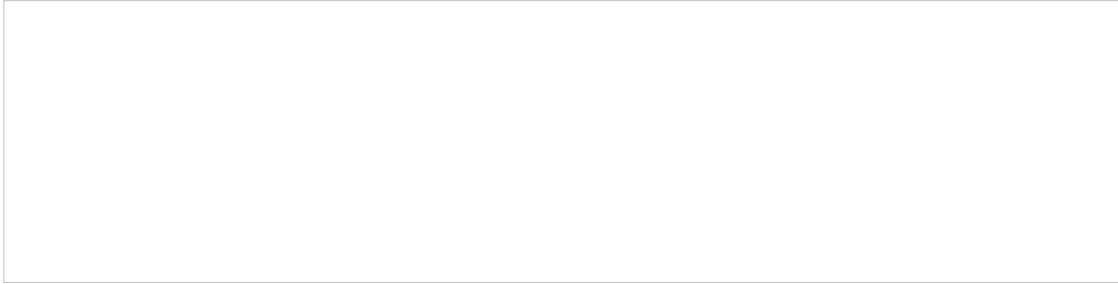


# PUBLIC TALK: What Is a (Contemporary) Masterpiece?

28 October 2025

As part of our **partnership with Beaux-Arts Magazine**, we'll be hosting a monthly series of cultural talks from June to December 2025, exploring major topics in art history.

Each session will feature a guest expert alongside a member of the SNA, offering diverse perspectives and highlighting the richness of the professions and artworks we represent.



After reviewing what the notion of “masterpiece” encompasses in the history of Western art, we will examine how this concept has evolved since the early 20th century, marked by the emergence of unprecedented artistic forms.

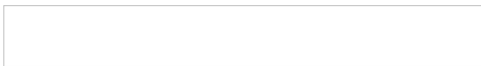
From the Ready-Made to installation art, from conceptual art to performance, what are today's contemporary masterpieces, and how can we recognize them? Are masterpieces eternal?

Duration: 1 hour with a Q&A session

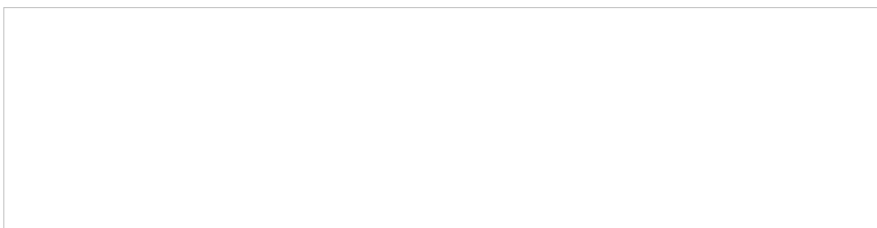
Language: French

Where & When: Online on Zoom, December 11 at 6:30 p.m.

© Sotheby's – detail of: Banksy, Girl With Balloon, 2006

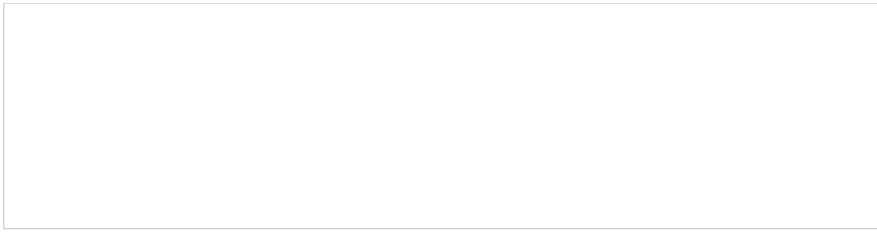


## Past Talks:



During this lecture, we will analyze two iconic masterpieces of French photography: La Gare Saint-Lazare by Henri Cartier-Bresson and Le Baiser de l'Hôtel de Ville by Robert Doisneau.

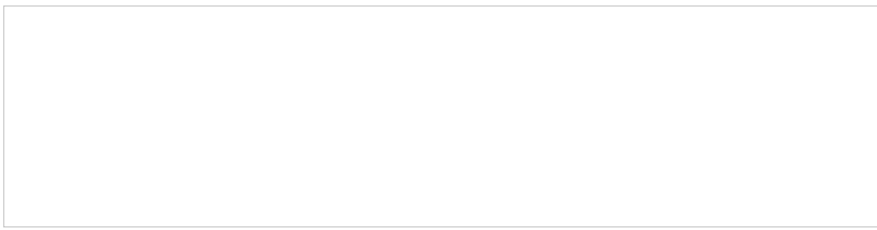
These two photographs illustrate the distinct approaches of these two great photographers—friends in life, yet almost opposite in their artistic visions: Cartier-Bresson's concept of the decisive moment, capturing the grace of a fleeting instant within an urban setting, versus Doisneau's so-called humanist photography, characterized by the poetic and tender staging of love in the heart of Paris—a symbol of an idealized era.



Through its role in the early 20th-century artistic avant-garde, the African mask was long seen by Western audiences as a gateway to understanding African cultures.

Yet the mask's status and function across the continent's many cultures reveal just how deep the cultural misunderstanding runs. From Dogon mourning masks to Fang reliquary guardians, Kwele ekuk masks, and helmet masks, it is the remarkable diversity of indigenous traditions that truly stands out to outside observers.

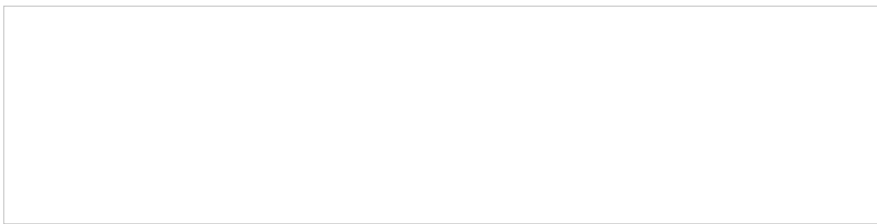
This talk will begin by exploring the different types and roles of masks, before delving into the idea of primitivism, and finally turning to contemporary creations — both by African artists and by members of the African diaspora.



The major collections of Egyptian antiquities held in Turin, London, Paris, and Berlin were born in the 19th century out of the passion of amateur collectors such as Drovetti, Salt, and Champollion. Their discoveries, rivalries, and acquisitions laid the foundations for Europe's great Egyptology museums.

Beyond these major institutions, this movement also extended to smaller cities — as seen in Roanne, with Joseph Déchelette.

Blending fascination, science, and diplomacy, this talk explores the lesser-known story of these early pioneers and questions the legacy they left in today's museums.



Colorful, refined, and sometimes bold, Japanese woodblock prints have captivated generations of art lovers — both in Japan and the West.

This talk offers an immersive journey into the world of Ukiyo-e, or “pictures of the floating world,” a genre that flourished during Japan's Edo period (1603–1868).

We'll explore the main themes of these prints: kabuki theater scenes, elegant courtesans, poetic landscapes, legendary tales, and everyday urban life. Mass-produced through the technique of woodblock printing, these images reflect the tastes of a refined and curious urban society.

Masterpieces by artists like Hokusai, Hiroshige, Utamaro, and Sharaku reveal the delicate balance between strict visual codes and bold graphic innovation. The talk will also highlight the major influence of Japanese prints on Western artists at the turn of the 20th century — from Monet to Van Gogh — in what became known as Japonisme.

Blending aesthetics, storytelling, and modernity, this lecture showcases the enduring richness of an art form that continues to inspire artists, historians, and collectors around the world!