

# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Episode Synopses (Set One)

#### I. The Kiss

Producer: Bob Bentley

Perhaps the best-known sculpture from the last 150 years, Rodin's *The Kiss* is also arguably the most sensual. This film reveals how its creator, Auguste Rodin, conceived the sculpture, how he executed it and what happened next.

*The Kiss* has its origins in the huge commission Rodin won in 1880 to make the gates for a new museum of decorative arts, and was inspired by the adulterous lovers Paulo and Francesca in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The film re-creates the studio in which Rodin developed small clay, then larger terracotta versions of the sculpture. Five versions were carved from a block of marble, a gift from the French government, with the first fashioned by an artisan, Jean Turcan, rather than Rodin himself.

*The Kiss* has since developed a life of its own, and one of the most famous replicas is on display in the Tate Modern. It was created for an eccentric American millionaire, who wanted his version to have more distinct genitalia than the French original; it later caused a storm in his local Sussex town of Lewes. British artist Cornelia Parker also wrapped the sculpture in string for a work in 2003, which London artist Piers Butler later cut in a public demonstration, and the film includes exclusive video footage shot at the time.

Appearing in the programme are Rowan Pelling, editor of *The Erotic Review*; Simon Wilson, formerly of the Tate Gallery; Richard Cork, art critic for *The Times* (see also his *Times* press feature on this programme); sculptors Alain Kirili and Nick Haig; and Rodin experts Ruth Butler, Antoinette Roman and Catherine Lampert.



# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Episode Synopses (Set One)

#### 2. The Third Of May 1808

Producer: Mick Gold

*The Third Of May 1808* was the first painting to put the victims of war centre stage. Painted in 1814 by Don Francisco Goya, the chief court painter to the Bourbon royal family of Spain, the picture was far removed from the conventional expectations of a war painting. Instead of glorifying the King, the army or the state, Goya focused on a group of frightened, anonymous men being shot at point-blank range by a firing squad. Although the painting was an official commission for the King, he wanted nothing to do with it. *The Private Life Of A Masterpiece* discovers the full story.

In May 1808, the people of Madrid rose up against the Napoleon occupation. French troops brutally suppressed the uprising - hundreds of people were rounded up and shot in the middle of the night. In 1814, when Napoleonic troops were defeated, Goya was commissioned to depict "the most notable and heroic actions of our glorious insurrection against the tyrant of Europe" for the exiled King's return. Instead, he painted the brutal aftermath of the Madrid rebellion.

All the evidence suggests that the King loathed the pictures. The painting had little major attention until young French artist Edouard Manet saw it in 1865 and noticed *The Third Of May's* radical qualities, which he imitated in *The Execution Of The Emperor Maximilian*. Only in the 20th century was Goya's work seen as a prophecy of military brutality and human suffering.

The film looks at artists who have been influenced by the painting in their work, including, Picasso in *Guernica*. There are contributions from BBC World Affairs Editor John Simpson, art historian Juliet Wilson Bareau, Nigel Glendinning from the University of London, art critic Jonathan Jones and artists Leon Golub, Peter Howson and Robert Ballagh.

Documentaries

10 x 50 minutes



# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Episode Synopses (Set One)

#### 3. Dance At The Moulin De La Galette

Producer: Judith Winnan

*Dance At The Moulin De La Galette* has been described as the most beautiful picture of the 19th century and is loved around the world for its joie de vivre. Painted by Auguste Renoir in 1876, it depicts a lively Sunday afternoon at the Moulin de la Galette dance hall in Montmartre. But, as the programme reveals, though the painting has a celebratory tone, Paris was then still recovering from its most bloody and turbulent time, and the Moulin de la Galette dance hall had been at the centre of it all.

The film tells how Renoir had grown to love the Moulin de la Galette, which was just a stone's throw away from his studio. He never missed the Sunday-afternoon dances and loved to paint the local girls, three of whom feature in the painting, as does his closest friend, Georges Rivière, who later wrote the artist's biography. Yet just a few years earlier, the Moulin de la Galette had been occupied by resistance group the Commune, which was brutally overthrown by Government troops in 1871.

*Private Life Of A Masterpiece* reveals that Renoir actually painted two pictures, both dated 1876 and virtually identical apart from the size: one six feet across, the second half that size. It is not known which of the paintings is the "original". In 1990, the smaller painting hit the headlines when it was sold for \$78.2m (£48m) at Sotheby's in New York – the second highest price ever paid for a painting.

The film features contributions from Professor John House from The Courtauld Institute, London; Professor Patrice Higonnet from Harvard University; Christopher Riopelle from The National Gallery, London; and artist and art historian Eric Shanes.

**Documentaries**

**10 x 50 minutes**

# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Episode Synopses (Set One)

#### 4. The Night Watch

Producer: John Bush

*The Night Watch*, Rembrandt's painting of a group of part-time soldiers setting out on parade, is perhaps one of the world's greatest group portraits. It rivets all who come to see it and, in its own country, it has the status of a national symbol. *Private Life Of A Masterpiece* tells the biography of the painting, from its conception in 1642 to its position today as the supreme painting in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

However, the painting is not actually the picture Rembrandt intended people to see. There are bits missing. The programme discloses its mutilation and the attacks upon it.

