas, this should be easy, for he has Gillette—but Nicolas is only in pursuit of fame and wealth by way of painting. He uses Gillette sexually and for his art, but does not care deeply enough about her not to consider her expendable in the chance to glimpse the masterpiece.

The reason why Frenhofer's paintings are so beautiful has not only to do with his skill, technique, and abilities, but his love of painting—and his love of life. This can be detected in his brushwork: he is painting not merely to earn money, but to lovingly express beauty, to lovingly express life. Note that he is transfixed by Gillette when she first appears, seeing her not only as physically beautiful, but transformatively beautiful. There is a love of life relating to Gillette which Frenhofer sees, but which Nicolas has not appreciated. Life is about more than just art, and a moment alone with Gillette is all Frenhofer seeks in exchange for his painting.

Because neither Nicolas or Porbus care about life the way that Frenhofer does, and because neither care about art the way that Frenhofer does, neither are able to understand his masterpiece. It may be very well that Frenhofer's masterpiece simply cannot be understood, but their lack of even attempting to understand it is reflective of their lack of even attempting to understand life. Nicolas has the entire world in Gillette—but he gives her up for a glimpse of the masterpiece. Frenhofer is happy with his masterpiece, but willingly gives it up for a mere moment with Gillette, finding more happiness and beauty in life than in art.



# Styles

## Point of View

Honore de Balzac tells his story “The Unknown Masterpiece” from a third-person omniscient reflective narrative from the point of view of an unknown individual, one who is nevertheless familiar with the events described. The story is dedicated in 1845 (even though it originally appeared in 1831) and even though the events of the book take place in 1612—more than two hundred years before they are recorded.

The narrator assumes a bird’s eye view of events, able to tell readers what goes on at every moment in the story from Nicolas’s home to Porbus’s attempting to offer Nicola’s trade of Gillette for a glimpse of the painting to Frenhofer. Readers are thus able to see each character, fully formed and self-motivated to their own ends (thus fully rendering the approaches of the different artists to art, life, and love), as well as to have an idea about what is happening at each point. Because the story is set down more than two centuries after the events contained within, the narrator is able to provide asides about certain things—such as the future fate of the Mary painting.

## Language and Meaning

Honore de Balzac relates “The Unknown Masterpiece” in language that is formal, educated, and descriptive, evidence of the time (the 1830s) in which it was written—a more formal, educated age. Given the very subject of art, the story naturally relies on descriptive, artistic language that, with a few words, conveys deeper meaning and truth much the way a painting, with a few brushstrokes, conveys life, love, beauty, and a deeper meaning than what appears on the surface. This is also true of the masterpiece and Gillette themselves—beauty is not merely physical or copied—it is something deeper, something invaluable, something which must be expressed but cannot be possessed.

Consider how, in Part 1, Frenhofer articulates his argument succinctly, but descriptively and formally with educated language: “...because you glance now and then at a naked woman standing on a table, you think you’re copying nature—you call yourselves painters and suppose you’ve stolen God’s secrets! ...Brrr! A man’s not a great poet just because he knows a little grammar and doesn’t violate usage! (11)”.

## Structure

“The Unknown Masterpiece” is a short story that is divided into two major parts. The parts are given numbers and titles—Part 1: Gillette; and Part 2: Catherine Lescault. Part 1 deals with Nicolas meeting Frenhofer and urging Gillette to accept that she is a pawn in a trade; and Part 2 deals with the viewing of the masterpiece featuring Catherine.



Part 1 effectively deals with the pursuit of Frenhofer's masterpiece, and Part 2 with its exposure. Part 1 deals with the formulation of a plan to see the masterpiece, while Part 2 deals with the plan being put into action. Part 1 deals with ideas about art, whereas Part 2 deals with Frenhofer's ideas in practice. Part 1 sees the masterpiece of being of primary importance to Frenhofer, whereas in Part 2, life by way of Gillette is of primary importance to Frenhofer—so much so that he burns his paintings and dies.

