



The value of the

UNKNOWN

Online exhibition

"I maintain that the true worth of a collection cannot—and should not—be measured solely in terms of its monetary value."

— J. Paul Getty

Behind the Unknown

The history of objects and the names attached to them can make certain items more appealing for the art market and collectors. As a consequence, not knowing the creator of an object puts its authenticity into question. Authenticity is essential to determining an economic value in the artistic world, but is it possible to put a price on a story, on a technique or on a milestone of historical relevance?

The exhibition features a concise selection of objects available in the Getty's Open Content Program: each one of them made by unknown makers. The information displayed was written and curated by Junyi Chen, Maria Navarro, Katie Starr, and Yiyi Yang, MA student from the University of Leeds.

Scroll down to have access to the online exhibition. Further information on the items displayed is available by clicking each title.



Interior of Saint Peter's Basilica

Maker: Unknown

Culture: Italian

Date: 17th Century



Portrait Head of Augustus

Maker: Unknow

Culture: Roman

Date: 25 - 1 B.C

No name, no value?

Either due to a lack of evidence or an intended statement, a vast quantity of artists remain unidentified. This situation, as a contrast to works that are greatly known—and eagerly visited—for their creators' name, raise questions on the different perspectives to approach art.

Some art pieces provide relevant historic background about their respective times, such as political and power structure affairs or they may act as a record of architectural and religious heritage. However, if having a clear provenance were the only prevailing criterion to make decisions on what should be seen and valued, then what would happen to anonymous collections?



Statue of Hercules

Maker: Unknow

Culture: Roman

Date: A.D. 100 - 200



The Death of Samson

Maker: Unknow

Culture: Italian

Date: Around 1650

Unknown storytellers

From paintings of ancient gods to sculptures of heroes, it is possible to recognise characters and stories despite their unidentified provenance. Our cultural heritage tells a story about many nations, throughout centuries, keeping alive experiences from past generations. It is a never-ending odyssey written by one single author: humankind.

Even when these oral and written traditions may lack an origin, they have embodied beliefs, ways of thinking, and statements of what we conceive as meaningful and valuable. The value of the unknown is in that story: our creations are evidence of our existence. With or without provenance, they all belong to that great narrative, which gives us value as human beings.



Lidded Vase

Maker: Unknow

Culture: Chinese

Date: 1644 - 1661



The Archangel Michael Vanquishing the Devil

Maker: Unknow

Culture: Possibly Southern Netherlandish

Date: About 1530

Unclear future

Art history is a reflection of diverse trends and styles, as well as techniques that may represent a specific culture or community. The methods contained in pieces that are no longer reproduced have become a microcosm of human development.

The significant legacy of artistic techniques goes beyond any name and, similarly, the related emotional value is immeasurable from a monetary point of view. Even so, how society constructs value around objects and life has never been static, thus it is and will remain as an uncertain factor. But who is in charge of making such crucial decision in the end?

Acknowledgement

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This website is managed by 2021 MA programme students from the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies—University of Leeds.

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