Militiamen had the job of maintaining law and order on Amsterdam's streets but, by the time of *The Night Watch*, the job had become largely ceremonial. A group of militiaman, the Kloveniers, commissioned Rembrandt to do a collective portrait. Such paintings were typical, but usually just dull lines of faces. However, Rembrandt took this genre and produced, instead, an extraordinary picture full of movement and life. Using experts and X-rays, the programme shows in great detail how Rembrandt achieved his fantastic results.

*The Night Watch* was quickly recognised as a great achievement and became a symbol of the new Dutch nation. However, that did not prevent an extraordinary act of vandalism taking place. Some 70 years after it was painted, it was moved to a new hall and, finding it did not fit, the new owners simply sliced off sections of the painting, most notably a large section on the left. Since then, it has been attacked twice.

The programme includes contributions from American authority on Rembrandt, Garry Schwarz, and art critic Jonathan Jones.

# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Episode Synopses (Set One)

#### 5. La Primavera

Producer: Ian Jones

Sandro Botticelli's allegorical masterpiece, *La Primavera*, was painted in Florence, probably in the 1480s. It was one of the first large secular works since Greek and Roman times, and featured the first sensual female figures of the Renaissance in a city awash with pious Christian images. Now over half a millennium old, it remains one of the most perplexing and enigmatic of all the great paintings.

Why did Botticelli – whose previous art was confined to conventional Christian images and portraits of the wealthy and powerful – paint the ground-breaking *La Primavera*? This final programme explains how, in the Seventies, a painting, fixed above an ornamental day-bed, cited in a centuries-old inventory from a Medici house, was recognised as being *La Primavera*, shedding new light on its creation.

*La Primavera* was, for centuries, displayed in the homes of the Medici family, and did not come into public ownership until the death of the dynasty in 1743. Even then, it was stowed in a storeroom in the Uffizi Gallery until the mid-19th Century.

Since then, reproductions of *La Primavera* have become easily available. It has been spoofed by *Punch* magazine and Gilbert and Sullivan; and surrealist artist René Magritte superimposed *La Primavera*'s figure of Flora on the back of his famous bowler-hatted man.

The programme includes contributions from Jonathan Nelson from the Syracuse University in Florence; Patricia Rubin, of the Courtauld Institute, London; art historian Jenny Graham; and Camille Paglia, cultural commentator at the University of the Arts, Philadelphia.

**Set Two: featured works of art have still to be finalised.**



# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Episode Synopses (Set Two)

#### I. The Great Wave

Producer: Bob Bentley

Possibly the most famous Far Eastern image in art, Katsushika Hokusai's woodblock painting *The Great Wave* depicts human vulnerability in the face of nature, with three fragile cargo boats about to be swamped by a giant wave.

Hokusai was aged 70 when he created *The Great Wave*. He had been retired for some time but had been ruined by a profligate grandson who gambled away all his money. Homeless and destitute, Hokusai resumed work and designed *The Great Wave* as part of his celebrated sketch-book of works, *Thirty Six Views of Mount Fuji*, begun in the 1820s. He was operating in a low status, popular art market, with no notion that his image would have a profound influence on Western art, nor that it would be endlessly reproduced, borrowed and adapted around the world nearly two centuries later.

The programme also reveals how different cultures interpret the work. To the Western eye, it provides a vision of implacable nature that taps into an age of anxiety – the sense that we are all about to be engulfed by catastrophe. To the Eastern eye, the painting represents human courage and endurance. Westerners scan from left to right, but Eastern audiences scan in the opposite direction, focusing on the plight of the boatmen rather than the sea.

These giant waves were, until recently, believed to be just exaggeration by sailors. Dr Chris Swan of Imperial College, London reveals how he re-created one such wave using a wave tank, while Clare Francis, yachtswoman and novelist, gives her view on Hokusai's depiction of dangerous seas.

Today, Hokusai's influence can be seen across a wide range of works, from David Hockney to Pop Art favourite Roy Lichtenstein, and even in an online communal artwork, *36 Views Of The World Trade Centre*, commemorating 9/11. *The Great Wave* is one of the most popular and reproduced art works in the world, and can be found on everything from notebooks to calendars and even as part of a fashion show.

Art critic Richard Cork explains why he believes that the enduring popularity of the piece lies partly with its symbolic image of impending disaster. Other contributors include Hokusai expert Feigi Nagata and Japanese art specialist Tim Clark from The British Museum.

**Documentaries**

**10 x 50 minutes**

# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Production Notes (Set Two)

#### I. The Great Wave

Also known as *The Breaking Wave Off Kanagawa*, *The Great Wave in the Western World* and *In The Hollow of a Wave off the Coast at Kanagawa*.

Japan's best known woodblock painting, *The Great Wave* is also very un-Japanese. Despite seeming to be the quint-essential Japanese image, it displays qualities that are much more typical of Western painting.

Hokusai settled in landscape painting, his true metier around 1798, and *The Great Wave* is part of his most famous sketch book of works entitled *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (1823-1831). This type of painting (usually a woodblock) is known as *Ukiyo-e* ("pictures of the floating world"), which portrays everyday life and leisure time.

In *The Great Wave*, there are three boats among the turbulent, broken waves. The boats mould into the shapes of the engulfing waves. Tiny humans are tossed around under giant waves, while the sacred, enormous, snow-capped Mount Fuji is just a hill in the distance. These swift boats, called *Oshiokuribune* in Japanese, transported fresh fish, dried sardines and the like, early in the morning, to fish markets off the Edo Bay, from fishing villages on the Bohso Peninsula.