Just as there are two parts to the story, so too are there two parts to art: there is love of what is being painted, and there is love of the painting (the craft) itself. Frenhofer is made complete by both loves, but Nicolas and Porbus are not. This is reflected structurally in the story itself.



## Quotes

The young man was experiencing that profound emotion which has stirred the hearts of all great artists when, in the prime of youth and their love of art, they approach a man of genius or stand in the presence of a masterpiece.

-- Narrator (Part 1)

**Importance:** Here, Balzac paves the way for the hidden masterpiece that is to follow. Balzac reveals the arrival of the young man at the artist Porbus's studio, and the common feeling of inspiration that surrounds all young artists in places of creativity, and speaking with creative people. This is the feeling the young man experiences at the studio of Porbus.

...because you glance now and then at a naked woman standing on a table, you think you're copying nature –you call yourselves painters and suppose you've stolen God's secrets! ...Brrr! A man's not a great poet just because he knows a little grammar and doesn't violate usage!

-- Old man (Part 1)

**Importance:** Here, the old man effectively lays out his case against many artists who are concerned with copying life precisely as it is, rather than seeing it as it is lived. Painters, because they can accurately portray something, assume they have done well. The old man argues this is not the case, comparing them to poets who know grammar and proper usage, but cannot form an actual poem. He believes Porbus knows his stuff, but not what to do with it.

Your creation's unfinished. You've managed to put only part of your soul into your precious work. Prometheus's torch has gone out more than once in your hands, and lots of places in your picture are untouched by the divine fire.

-- Old man (Part 1)

**Importance:** The old man here argues that Porbus does not know what to do with his talents because there is no soul in his work, no love, and no feeling. Painting an exact replica of life is meaningless without the passion for what is being painted, and a passion for what is going into the painting. This love—both of subject and of executing the painting—are missing from much of the painting itself, and it shows clearly to the old man.

It's not the mission of art to copy nature, but to express it! Remember, artists aren't mere imitators, they're poets! Otherwise, a sculptor would be set free from all his labors by taking a cast of his model!

-- Old man (Part 1)

**Importance:** Here, the old man expounds upon his argument, driving home his point. Artists must see love in life and in their work, combining the two together in the painting. The old man makes an important, and very clear point: if sculpture was only about



copying, a sculptor could simply take a cast of his subject and be done with it. There is more to sculpture than merely capturing form, just as there is more to painting than merely copying forms.

Show you my work!" the old man exclaimed, suddenly upset. "No, no, it must still be brought to perfection."

-- The old man (Part 1)

**Importance:** Here, Frenhofer refuses to allow anyone to see his unfinished masterpiece. This is only one example of innumerable such refusals through the past ten years. Frenhofer argues the painting is not finished, and so it cannot yet be seen. This, however, only reinforces the desire between Nicolas and Porbus to see the painting.

Young Poussin happens to have a mistress of incomparable beauty—not one defect! But if he consents to lend her to you, you must at least give us a glimpse of that canvas of yours.

-- Porbus (Part 2)

**Importance:** Here, Porbus lays out the deal to Frenhofer. For a glimpse of the painting, Frenhofer will have access to the beautiful Gillette. Nicolas is willing to betray Gillette's love for him for a glimpse at a painting, offering her up as a pawn for his own ends. Little does Nicolas realize, violating her love in such a way will leave him empty—as the masterpiece he seeks is not what he expects at all.

The old fraud's pulling our leg.

-- Porbus (Part 2)

**Importance:** Here, Porbus expresses the disbelief he and Nicolas share at their first sight of the masterpiece. It is nothing like they expected. It is chaos. They are stunned, and at first think that perhaps Frenhofer is playing a joke on them by presenting such a painting. Yet, they quickly realize that what they see is incomprehensible to them—though it makes perfect sense to Frenhofer.