PARIS, FRANCE

Musée d’Orsay: Masterpieces

Twenty paintings from the Musée d'Orsay, from Courbet's village funeral and Manet's Olympia to Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin.



The Musée d'Orsay is housed in a former railway station on the Seine, and its collection concentrates on the period from the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. French painters of those decades disagreed fiercely about what a picture should look like, and some works in this selection were first received as provocations: Manet's Olympia caused a scandal at the Salon, and the Salon jury would not have his Luncheon on the Grass at all.

The twenty paintings here follow those disagreements through particular subjects rather than through a sequence of movements. One strand runs through a village funeral, women gleaning, two field workers stopped for prayer, men on their knees scraping a floor, a crowded dance and a dance lesson. Portraits make up another: by Manet, Morisot and Whistler, by Renoir of a fellow painter at work, and by Regnault of a rider on a restless horse. Then come Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin, in whose pictures a tabletop, a church or a Tahitian scene can no longer be taken on trust. Manet, Millet, Renoir, Van Gogh, Cézanne and Gauguin each appear more than once, so pictures by the same hand can be set beside one another as well as against the rest.

This selection was made independently of the museum. Inclusion here does not mean that a painting is on display, since works may be on loan or off view. Dates and attributions keep the qualifications given in the collection records.

Explore this selection in Artline

See the selected works alongside books and events from their period, or compare when the artists lived. The books and events provide context, not evidence of direct influence. Works without confirmed dates remain in this guide.

Artworks in context Who lived when?

artlines.org/guides/musee-orsay

The selection · 20

1. Olympia
   Édouard Manet · 1863
2. Luncheon on the Grass
   Édouard Manet · 1863
3. A Burial at Ornans
   Gustave Courbet · 1849–1850
4. The Gleaners
   Jean-François Millet · 1857
5. The Angelus
   Jean-François Millet · 1857–1859
6. Dance at the Moulin de la Galette
   Pierre-Auguste Renoir · 1876
7. The Floor Scrapers
   Gustave Caillebotte · 1875
8. Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1: The Artist's Mother
   James Abbott McNeill Whistler · 1871
9. The Dance Class
   Edgar Degas · 1873–1876
10. Starry Night over the Rhône
    Vincent van Gogh · 1888
11. The Church at Auvers
    Vincent van Gogh · 1890 (painted 4–8 June 1890)
12. Dr Paul Gachet
    Vincent van Gogh · 1890
13. The Card Players
    Paul Cézanne · 1893-1896
14. Apples and Oranges
    Paul Cézanne · c. 1899
15. Arearea
    Paul Gauguin · 1892
16. Tahitian Women
    Paul Gauguin · 1891 (November–December)
17. Portrait of Edma Pontillon
    Berthe Morisot · 1871
18. Portrait of Émile Zola
    Édouard Manet · 1868
19. Frédéric Bazille Painting the Heron
    Pierre-Auguste Renoir · 1867
20. Juan Prim, 8 October 1868
    Henri Regnault · 1868

01 / 20

Olympia

Édouard Manet

1863 · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Édouard Manet. Olympia. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

Olympia is dated 1863, but the scandal came when it was shown at the Salon of 1865. Official painting had accepted the nude as long as mythology kept her at a safe distance. Manet does without that distance. The reclining woman looks straight at the viewer, and nothing in the picture explains her away: a servant brings flowers and a black cat stands near the foot of the bed, details that place the scene in contemporary Paris rather than in some mythological elsewhere. Nor was it only the subject that gave offence. The way Manet painted it was taken as a provocation too.