Although long-distance landscape views had been used for 1,500 years in Japan, they had never been entered into woodblock print. Traditionally, woodblocks were produced for bourgeois city gentry who wanted images of street life, sumo wrestlers and geisha girls, and they ignored the outdoors, perspective, and the use of detail. Hokusai's wood blocks were unique therefore, in their use of nature, the countryside, and his depiction of lower-class citizens such as fishermen. As a result, this painting is often described as a "Western painting seen through Japanese eyes".

Hokusai added the Japanese style of flattening, and use of colour surfaces as an element. In the Japanese tradition, brushwork was considered the essence of painting and calligraphy. The more accomplished the brushstrokes, the greater the work. One of the most striking aspects of the painting is Hokusai's use of line to create both movement and space. The apparent spontaneity of his brushwork is a contributing factor. In the creation of this print, the block cutter has faithfully reproduced this sense of spontaneous brushwork.

When regarding *The Great Wave*, a Western audience would scan the painting from left to right, their initial focus being the overwhelmingly large wave on the left. An Eastern audience, however, scan from right to left, therefore experiencing a different sense of movement, their initial focus being the plight of the fishermen and a quicker notification of Mount Fuji.

*The Great Wave* has been hugely influential on other artists. Hokusai's paintings were popular in Paris in the mid 19th Century, and were collected by Impressionists such as Monet, Degas, and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. One only needs to look at Hokusai's work of wind and waves alongside Monet's coastal works to see the parallels. Hokusai's hand is also seen clearly in Monet's serial works, particularly his Haystacks paintings, which were related to *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*.

# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Production Notes (Set Two)

#### I. The Great Wave continued.../2

To Degas, the flatness of these paintings meant that the Japanese artists were not afraid to admit that a picture was not a photograph, and therefore was not merely a slave to the world of material things. Degas would strive more and more to create the flattened effect of Japanese prints in his paintings.

Hokusai's influence is also to be strongly seen in the work of Escher, whose pictures of waves subtly changing into flying birds bear a great resemblance to Hokusai's *Fuji Seen from the Sea*, depicting waves breaking into foam which in turn break into a flock of birds.

Today, the image of *The Great Wave* is almost as widespread as the *Mona Lisa*, appearing in posters, prints, calendars, and notebooks.

Hokusai's *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* is also currently the inspiration for an online communal art project entitled *Thirty-six Views of the World Trade Centre*, which aims to create 36 new images to commemorate the World Trade Centre in New York.

*The Great Wave* has also become a popular choice of tattoo design. Finally, a perceptive description of the painting:

"In this well-known work Hokusai depicts man's vulnerability when faced with the power of nature. The scene shows three cargo boats whose fearful oarsmen huddle together, turning away in horror from the huge wave about to engulf them. To emphasize his vision, Hokusai has the viewer looking up into the menacing hollow of the giant wave – a view that the oarsmen are too terrified to face. The eternal mountain is envisioned in a single moment frozen in time. Hokusai characteristically cast a traditional theme in a novel interpretation. In the traditional *meisho-e* (scene of a famous place), Mount Fuji was always the focus of the composition. Hokusai inventively inverted this formula and positioned a small Mount Fuji within the midst of a thundering seascape."



# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Episode Synopses (Set Two)

#### 2. The Little Dancer Aged Fourteen

Producer: Mick Gold

The cause of a major scandal when it was first exhibited in Paris in 1881, Edgar Degas' sculpture, *Petite danseuse de quatorze ans* (*The Little Dancer*), is now rightly recognised as one of the most important works produced during the 19th Century. By using real fabric and real hair to complete the groundbreaking work, Degas blurred the distinction between art and life and paved the way for modern sculpture.

Made mainly from wax, the original sculpture now resides in the National Gallery in Washington DC, where recent tests have revealed some surprising evidence that Degas altered his original plans for the piece. This may help explain why Degas missed his deadline for an important Impressionist exhibition. Instead of the promised sculpture, an empty glass case was shown, much to the amusement of the critics. When *The Little Dancer* was finally exhibited, it led to scandal and disgust among the very same wealthy men who sponsored, and took advantage of, the young dancers at the ballet. Both a critique of social behaviour and an exploration into the very boundaries of artistic acceptability, *The Little Dancer* was the only sculpture to be exhibited in Degas' lifetime.

*The Private Life Of A Masterpiece* also reveals the tragic story of the young model, 14-year-old Marie van Goetham, on whom *The Little Dancer* was based. A young ballet dancer brought up in a poverty-stricken family of prostitutes, it seems that she, too, fell into disrepute after being sacked from the corps de ballet.

Documentaries

10 x 50 minutes

# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Production Notes (Set Two)

#### 2. Little Dancer Aged Fourteen

Degas' sculpture of the *Little Dancer* is one of the most celebrated images of our age. Although it caused immediate controversy when first exhibited in 1881, it is now recognised as the sculptural masterpiece of Impressionism. After the artist's death, the original wax was reproduced in at least 30 plaster and bronze casts that are now scattered throughout the world, inspiring delight among museum-goers and continuing debate among art historians.

