Balzac's long short story is dated February 1832 and was first published in an eponymous compilation in Paris in 1845. It is set in the seventeenth century and its principal characters are the senior painter Porbus, the young Nicholas Poussin and a legendary master called Frenhofer. In the first of our three excerpts Frenhofer is made the mouthpiece for a critique of simple equations of realism with lifeliness; in the second he sketches the conditions for an ideal form of pictorial mimesis; in the third the 'unknown masterpiece' is finally disclosed, in terms suggestive of the conflict between an extreme realist assiduousness and an extreme modernist aestheticism, and prophetic as to the outcome. The narrative concludes with Frenhofer discovered dead amidst the destruction of his life's work. The story provided a compelling point of literary reference for accounts of the modern painter's psychology, and exercised a powerful hold over the imaginations of various artists. Notable among these was Cézanne, who at times represented his own endeavour in terms that Balzac's story had helped to furnish, and who adopted Frenhofer's 'there are no lines in nature' as his own personal dictum. Our text is taken from the English Caxton Edition, London: Caxton Press, 1899, pp. 12–15, 21–3 and 40–4.

'The mission of art is not to copy nature, but to give expression to it! You are not a base copyist, but a poet!' cried the old man, earnestly, interrupting Porbus with an imperious gesture. 'Otherwise, a sculptor would end all his labours in merely moulding women. But try to mould your mistress's hand and place it before you; you will find a horrible dead thing without any resemblance, and you will be compelled to have recourse to the chisel of the man who, without copying it for you exactly, will instil movement and life into it. We have to grasp the spirit, the soul, the features, of things and beings. Effects! effects! why, they are the accidents of life, and not life itself. A hand - as I have taken that example - a hand is not simply a part of the body, it expresses and continues a thought which we must grasp and render. Neither the poet nor the painter nor the sculptor should separate cause and effect, which are inextricably bound up in each other! There is the real struggle! Many painters triumph instinctively, knowing nothing of this canon of art. You draw a woman, but you do not see her! Not thus do we succeed in forcing nature to yield up her secrets. Your hand reproduces, unconsciously on your part, the model you have copied in your master's studio. You do not go down far enough into the intimate knowledge of form, you do not pursue it with sufficient love and perseverance in its windings and its lights. Beauty is a stern, uncompromising thing, which does not allow itself to be attained in that way; you must bide its time, keep watch upon it, press it close, and hold it fast to force it to surrender. Form is a Proteus much more difficult to seize, and much more prolific in changes of aspect than the fabled Proteus; only after a long contest can one force it to show itself in its real shape. You are content with the first view that it presents to you, or with the second or the third, at all events: but that is not the way that victorious fighters act! The unvanquished painters never allow themselves to be deceived by all these will-o'-the-wisps, they persevere until nature is driven to show itself to them all naked and in its true guise. Such was the course pursued by Raphael,' said the old man, removing his black velvet cap to express the
‘Nothing.’

The two painters left the old man to his raving, and looked about to see whether the light, falling too full upon the canvas that he pointed out to them, did not neutralize all its fine effects. They examined the painting from the right side and the left and in front, stooping and standing erect in turn.

‘Yes, oh! yes, that is a canvas,’ said Frenhofer, misunderstanding the object of that careful scrutiny. ‘See, there are the frame and the easel, and here are my paints, my brushes.’

And he seized a brush which he handed them with an artless gesture.

‘The old lansquenet is making sport of us,’ said Poussin, returning to his position in front of the alleged picture. ‘I can see nothing there but colours piled upon one another in confusion, and held in restraint by a multitude of curious lines which form a wall of painting.’

‘We are mistaken,’ said Porbus, ‘look!’

On drawing nearer, they spied in one corner of the canvas the end of a bare foot standing forth from that chaos of colours, of tones, of uncertain shades, that sort of shapeless mist; but a lovely foot, a living foot! They stood fairly petrified with admiration before that fragment, which had escaped that most incredible, gradual, progressive destruction. That foot appeared there as the trunk of a Parian marble Venus would appear among the ruins of a burned city.

‘There is a woman underneath!’ cried Porbus, calling Poussin’s attention to the layers of paints which the old painter had laid on, one after another, believing that he was perfecting his picture.

The two artists turned instinctively toward Frenhofer, beginning to understand, but only vaguely as yet, the trance in which he lived.

