OTTAWA, CANADA

National Gallery of Canada: Masterpieces

Twenty works in Ottawa: landscapes, portraits, war pictures, history, myth and abstraction



The National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa holds Canadian art alongside European, American and other international collections, and its holdings include important works by Indigenous artists. These twenty works give a sample of that range, from a Lorenzo Lotto portrait to an abstract painting by Jean-Paul Riopelle. The Canadian landscapes form a group of their own: Tom Thomson's pine, J. E. H. MacDonald's garden, and the lakes and mountains of John Arthur Fraser, which were painted well before Thomson's and MacDonald's pictures. Edward Wadsworth and Wyndham Lewis show people at work around a camouflaged ship and a gun. The portraits run from Lotto and Bronzino to Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun and George Horne Russell, while Benjamin West's Death of General Wolfe and Jean-François Millet's Oedipus bring in history and myth. Sisley, Klimt, Braque, Beckmann, Nash and Redon complete the selection. Some of the most useful comparisons cut across these groups: a single pine set against a whole orchard, a dying general against a child lifted from a tree.

Artline chose these works from the gallery's documented holdings, independently of the museum. A work in the collection is not necessarily on view, because some may be on loan or off display. Where the records qualify a date or attribution, the qualification is kept here.

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/national-gallery-canada

The selection · 20

1. The Jack Pine
   Tom Thomson · 1916–1917
2. The Death of General Wolfe
   Benjamin West · 1770
3. The Tangled Garden
   J. E. H. MacDonald · 1916
4. Hope I
   Gustav Klimt · 1903
5. Pavane
   Jean-Paul Riopelle · 1954
6. Dazzleships in Dry Dock at Liverpool
   Edward Wadsworth · 1919
7. A Canadian Gun-pit
   Wyndham Lewis · 1918
8. Port of Antwerp
   Georges Braque · 1906
9. North Sea I: Thunderstorm
   Max Beckmann · 1937
10. Solstice of the Sunflower
    Paul Nash · 1945
11. Portrait of a Man with a Felt Hat
    Lorenzo Lotto · 1541
12. Portrait of a Gentleman
    Bronzino · c. 1552
13. Anna Ivanovna Tolstaya
    Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun · 1796
14. Apple Trees in Bloom
    Alfred Sisley · 1880
15. September Afternoon, Eastern Townships
    John Arthur Fraser · 1873
16. A Shot in the Dawn, Lake Scugog
    John Arthur Fraser · 1873
17. At the Rogers Pass
    John Arthur Fraser · 1886
18. Edmond Dyonnet
    George Horne Russell · c. 1920
19. The Raven
    Odilon Redon · 1882
20. Oedipus Taken Down from the Tree
    Jean-François Millet · 1847

01 / 20

The Jack Pine

Tom Thomson

1916–1917 · National Gallery of Canada



Tom Thomson. The Jack Pine. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/tom-thomson/the-jack-pine-1917 · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

Thomson paints one particular tree. The pine is irregular and stands close to the front of the picture, against bands of lake, distant shore and evening sky. Everything behind it is reduced to broad horizontal divisions, while the tree keeps its uneven shape, and that contrast lets a single pine supply the main upright structure of the whole view. Its branches look almost like drawing laid over the colour.

Object source · Open artwork

02 / 20

The Death of General Wolfe

Benjamin West

1770 · National Gallery of Canada



Benjamin West. The Death of General Wolfe. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

West painted Wolfe's death after the event, and the result is a composition, not a record of who was present at any single moment. Wolfe lies pale at the centre, and the men around him turn their gestures and attention towards his body. Their uniforms and faces are convincing enough to suggest reportage, but the arrangement is theatrical. The group is organised to frame and honour the dying general, and a death on the battlefield becomes a scene of formal witness.

Object source · Open artwork

03 / 20

The Tangled Garden

J. E. H. MacDonald

1916 · National Gallery of Canada



J. E. H. MacDonald. The Tangled Garden. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

MacDonald's garden was painted around the same time as Thomson's pine, and it works in almost the opposite way. Thomson sets a clear form against a simplified distance. Here, drooping plants crowd the foreground and press right up to the viewer, their leaves and flowers overlapping in a thick tangle scattered with bright patches. There is no path through, and neighbouring shapes have to be picked apart one at a time. The garden is cultivated but far from tidy, and MacDonald does not neaten it into a decorative pattern either. The abundance comes close to excess.