*Little Dancer* is notable, partly because Degas used real fabric and real hair to complete the work, which previously had never been done. In doing so, he also blurred the distinction between art and life in a way that seemed radical and bewildering to his critics. Yet such innovations inspired future generations of artists. As a result, *Little Dancer* is considered today to be one of the most important sculptures produced during the 19th Century.

Although Degas is principally known as a painter, sculpturing was almost as important in his life. He began to sculpt when he was in his early 40s and it became increasingly a major part of his work. At the end of his career, Degas suffered from failing eyesight, and sculpting became his principal medium of expression.

*Little Dancer* is the only sculpture that Degas exhibited in his lifetime. She appeared in the catalogue for the Impressionist Exhibition *Salon des Independents* in 1880 in Paris. However, she was, not present in the actual exhibition, which featured only an empty glass case. One year later, she made her debut, in the sixth Impressionist exhibition, in 1881.

Although considered an Impressionist, Degas' work stands apart from other Impressionist artists, such as Monet, Renoir and Pissarro. Monet studied the effects of natural light, shadow, and atmosphere and created form by juxtaposing brushstrokes of colour; whereas Degas worked without natural light, employed unusual perspectives and created lineal structures. Moreover, Degas observes laundresses, milliners and ballet dancers at work, and his work is actually closer to that of Manet – a Realist, who also depicted ordinary people in contemporary dress (or undress). Degas' work shares with Manet's an interest in the complexity of human expressions and the articulation of everyday experience.

*Little Dancer* caused a furore when first exhibited in 1881. Made of wax and dressed in real clothes, the sculpture outraged many viewers' sense of propriety. This hostility was, however, very much to the point, as Degas was clearly using the sculpture to question accepted ideas of art.

Museum goers expected to see idealised forms rendered volumetrically in smooth, white marble, bronze or plaster. The skinny young dancer, with her protruding jaw and belly, was too strong a dose of naturalism for many viewers. Outraged critics called her atavistic and monkey-like.

Karl Huysmans, a generally more sympathetic critic observed: "The terrible truthfulness of this statuette is a source of obvious discomfort... all their notions about sculpture, about that cold, inanimate whiteness, those memorable stereotypes replicated for centuries, are demolished. The fact is that, on first blow M. Degas has overturned the conventions of sculpture."

# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Production Notes (Set Two)

#### 2. Little Dancer Aged Fourteen continued.../2

It has been argued that Degas intentionally coded the figure as morally deviant. Degas was fascinated by Darwin's general studies of evolution and, in particular, his photographic studies of human expression. He exhibited the sculpture alongside other works bearing similar animalistic physiques. *Criminal Physiognomies*, two pastel portraits picturing markedly atavistic profiles, in title alone clearly revealed Degas' subscription to the popular idea that criminality was biologically predetermined and physically legible.

One critic railed: "Wishing to present us with a statuette of a dancer, he has chosen amongst the most odiously ugly... Oh, certainly, at the very bottom of the barrel of the dance school, there are some poor girls who look like this monster... but what good are they in terms of statuary? Put them in a museum of zoology, of anthropology, of physiology, all right – but in a museum of art, really!"

Not only does he portray the *Little Dancer* with a propensity for vice, he situates her in a dubious environment, backstage at the opera, making her corruption inevitable. By transposing a type of wax imagery usually aligned with the Virgin onto the *Little Dancer* is he purporting to an unholy secular Madonna? Is she the antithesis of that paragon of female virtues, the Virgin Mary, whose age, according to theologians, was 14 at the time of the Annunciation?

The model, 14-year-old Marie van Goetham, was one of three sisters recruited as a *petit rats*, a term used to describe child ballerinas destined for the corps de ballet. But the sisters also worked the cabarets around Pigalle, where their mother entertained clients in a nightclub called Le Chat Noir. Like most young ballerinas, the girls had rich 'protectors' who sponsored their stage careers. One of the men-about-town was robbed of 700 francs by Marie's older sister, Antoinette, while they dined together in a private salon. Antoinette was jailed with her mother and Marie, who were suspected of complicity.

Degas repeatedly sketched his model in preparation for making the sculpture. He drew her from every angle, circling around her to capture each look and gesture. He also modelled a nude study in wax, experimenting with the dancer's stance and posture, head and arm positions. Degas loved working with this malleable material, a dynamic medium that allowed him to experiment endlessly.

Reminiscent of a standard dance pose (fourth position), her stance is informal, yet neatly demonstrates a dancer's natural equilibrium. She seems unaware of being observed as she stretches her arms and shoulders. This 'snapshot effect' is present in many of Degas' ballerina paintings. Like the other Impressionists, he aimed to give the suggestion of accidental, spontaneous, unplanned scenes. Like them, he was influenced by the new techniques of photography and by Japanese colour prints, and he was interested in conveying the impression of movement.

The incorporation of ordinary materials makes Degas' *Little Dancer* the first truly modern sculpture. The wax statuette is also adorned with horsehair, ribbon, linen bodice, satin shoes, muslin tutu and has a wooden base.



# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Production Notes (Set Two)

#### 2. Little Dancer Aged Fourteen continued.../3

The US National Gallery in Washington DC is currently investigating Degas' waxes. "One of our questions is whether the tutu is original. We are comparing it to the inventory photographs, and we will conduct research about the materials from which it is made," says objects conservator, Daphne Barbour. "We will also investigate the composition of her slippers, and the wig over which Degas placed wax to form the figure's hair. The wig has always been described as being made of horse hair, but as far as we know, no one has ever analysed it. We can do that now, with the help of our scientific research department."