Object source · Open artwork

02 / 20

Luncheon on the Grass

Édouard Manet

1863 · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Édouard Manet. Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe. Image credit: Édouard Manet; Self-photographed. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le_D%C3%A9jeuner_sur_l%27herbe_-_%C3%89douard_Manet.jpg. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression; applicable ShareAlike terms retained. · Public domain

A nude woman and two clothed men share the picture, but they do not seem to belong to the same occasion, and, as in Olympia, Manet offers no mythology to account for her. The composition is more traditional than the subject: one group of figures derives, by way of an engraving, from Raphael. That pedigree did not save it. The Salon jury rejected the painting, and in 1863 it was shown instead at the Salon des Refusés, an exhibition of rejected works.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: RF 1668

03 / 20

A Burial at Ornans

Gustave Courbet

1849–1850 · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Gustave Courbet. A Burial at Ornans. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

At 6.68 metres wide, the canvas gives a village funeral the kind of space usually reserved for elevated historical or religious subjects. Courbet does not spend that space on a hero. He shares it among the mourners and paints them life-size without idealising any of them, so the dignity of the format goes to people who have not been improved to earn it. The open grave lies in the foreground, at the edge nearest the viewer.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: RF 325

04 / 20

The Gleaners

Jean-François Millet

1857 · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Jean-François Millet. Des glaneuses ou Les glaneuses. Image credit: Jean-François Millet; Source credit: Google Arts & Culture — GgHsT2RumWxbtw. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Proportional resize and JPEG compression; full source frame retained. · Public domain

Gleaning meant gathering what was left in the fields after the harvest, and Millet builds the picture on that division. The harvest itself, the abundance, is pushed into the distance. The foreground belongs to the women and their handfuls, to work that is exhausting and small in scale, so those left with only the remains get the most room. They bend in similar ways, which links them, though Millet does not make them interchangeable.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: RF 592

05 / 20

The Angelus

Jean-François Millet

1857–1859 · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Jean-Francois Millet. L'Angélus. WikiArt: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt per-object label)

A man and a woman have stopped work to pray. Their tools and basket are still beside them, so the prayer reads as a pause in the day's labour rather than a separate ceremony; as in The Gleaners, Millet keeps the work in view. With both heads lowered, neither looks at the other, and the gap between them becomes all the more noticeable. A church in the distance ties this private moment to the wider landscape.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: RF 1877

06 / 20

Dance at the Moulin de la Galette

Pierre-Auguste Renoir

1876 · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Bal du moulin de la Galette. Image credit: Sailko; Own work. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pierre_auguste_renoir,_ballo_del_moulin_del_la_galette,_1876,_01.JPG. CC BY 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression; applicable ShareAlike terms retained. · CC BY 3.0

Courbet's funeral has no hero, and neither does Renoir's dance. But where the mourners at Ornans have gathered for one occasion, this crowd is many small occasions happening at once. Patches of light fall on faces, clothing and the ground, passing from group to group without settling on any main event, and it is the light, more than any action, that binds the separate conversations and dancing couples into one scene. The seated figures in the foreground offer a way in; farther back, nobody dominates.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: RF 2739

07 / 20

The Floor Scrapers

Gustave Caillebotte

1875 · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Gustave Caillebotte. The Parquet Planers (The Floor Scrapers). Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

Here the floor is as much the subject as the men. Millet's gleaners bend over a field; these men kneel indoors on the very surface they are working, and its boards run back into the room in long strips that set the direction of the picture. The men work their way across them, each at a different stage of the same job. Light from the window picks out the scraped wood and their bare backs. Caillebotte gives the labour an orderly, even handsome setting, without disguising the awkward positions it demands.

Object source · Open artwork

08 / 20

Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1: The Artist's Mother

James Abbott McNeill Whistler

1871 · Musée d'Orsay



James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1, Portrait of the Artist's Mother. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

Whistler's title puts the arrangement in grey and black first and the sitter second, and the painting seems to work in the same order. Large areas of the two colours establish the picture; only afterwards do the smaller pale accents of face, cap and hands come forward. A framed picture and a patterned curtain divide the wall, and the artist's mother sits in quiet profile within that firm structure. Is this a portrait, then, or an arrangement that happens to include the painter's mother? The title, at least, is clear about which comes first.