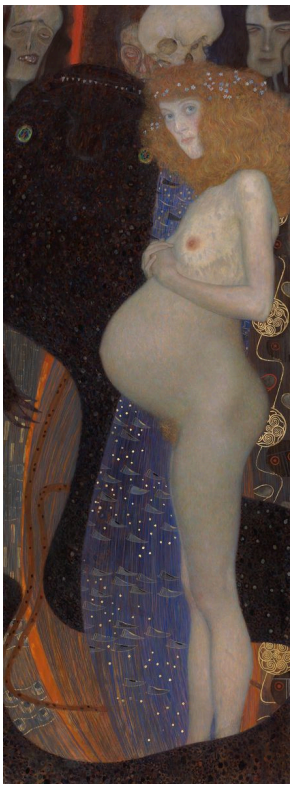
Object source · Open artwork

04 / 20

Hope I

Gustav Klimt

1903 · Oil on canvas · National Gallery of Canada



Gustav Klimt. Hope I. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/gustav-klimt/hope-i · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

Klimt's title is Hope and his subject a pregnant woman. That sounds straightforward until you notice the dark forms behind her, which are unsettling and sit awkwardly with the title. The woman herself is firmly drawn and kept distinct from them, but they share the same surface, and the picture does not explain how the two belong together. Do the forms threaten the hope, or only surround it? The painting never settles into a fixed prophecy either way.

Object source · Open artwork

05 / 20

Pavane

Jean-Paul Riopelle

1954 · National Gallery of Canada



Jean-Paul Riopelle. Pavane. Image: WikiArt. Copyright protected (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Copyright protected (WikiArt label)

Riopelle gives the eye no object and no horizon to settle on. The wide field is divided into three sections, and across all of them the individual marks stay distinct, repeating without hardening into a uniform pattern. Colour gathers thickly in some areas. The paint builds up in places and thins out in others, so the density of the surface keeps changing from one part of the field to the next.

Object source · Open artwork

06 / 20

Dazzleships in Dry Dock at Liverpool

Edward Wadsworth

1919 · National Gallery of Canada



Edward Wadsworth. Dazzle-ships in Drydock at Liverpool. Image credit: Edward Wadsworth; Source credit: Self-photographed by Mzajac of original painting.. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Resized and JPEG-compressed; selected source frame preserved. · Public domain

A striped hull towers over the small figures finishing its paintwork in the dry dock. Dazzle camouflage was designed to confuse estimates of a ship's course rather than simply to hide the vessel. There is a dry irony, then, in Wadsworth's handling of it. The deliberate optical disruption sits inside a clearly organised composition, where the pattern meant to mislead and the enormous ship carrying it are both perfectly legible.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: 8925

07 / 20

A Canadian Gun-pit

Wyndham Lewis

1918 · National Gallery of Canada



Wyndham Lewis. A Canadian Gun-pit. Image credit: Wyndham Lewis; Source credit: https://www.gallery.ca/collection/artwork/a-canadian-gun-pit. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Resized and JPEG-compressed; selected source frame preserved. · Public domain

Lewis draws his soldiers into the same visual language as their gun. Angular forms run through bodies, equipment and ground alike, and each man's task and posture tie him to the weapon and its supports. Wadsworth's workers stay small and separate beside their ship. Lewis's men can still be read as individuals at work, but the machinery determines the space they occupy and the shapes that define them.

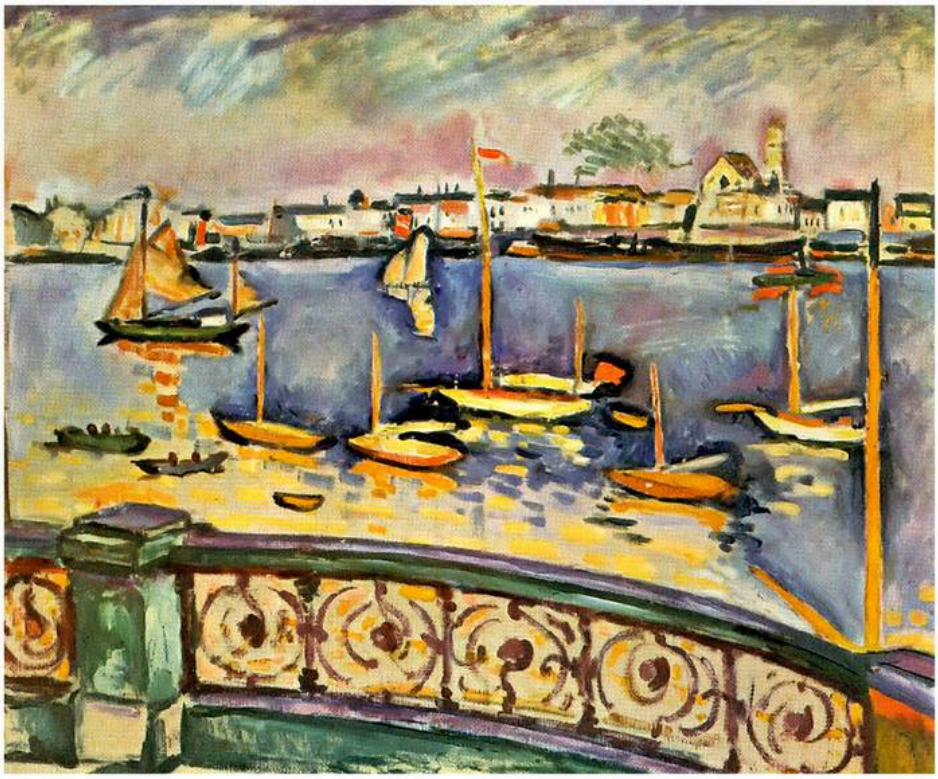
Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: 8356