Edgar Degas refused all requests to sell the *Little Dancer*. The original wax sculpture was found in his studio after he died, and was first cast in bronze in 1922. After his death in 1917, about 150 wax and mixed-media statuettes were discovered in his apartment, many of them disintegrating.

His heirs (wife and daughter) made the decision to have 74 of them cast in bronze. The casting went on at the Hébrard foundry in Paris from 1920 until the mid-20th Century, producing the posthumous Degas bronzes that can be seen in many museums. Sixty-nine original sculptures in wax and mixed-media survived the casting process.

These were acquired by Paul Mellon in 1956 and 1958. Beginning in 1985, Mr and Mrs Mellon gave the US National Gallery of Art 49 Degas waxes, 10 bronzes and 2 plasters, the largest group of original Degas sculptures.

Degas' most famous sculpture came to life as a ballet at the Paris Opéra in April 2003. *La Petite Danseuse*, with a cast of 60, pays tribute to the model who posed for *La Petite Danseuse de Quatorze Ans*. The new opera was inspired by recent detective work by the Opéra Museum curator Martine Kahane, who discovered that Marie van Goetham was brought up in a poverty-stricken family of prostitutes and was jailed soon after posing for Degas, at the age of 14, in 1881.

Drawing on a 19th-century bestseller, *La Famille Cardinal*, which tells the story of a family of prostitutes, the Paris Opéra balletmaster and choreographer, Patrice Bart, imagined what happened to Marie after she lost her place at the State opera house, the Palais Garnier, because she was seen soliciting in the street. His ballet shows her in later life as a laundress in Montmartre, a job often taken by ageing prostitutes.



# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Episode Synopses (Set Two)

#### 3. The Sunflowers

Producer: Lucie Donahue

Van Gogh's masterpiece is one of the most famous works of art in the world, but few people know the hidden history behind the painting. Inspired by a bunch of flowers that the artist found lying in a gutter, *The Sunflowers* was a favourite of Van Gogh's and he made 10 versions of the original.

The first version of the painting led to Van Gogh's friendship with fellow artist Paul Gauguin, with whom he dreamt of setting up an artists' school in Arles, France. Within two months, however, the pair had fallen out and parted on bad terms. Shortly afterwards, Van Gogh ended his own life. At the funeral, his coffin was covered in the sunflowers he loved so much and it was only after his tragic death that Van Gogh's work finally received the acclaim it deserved.

All of Van Gogh's sunflower studies are rich in religious and mystical symbolism. The artist believed that the way a sunflower turns its head towards the sun echoes the religious devotion of those who follow God. Van Gogh also drew on traditional Dutch painting for the sunflower series, with different stages of life represented by the flowers' blooms, from blossoming to wilting. Van Gogh was most proud of the version that hangs in the National Gallery in London. Perhaps the elegant symmetry of the artwork is one of the reasons why it continues to be popular today.

**Documentaries**

**10 x 50 minutes**

# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Production Notes (Set Two)

#### 3. The Sunflowers

Why has this almost monochromatic painting in the National Gallery in London become arguably the most famous painting in Britain? Indeed, why has this *Sunflowers* painting become the most prized of the series? After all Vincent Van Gogh painted no less than eleven sunflower paintings?

The answers lie in the extraordinary relationship between Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, a relationship that was fraught with tension.

Van Gogh painted his very first sunflower studies not long after moving from Holland to Paris. He found some in a gutter and painted them for an exhibition of local artists. Gauguin happened to see them and praised them. The relationship between the two men developed, and Van Gogh determined on a plan, part artistic and part religious, to set up an artist's school in the south of France. Van Gogh went on ahead to Arles, and painted a number of major canvases, including the National Gallery canvas, in preparation for Gauguin's arrival. Once again, Gauguin was hugely impressed with the *Sunflowers* painting.

There is said to be an elegant symmetry to the piece, with the drooping flowers and the two groups of three brighter yellow flowers reflecting each other on either side of the vase, and vertical symmetry between the darker flower groups. The whole composition is very well balanced. Van Gogh also predicted it to be his best of the studies. Writing to his brother Theo at the inception of this series he wrote, 'The last is therefore light on light, and I hope it will be the best.'

Innovations in paint-making enabled Van Gogh to use new chromium and cadmium yellows. The paint was laid onto the canvas in thick strokes suggesting the three-dimensional flowers. Each bloom is at a different stage: some newly blossomed, some wilting and dying. Traditionally in Dutch painting, this is interpreted as representing the stages of human life.

After Gauguin arrived in Arles, within a few months two men had fallen out, differing in almost everything, including their approach to art.

Gauguin painted the famous picture *Vincent Van Gogh Painting Sunflowers* (1888) during this period in Arles.

Van Gogh's reciprocal study is unflattering to Gauguin. The two men parted on bad terms, though Gauguin wrote shortly afterwards asking for the *Sunflowers* painting that it is now in the National Gallery. Van Gogh refused, but painted him a copy of it instead.



# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Production Notes (Set Two)

#### 3. The Sunflowers continued.../2

For Van Gogh, the sunflower was rich in religious and mystical symbolism – the way it turned its head toward the sun, as a follower turns towards God.

After his death, Van Gogh received arguably his first great stroke of luck. His paintings fell into the hands of his brother's widow, Johanna Van Gogh. She proved both dedicated and masterly at promoting the paintings of her dead brother-in-law. Within a few years, his paintings were being widely praised and the *Sunflowers* especially were being faked.

The greatest of the *Sunflowers* series found its way to the National Gallery after some special pleading by the Gallery. Johanna at first wanted to keep it in the family, but passionate letters from the Gallery changed her mind.

When Van Gogh died, his coffin was covered with a mass of sunflowers.



# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Episode Synopses (Set Two)

#### 4. Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)

Producer: Judith Winnan

Widely regarded as the beginning of modern art, Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* is a startling image of five prostitutes in a brothel. Created when he was just 26, the famous work was the result of an intense rivalry between Picasso and Henri Matisse.

Although the critics and public mocked Matisse's work, Picasso was shocked by its inventiveness and set about creating his own masterpiece in response. The result appalled his fellow artists and one even said that Picasso would be found hanged behind it.

*Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* shattered the image of the female form in painting. The contorted, angular bodies of the prostitutes in Picasso's work were a far cry from the curvaceous, sensuous nudes that had adorned galleries for centuries.

Completed in 1907, the finished painting wasn't exhibited publicly until 1916, acquiring its present title. Nicknamed *The Young Ladies of Avignon* by the exhibition's organiser, the name stuck, much to Picasso's annoyance. He insisted that, to him, it would always be called *My Brothel*.

The Private Life Of A Masterpiece also examines the claim that African art was a huge influence on the painting. Picasso later denied this, but X-rays show that he changed two of the heads in the painting to resemble African masks.

Picasso also made over 700 preparatory sketches for *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)*, rumoured to be the largest number ever for a single work of art.

Contributors include Germaine Greer, art critic Jonathan Jones, biographer John Richardson and Professor Robert Rosenblum of New York University.

# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Production Notes (Set Two)

#### 4. Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)

*Les Femmes d'Alger* was, for much of its early life, a child without a name. Before this, it had been without an identity, abandoned for months by Picasso, who was battling with the urge to create a work that was to break all the rules of Western art and to define the beginning of a new age, as clearly as any work ever has.

The child was carefully – maybe obsessively – planned. More than with any other work, Picasso sketched and altered, experimented and re-drew. It was the child's triumph and tragedy that it was ultimately to be overburdened with the hopes of its creator, and that, unable to live up to them, was to be abandoned by him.

Far from being cast off half-formed, by the time Picasso turned his back on it, the child had been over-used. It had seen too much: overpainting, removal of figures, changes of idiom, violent brushwork – it was worn out.

The painting was not finally even named by its creator, who favoured *The Avignon Brothel*, but by his friend, Andre Salmon. Initially a study of sex and death, to be entitled *The Wages of Sin*, the morally perfect child was to have featured a sailor in the midst of the prostitutes, with a memento mori medical student looking on.

In many ways, the painting was born of the intense rivalry between Henri Matisse for leadership of the avant-garde at the beginning of the century. In 1906, Matisse exhibited his *Joy of Life* painting, to crowds of laughing, jeering people. One person who did not laugh was Picasso, who felt that Matisse in this one picture made his own work seem precious, even quaint. He determined to regain the initiative and returned at once to his studio to start work on *Les Femmes d'Alger*.

Picasso kept his strange offspring hidden in his studio for years. Only a few selected friends were allowed to see it, and they were usually unimpressed. It was partly the horror that this new child aroused in people (its deformity and violence), and partly its uncomfortable reminders of a gentler generation – the figures on the left resembling the Three Graces, the formal arrangement of the salon prostitutes' parade – that kept it hidden away from the world's eyes for so long. Few were impressed by the savage child. Picasso's friend, Georges Braque, thought that the artist had been "drinking turpentine and spitting fire". André Salmon remembered, "The hideousness of the faces struck the semi-converted with horror." As for Matisse, he was horrified by what he saw, and determined to get even.

Picasso's first really gifted child was not finally to see the light of day until 1916, its ninth year, and then only in a private salon. It was not until 1937, when *Les Femmes d'Alger* was 30 years old, that it finally came out into the world. It was taken away to be displayed in New York. It was only with the installation at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that the work received the recognition it deserved: a turning point in modern art.

Even then, on its first journey home to France in 1953, 37 years after its debut there, *Les Femmes d'Alger* received little attention. The painting was not recognised for the genius it was until late in its life.

# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Production Notes (Set Two)

#### 4. *Les Femmes d'Alger* continued.../2

The child has generally been assumed to be of mixed race, at least half African. Recently, however, experts have thrown doubt on the extent of its ethnicity. It is now maybe thought to be more a European child whose father had a dalliance with Africa sometime during its gestation. Nonetheless, the child absorbed traces of its surroundings: the faces of the women on the left were derived from Iberian stone heads that Picasso had seen in the Louvre; those on the right do display the shocking vitality of African masks.