Object source · Open artwork

09 / 20

The Dance Class

Edgar Degas

1873–1876 · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Edgar Degas. The Ballet Class. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

On this evidence, much of a dance lesson is spent not dancing. Only some of Degas's dancers are practising; others wait, rest or adjust their clothes. Where light ties Renoir's crowd together, here the small activities stay separate on the open floor, and only the instructor and the lesson in progress hold the group loosely together.

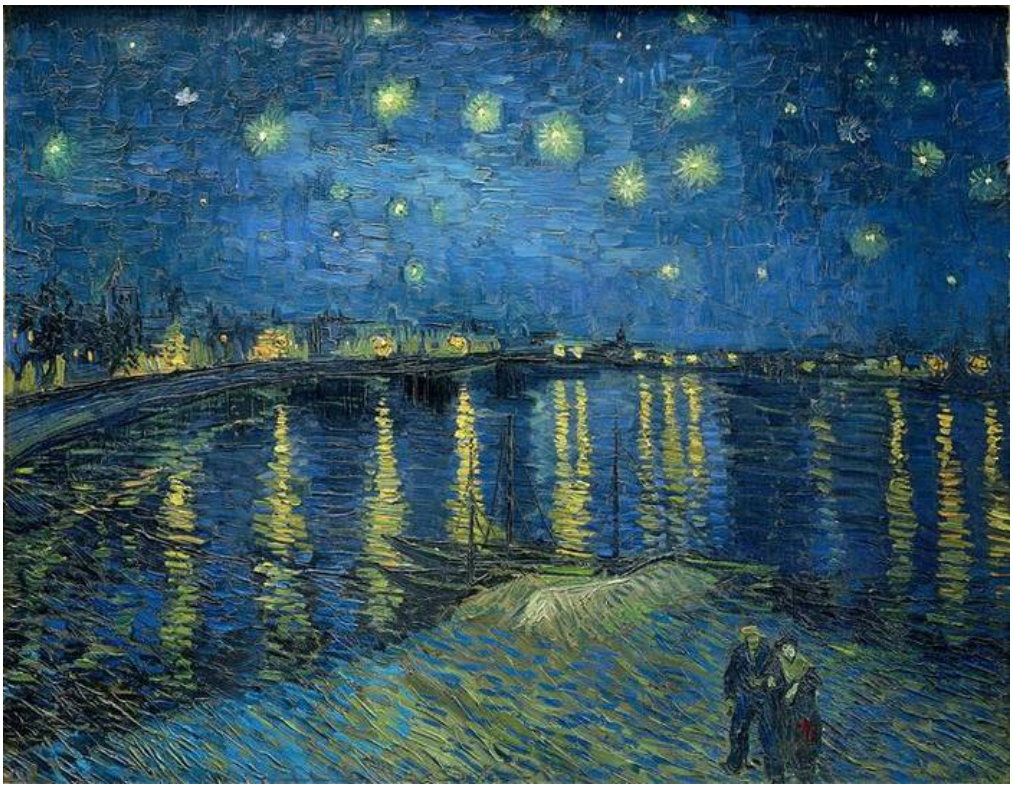
Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: RF 1976

10 / 20

Starry Night over the Rhône

Vincent van Gogh

1888 · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Vincent van Gogh. La Nuit étoilée. WikiArt: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt per-object label)

Two kinds of light share the night: stars scattered overhead and the long reflections of the city stretched across the river. The difference keeps sky and water apart, even where their colours come close. A couple near the bank gives a measure of the river's breadth.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: RF 1975 19

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The Church at Auvers

Vincent van Gogh

1890 (painted 4–8 June 1890) · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Vincent van Gogh. L'église d'Auvers-sur-Oise, vue du chevet. Image credit: Sailko; Own work. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vincent_Van_Gogh,_la_chiesa_di_auvers-sur-oise,_1890,_01.JPG. CC BY 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression; applicable ShareAlike terms retained. · CC BY 3.0

Paths divide to pass around the church, and its walls seem to bend beneath the deep blue sky. The outlines are less stable than masonry has any right to be. In Starry Night over the Rhône Van Gogh kept sky and water distinct; at Auvers even a building's solidity is drawn into the movement of the landscape, though it remains recognisably a church. A small walking figure adds movement on an entirely different scale.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: RF 1951 42