‘He speaks in perfect good faith,’ said Porbus.

‘Yes, my friend,’ interposed the old man, rousing himself, ‘one must have faith, faith in art, and live a long, long while with his work, to produce such a creation. Some of those shadows have cost me many hours of toil. See on that cheek, just below the eye, there is a slight penumbra which, if you observe it in nature, will seem to you almost impossible to reproduce. Well, do you fancy that that effect did not cost me incredible labour? And so, dear Porbus, scrutinize my work with care, and you will understand better what I said to you about the manner of treating the model and the contours. Look at the light on the bosom, and see how I have succeeded, by a succession of heavy strokes and relief-work, in catching the genuine light and combining it with the gleaming whiteness of the light tints; and how, by the contrary process, by smoothing down the lumps and roughness of the paint, I have been able, by dint of touching caressingly the contour of my figure, swimming in the half-light, to take away every suggestion of drawing and of artificial methods, and to give to it the aspect, the very roundness of nature. Go nearer and you will see that work better. At a distance, it is invisible. Look! at that point, it is very remarkable, in my opinion.’

With the end of his brush he pointed out to the two painters a thick layer of light paint.

Porbus put his hand on the old man’s shoulder and turned toward Poussin.

‘Do you know that in this man we have a very great artist?’ he said.

‘He is even more poet than artist,’ said Poussin, with perfect gravity.

‘That,’ added Porbus, pointing to the canvas, ‘marks the end of our art on earth.’

‘And, from that, it will pass out of sight in the skies,’ said Poussin.

‘How much enjoyment over that piece of canvas!’ exclaimed Porbus.

The old man, absorbed in reverie, did not listen to them; he was smiling at that imaginary woman.

‘But sooner or later he will discover that there is nothing on his canvas!’ cried Poussin. [ . . . ]

17 Washington Allston (1779–1843) from ‘Art’

Allston was the pioneer of a painting of Romantic mood in America. He left Washington in 1801 to study at the Royal Academy in England, and subsequently spent four years in Italy, where he began a lifelong friendship with the Romantic poet Coleridge. He was also acquainted with Wordsworth and Southey, with Reynolds and Fuseli, and with Constable’s friend Sir George Beaumont. He was in Boston between 1808 and 1811 and returned there for good in 1818, embarking on an ambitious work, Belshazzar’s Feast, which he was never to finish. In 1830 he moved to Cambridge, Mass., and began work on a course of lectures on art, with the aim of delivering them to a select audience in Boston. Four were completed, one of them under the simple title ‘Art’. Allston distinguishes between natural creation and artistic creation, arguing for the equation of individuality and originality with a form of ‘human’ or ‘poetic’ truth. This truth is a form of unarguable truth to nature, which is recognized in the unity of the artist’s production. A collection of Allston’s Lectures on Art and Poems was edited after his death by Richard Henry Dana, Jr, and was published in New York by Baker and Scribner in 1850. The following excerpts are taken from the facsimile reprint of that edition, Gainesville, Florida: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1967, pp. 76–9, 80–1, 83 and 85–7.

[ . . . ] If it be true . . . that no two minds were ever found to be identical, there must then in every individual mind be something which is not in any other. And, if this unknown something is also found to give its peculiar hue, so to speak, to every impression from outward objects, it seems but a natural inference, that whatever it be, it must possess a pervading force over the entire mind, – at least, in relation to what is external. But, though this may truly be affirmed of man generally, from its evidence in any one person, we shall be far from the fact, should we therefore affirm, that, otherwise than potently, the power of outwardly manifesting it is also universal. We know that it is not, – and our daily experience proves that the power of reproducing or giving out the individualized impressions is widely different in different men. With some it is so feeble as apparently never to act; and, so far as our subject is concerned, it may practically be said not to exist; of which we have abundant examples in other mental phenomena, where an imperfect activity often renders the existence of some essential faculty a virtual nullity. When it acts in the higher degrees, so as to make another see or feel as the Individual saw or felt, – this, in relation to Art, is what we mean, in its strictest sense, by Originality. He, therefore, who possesses the power of presenting to another the precise images or emotions as they existed in himself, presents that which can be found nowhere else, and was first found by and within
'The line is the method by which man expresses the effect of light upon objects; but there are no lines in nature, where everything is rounded; it is in modelling that one draws, that is to say, one takes things away from their surroundings; the distribution of light alone gives a lifelike appearance to the body! Wherefore, I have not sharply defined the features, I have enveloped the outlines in a cloud of warm, half-light tones which make it impossible to place your finger on the precise spot where the outline ends and the background begins. Near at hand, the work looks downy and seems to lack precision; but at a distance of two yards it all becomes distinct and stands boldly forth; the body turns, the shape becomes prominent, you can feel the air circulating all about. But I am not content as yet, I have my doubts. It may be that we ought not to draw a single line, perhaps it would be better to attack a figure in the middle, giving one’s attention first to the parts that stand out most prominently in the light, and to pass thence to the darker portions. Is not such the method of the sun, the divine painter of the universe? O Nature, Nature! who has ever followed thee in thy flight? Observe that too much knowledge, like ignorance, leads to a negation. I doubt my own work!'