The grandfather of the piece might be said to be Cézanne. His *Grandes Baigneuses*, painted over a decade earlier, had impressed Picasso and was echoed in the *Demoiselles*. But the grandchild was almost of a different species, so startlingly rapid was the evolution. Where *Les Grandes Baigneuses* found a new way to portray the human form realistically, this new creature asserted an end to the 2,000-year tradition of Western Art's portrayal of that form. It was a frightening new savage, its face distorted, its voice an incomprehensible scream.

It might be fair to speak of Picasso's lover, Fernande, as the work's mother. Her relationship with Picasso was breaking up at the time of the painting's creation, and the outflowing of anger and distress, together with Picasso's legendary fear and hatred of women, have been noted by almost all critics. It is a child of its time, of the new century, of revolutions to come, but also a child of the confused and frightened sexuality of its father; its face a clear sign of his feelings.

It was a birth that signalled the end of an era, as well as the beginning. Fauvism was dead after a short life of only three years; Cubism was to come. As well as being a child of its time, *Les Femmes d'Alger* was a creature of pure potential, a tabula rasa on which the new century could create itself. Picasso famously commented on his Gertrude Stein portrait of this period, "In time, she will come to look like this." In time, our perception of the world would become shaped to the forms of *Les Femmes d'Alger*.

Throughout its strange life, *Les Femmes d'Alger* has found it difficult to find an identity. By the time its genius was recognised, its creator's star was in the descendant. Despite its importance, it possesses a shocking beauty, a deformed, bastard child of two eras. Within two years of its birth, the golden child – Cubism – arrived to steal the world's attention. Its fate was to be a prophet of a new artistic world to come. As the centrepiece of its present home, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, it is a freak-show as much as a destination of pilgrimages.

The artistic world of the 20th Century was altered irretrievably by *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Artists as varied as Bacon, Hockney, Moore and Hirst have expressed their debt to it. But individual tributes are unnecessary; all artists today are, in their way, children of the Avignon prostitutes.

# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Episode Synopses (Set Two)

#### 5. Arrangement in Grey and Black No 1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother

Producer:

Today, James McNeill Whistler's painting is celebrated as an artistic masterpiece and is one of the best-known and best-loved American paintings. It has a rich history and after-life.

It is one of the most satirised as well as loved American paintings, with Whistler's mother appearing with bottles of whisky, cards, naked men...

Ironically, it has, over time, become a powerful icon of Motherhood.

It was provocative, in 1871, for Whistler to call a portrait of his mother *An Arrangement in Grey and Black*. To reduce one's mother to an 'arrangement', however devotedly the arrangement was painted, implied an aversion to the banalities about motherhood that filled the Victorian air. It contradicted what Americans today call 'family values', which Whistler viewed as mere cultural baggage. It proposed that the aesthetic life of shapes mattered at least as much as social piety.

Whistler's portrait of his mother was an artistic and professional landmark in his career. In 1871, its innovative composition ended a period of artistic crisis. His abhorrence of narrative, his refusal to moralise through art, his preference for the exquisitely designed moment over the slice of life: these were new, and they epitomised the ideal of Art for Art's Sake.

Whistler believed that a painting should exist for its own sake, not to convey literary or moral ideas. "Art should be independent of all claptrap – should stand alone, and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism, and the like. All these have no kind of concern with it, and that is why I insist on calling my works 'arrangements' and 'harmonies!'"

Whistler's preference to describe his paintings as an arrangement of pure forms made him a precursor of abstract art. He was strongly influenced by Japanese art, which made no distinction between fine and decorative art. He drew inspiration from Japanese ink paintings with their simple lines and blocks of colour. He used a subtle palette of greys and blacks in reverent imitation of the technique.

However, the structure of the painting is perhaps strangely contradictory, almost absurd in its emphasis on formal composition, yet at the same time evoking in his mother's weathered, bony profile the harsh moral character of Puritan America.

Black, the muted colour of mourning and piety, is appropriated as an 'art colour'. His mother's pear-shaped black silhouette in an all-covering dress and the white lace bonnet on her tightly bound hair bring a severe and again contradictory portrayal of morality under the aesthetic banner. She is luxuriously juxtaposed with the room's subtle greys, blues and yellows to create a defiant symphony of colours, as declared in the painting's title.

# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Episode Synopses (Set Two)

#### 5. Arrangement in Grey and Black No 1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother continued.../2

Ultimately the portrait is a work of aestheticism. Whistler takes the essential elements of his mothers' image and makes her part of the decorative ensemble. The ebony-framed picture that hangs above her invites us to see her too as a framed work of art, posed carefully by her son, with her black feet on that foot rest, as if she too were a museum exhibit – Mother, American, 19th Century.

Yet Whistler's work served as a link between Impressionism and the Aesthetic movement, two movements ordinarily considered distinct. In his tireless efforts to avoid being typecast, Whistler dissociated himself not only from Realism, but also from both of these movements, yet he synthesised all three.

Whistler's Aestheticism was diametrically opposed to the newly developing Impressionist technique just then becoming known to critics. The Impressionist wave made Whistler's work appear retrograde in comparison.

When the painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1871, it barely escaped rejection and was the last painting he exhibited there. *The Times* wrote: "An artist who could deal with large masses so grandly might have shown a little less severity." Whistler went on to suggest jokingly, "the addition of a glass of sherry and the Bible would satisfy the public's desire for trivial detail."