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Dr Paul Gachet

Vincent van Gogh

1890 · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Vincent van Gogh. Le Docteur Paul Gachet. Image credit: GFreihalter; Own work. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paris_7e_Mus%C3%A9e_d%E2%80%99Orsay_Van_Gogh_%C3%A0_Auvers-sur-Oise_981.jpg. CC BY-SA 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression; applicable ShareAlike terms retained. · CC BY-SA 4.0

Weariness, perhaps melancholy, is the reading this pose invites, and the picture gives it plenty of support. Gachet's hand props up his head rather than gesturing towards anyone, and his sloping shoulders and the diagonal of his body repeat that downward pressure. The flowers beside him stand more upright, almost in contradiction.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: RF 1949 16

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The Card Players

Paul Cézanne

1893-1896 · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Paul Cezanne. Les Joueurs de cartes. WikiArt: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt per-object label)

A bottle marks a vertical division between the two men, but they are not mirror images: they sit in different postures on either side of the narrow table. Each looks at his cards, neither at the viewer nor at the other man. Very little happens. Cézanne makes their concentration the subject, and a game of cards takes on a stillness close to the monumental.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: RF 1969

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Apples and Oranges

Paul Cézanne

c. 1899 · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Paul Cézanne. Pommes et oranges. Image credit: Sailko; Own work. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul_c%C3%A9zanne,_mele_e_arance,_1899_ca._01.JPG. CC BY 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression; applicable ShareAlike terms retained. · CC BY 3.0

The fruit looks solid. Try to piece the table together as one consistent surface, though, and it will not quite fit: the plates, the folds of cloth and the raised dish are each seen from a different angle. These shifts need not be read as faulty perspective; they can as easily be seen as letting each object show more of itself. With no single fixed viewpoint, Cézanne holds the arrangement together through the relations between neighbouring objects.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: RF 1972

15 / 20

Arearea

Paul Gauguin

1892 · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Paul Gauguin. Arearea. Image credit: Sailko; Own work. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul_gauguin,_arearea,_1892,_01.JPG. CC BY 3.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression; applicable ShareAlike terms retained. · CC BY 3.0

The red dog settles it: this is not a neutral record of what Gauguin saw. Bands of colour organise the ground around the seated women, smaller figures occupy a separate zone behind them, and the simplification that holds the scene together makes no secret of the painter's intervention. The picture is better taken as Gauguin's construction than as an account of Tahitian life.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: RF 1961 6

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Tahitian Women

Paul Gauguin

1891 (November–December) · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Paul Gauguin. Femmes de Tahiti. WikiArt: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt per-object label)

Where Arearea, from the following year, spreads its figures across separate zones, this picture pulls everything in around two women. They sit close together but look in different directions, one turned sideways and the other facing out, so they never become a matched pair. Broad outlines and shallow space give their bodies weight, and their hands and patterned clothing add smaller differences within a compact, stable arrangement.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: RF 2765

17 / 20

Portrait of Edma Pontillon

Berthe Morisot

1871 · Oil on canvas · Musée d'Orsay



Berthe Morisot. Portrait of Edma Pontillon. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/berthe-morisot/portrait-of-edma-pontillon · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

Dark clothing could have turned the seated figure into a single block. Morisot prevents that with small changes of light that separate hands, face and dress. The head turns slightly while the hands rest together, and pale, patterned furnishings surround her. Whistler's portrait of his mother, from the same year, also sets pale accents of face and hands against dark tones, but there the large areas come first. Morisot's picture lives inside the dark, in the small distinctions that keep it from going flat.