'Show my work!' exclaimed the old man, excitedly. 'No, no! I have still to put some finishing touches to it. Yesterday, toward evening, I thought that it was done. The eyes seemed moist to me, the flesh rose and fell. The locks of hair moved. It breathed! Although I have found a way to represent upon a flat canvas the relief and rounded forms of nature, this morning, by daylight, I realized my error. Ah! to attain that glorious result, I studied with the utmost care the great masters of colouring, I analysed and dissected, layer by layer, the pictures of Titian, that king of light; like that monarch of painters, I sketched my figure in a light tone with soft, thick colour, — for shadow is only an incident, remember that, my boy! — Then I returned to my work, and, by means of half-tones and varnish, making the latter less and less transparent, I made the shadow more and more pronounced, even to the deepest black; for the shadows of ordinary painters are of a different nature from their light tones; they are wood, brass, whatever you choose, except flesh in shadow. You feel that, if their figures should change their positions, the shaded places would not brighten and become light. I have avoided that fault, into which many of the most illustrious painters have fallen, and in my work the light can be felt under the opacity of the deepest shade! I have not, like a multitude of ignorant fools who imagine that they draw correctly because they make a sharp, smooth stroke, marked the outlines of my figure with absolute exactness, and brought out in relief every trifling anatomical detail, for the human body is not bounded by lines. In that respect, sculptors can approach reality more nearly than we painters. Nature provides a succession of rounded outlines which run into one another. Strictly speaking, drawing does not exist [...]

'Come in, come in,' said the old man, beaming with happiness. 'My work is perfect, and now I can exhibit it with pride. Never will painter, brushes, colours, canvas, and light produce a rival to Catherine Lecault, the beautiful courtier!' Impelled by intense curiosity, Porbus and Poussin ran into the centre of a vast studio covered with dust, where everything was in confusion, with pictures hanging on the walls here and there. They paused at first before a life-size picture of a woman, half-nude, at which they gazed in admiration. 'Oh! do not waste time over that,' said Frenhofer; 'that is a canvas that I daubed to study a pose; that picture is worth nothing at all. Those are my mistakes,' he continued, pointing to a number of fascinating compositions on the walls about them. Thereupon, Porbus and Poussin, dumbfounded by that contemptuous reference to such works, looked about for the portrait he had described to them, but could not succeed in finding it. 'Well, there it is!' said the old man, whose hair was in disorder, whose face was inflamed by supernatural excitement, whose eyes snapped, and whose breath came in gasps, like that of a young man drunk with love. — 'Ah!' he cried, 'you did not anticipate such perfection! You are in presence of a woman and you are looking for a picture. There is such depth of colour upon that canvas, the air is so true, that you cannot distinguish it from the air about us. Where is art? lost, vanished! Those are the outlines of a real young woman. Have I not grasped the colouring, caught the living turn of the line that seems to mark the limits of the body? Is it not the self-same phenomenon presented by objects that swim in the atmosphere like fish in the water? Mark how the outlines stand out from the background! Does it not seem to you as if you could pass your hand over that back? For seven years I have studied the effects of the joining of light and figures. See that hair, does not the light fall in a flood upon it? Why, she breathed, I verily believe! — Look at that bosom! Ah! who would not kneel and adore it? The flesh quivers. Wait, she is about to rise!' 'Can you see anything?' Poussin asked Porbus. 'No. — And you?'