Whistler refused to sell the portrait for 20 years. In November 1891, the portrait was bought by the Louvre in Paris, largely thanks to Whistler's French friends, Duret, Mallarmé and Roger Marx. It now hangs in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Over the past three years, Georgia Toutziari, a PhD student, has meticulously transcribed, edited and annotated Anna Whistler's correspondence. The 270 surviving letters document Anna's life as young woman, mother, wife and widow living in the United States, in Russia (where her husband was railroad engineer on the St Petersburg to Moscow railway) and in London, where she organised her painter son's bohemian household.

In 1859, Anna Whistler moved to London and became her sons' housekeeper, agent and personal assistant. She was acquainted with his social circle and commented that: "The artistic circle in which he is only too popular, is visionary and unreal tho' so fascinating!"

"It was a mother's unceasing prayer that her son should succeed in his artistic quest... I never depress Jamie by complaints, so I stood bravely, two to three days whenever he was in the mood for studying me. His pictures are studies and I so interested stood as a statue."

In fact, she was a substitute for a young model that was unable to attend her sitting. "To me it is interesting as a portrait of my mother; but can or ought the public to care about the identity of the portrait?" said Whistler.

# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Episode Synopses (Set Two)

#### 5. Arrangement in Grey and Black No 1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother continued.../3

The public, however, cared very deeply about the identity of his subject. When, in 1934, the painting went on tour in the USA, millions queued to view it.

Before it was issued, there were separate suggestions for stamps to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of American artist James McNeill Whistler and to honour mothers on Mothers Day. The two ideas got combined into one. Roosevelt sketched out the design for his postmaster general, James Farley, and the stamp was issued on May 2, 1934. Mothers Day that year was May 13.

The Post Office Department made a big deal of this stamp. When the first sheets were printed on the flat plate press, Postmaster General Farley and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt attended a publicity event at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Newspaper and newsreel photographers were invited to see the stamps being printed, and the event was broadcast by radio.

"I am sure this Mother's stamp will be one of the most popular issues we have had for a long time," Mrs. Roosevelt said.

But the painting was not fully reproduced on the stamp. Designer Victor McCloskey cropped the image and added a pot of carnations in the lower lefthand corner. The white carnation, it was explained, was a symbol of Mothers Day, having been chosen as such by Miss Anna Jarvis when she invented the holiday in 1908.

Albert H Bar, Jr, director of the Museum of Modern Art, wrote to Farley, stating that, were Whistler alive, "he would be enraged by the adulteration."

Whistler had a shrewd understanding of the market for reproductive prints. Early reproductions included the first cartoon, published in *Fun* in May 1872, and a wood engraving in the *Illustrated London News* (June 8 1872). When the painting was shown in the Paris Salon of 1883, caricatures immediately appeared in such popular periodicals as *L'Univers Illustré* and *La Caricature*.

*Whistler's Mother* was now working her way into thousands of homes, both in Europe and in America. References to the picture were abundant in American culture of the 1930s: Cole Porters' lyrics in the 1934 song *You're the Top* include the lines: "You're an O'Neill drama, you're Whistler's mama, you're Camembert."

By the World War II, *Whistler's Mother* was a household phrase, and with familiarity came a less reverent form of appropriation. The *Douglas A-26* bomber was nicknamed *Whistler's Mother* when it was introduced in July 1942, presumably because of the whistling sound made by the bombs it released.

# The Private Life of a Masterpiece

## Series Three

### Episode Synopses (Set Two)

#### 5. Arrangement in Grey and Black No 1: Portrait of the Artist's Mother continued.../4

The *Whistler's Mother-in-law* was a popular dance hit of the war years, recorded by Woody Herman. From this point on, cultural references to Whistler's most famous painting are increasingly light-hearted and wide-ranging. Once established as an object of fun, it became fair game for every cartoonist, animator, advertising executive and greeting card designer. The floodgates had been opened.

One of the most famous lampoons of this sort was by Ward Kimball, one of the original animators at Walt Disney Studios. In a small 1964 book entitled *Art Afterpieces*, *Whistler's Mother* sits demurely watching television, still a relatively recent addition to many households.

Decades later, a 1982 *Newsweek* cover shows Mrs Whistler, again seated demurely, but this time in front of a computer and accompanied by the words: "Home is where the computer is."

If it is tempting to speculate about what Mrs Whistler might be seeing, the invitation to guess what she might be thinking has proved irresistible. The early reading of the sitter's character as typically Protestant and puritanical has paved the way for recent lampoons in which her prudishness is only skin deep. "Come on, sonny boy, this picture would be a lot more interesting if I posed in the nude!" she quips in a postcard of the 1980s, while a recent internet image, entitled *Whistler's Overbearing Mother: Derangement in Grey and Black*, shows a grim Mrs Whistler holding a whip.

Such eminent personalities as Donald Duck, Bullwinkle the Moose, Wile E Coyote, the Animaniacs, the Muppets and Barbie have struck the upright pose made famous by Mrs Whistler. Although these are characters created for children, the superimposition of *Whistler's Mother* is clearly meant to appeal to adults, providing the kind of inside joke that children's programming employs to keep parents watching.

In watching *Bean*, the 1997 comedy film starring Rowan Atkinson, in which the Mr Bean character escorts Whistler's Mother to California, only to destroy it when he sneezes, one could see and feel the audience cringe as the original face of Mrs Whistler was wiped away.