



The Unknown Masterpiece: (Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu)

Honoré de Balzac

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"Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu" (English "The Unknown Masterpiece") is a short story by Honoré de Balzac. It was first published in the newspaper L'Artiste with the title "Maître Frenhofer" (English: "Master Frenhofer") in August 1831. It appeared again later in the same year under the title "Catherine Lescault, conte fantastique." It was published in Balzac's *Études philosophiques* in 1837 and was integrated into the *La Comédie humaine* in 1846. At the most fundamental level, "Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu" is a reflection on art.

The story concerns young Nicolas Poussin, an artist as yet unknown to the world, who visits the painter Porbus in his workshop. He is accompanied by the old master Frenhofer who comments expertly on the large tableau that Porbus has just finished. The painting is of Mary of Egypt, and while Frenhofer sings her praises, he hints that the work seems unfinished. With some slight touches of the paintbrush, Frenhofer transforms Porbus' painting such that Mary the Egyptian appears to come alive before their very eyes. Although Frenhofer has mastered his technique, he admits that he has been unable to find a suitable model for his own masterpiece, *La Belle noiseuse*, on which he has been working for ten years. This future masterpiece, that no one has yet seen, is to be the portrait of Catherine Lescault. Poussin offers his own lover, Gilette, as a potential model.

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