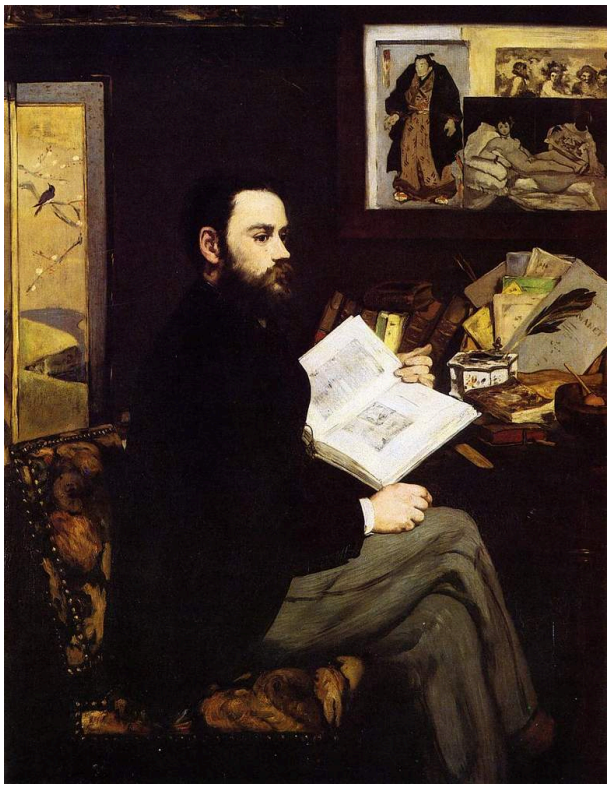
Object source · Open artwork

18 / 20

Portrait of Émile Zola

Édouard Manet

1868 · Oil on canvas · Musée d’Orsay



Édouard Manet. Portrait of Emile Zola. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/edouard-manet/portrait-of-emile-zola-1868 · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

An open book and pictures on the wall make reading and looking part of the portrait's subject. Manet surrounds Zola with these things, yet the sharply drawn profile stays distinct and is never lost among them.

Object source · Open artwork

19 / 20

Frédéric Bazille Painting the Heron

Pierre-Auguste Renoir

1867 · Oil on canvas · Musée d’Orsay



Frederic Bazille Painting The Heron (Frederic Bazille at his Easel). WikiArt; Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Proportional resizing and JPEG compression; source frame preserved. · Public domain

Bazille is at work, not posing: the title tells us he is painting a heron. Renoir shows his colleague from the side and lets the leaning body, the brush and the materials nearby define the portrait. It is one painter's record of another, busy with a picture of his own.

Object source · Open artwork

20 / 20

Juan Prim, 8 October 1868

Henri Regnault

1868 · Oil · Musée d'Orsay



Henri Regnault. Juan Prim, October 8, 1868. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/henri-regnault/juan-prim-october-8-1868-1868 · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

The equestrian portrait was a traditional format for displaying public authority, and Regnault takes it up directly. Prim's horse lifts a foreleg and is plainly restless, which makes the rider's composure all the more noticeable. Around horse and rider, other figures and flags carry the scene outwards. The title ties the picture to a single day, so it reads as the record of an occasion as well as a portrait, and the figures and flags seem to belong to that event as much as to the man at its centre.

Object source · Open artwork

Kinds of attention

A surprising number of these pictures turn on where people's attention goes. Cézanne's card players have eyes only for their game, and the couple in The Angelus have lowered their heads to pray. Bazille is absorbed in his canvas, and Gachet seems turned in on himself. Whistler's mother and Manet's Zola are both seen in profile. In Degas's class and at Renoir's dance, attention scatters among small concerns. Olympia stands apart from all of these. She returns the gaze of whoever is looking at her, and that may have been part of what made her a scandal.

Further reading

Impressionism: A Centenary Exhibition

Anne Dayez, Michel Hoog and Charles S. Moffett · Read online or download · English

An exhibition catalogue placing works by Monet, Renoir, Degas and their contemporaries in the context of the early Impressionist exhibitions. It deals with Impressionism, not with the Musée d'Orsay's collection as a whole, so it bears most directly on the Renoir and Degas paintings in this selection.

Museum website · Official collection guide

Sources and visitor information checked: 2026-10-12

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