08 / 20

Port of Antwerp

Georges Braque

1906 · Oil on canvas · National Gallery of Canada



Georges Braque. Port of Antwerp. WikiArt source label: Public domain US. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/georges-braque/port-of-antwerp-1906 · Public domain US (WikiArt source label)

A curved railing in the foreground marks the near edge of the harbour. Beyond it, boats and distant buildings sit in strong fields of colour that have little to do with ordinary daylight. Braque splits the work between space and colour. The spatial relations stay clear enough for the port to read as a port, while the colour is frankly invented and pushed well beyond description into something more declarative and strange.

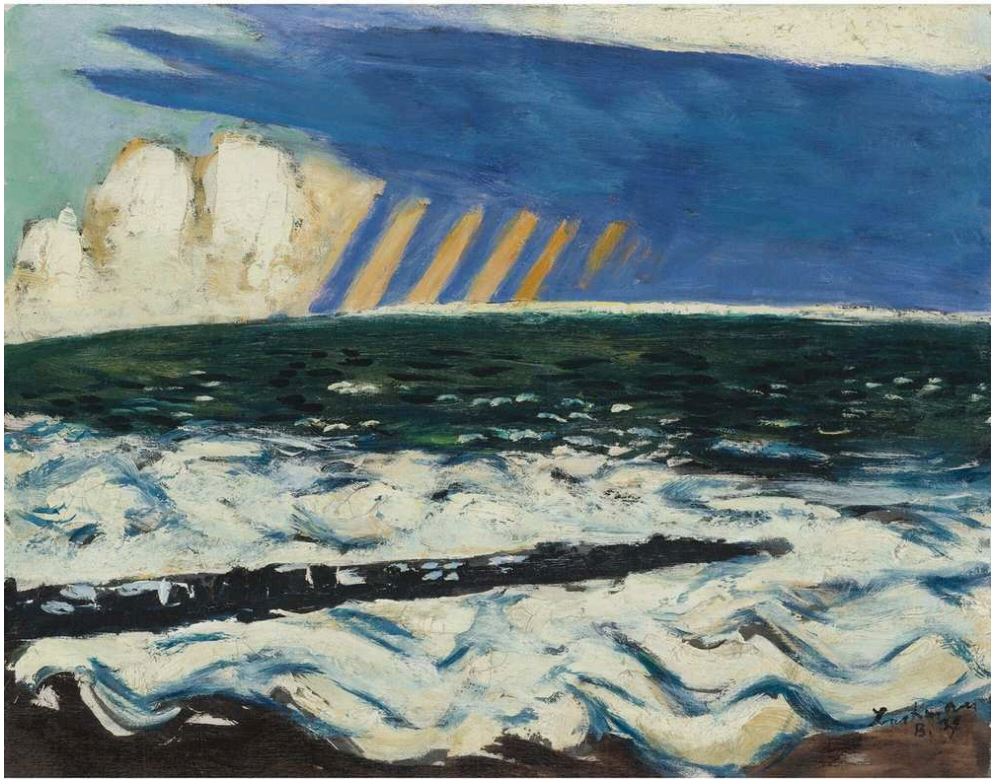
Object source · Open artwork

09 / 20

North Sea I: Thunderstorm

Max Beckmann

1937 · National Gallery of Canada



Max Beckmann. North Sea I (Thunderstorm). Image credit: Max Beckmann; Source credit: https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2010/impressionist-modern-art-evening-sale-n08675/lot.57.html. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Resized and JPEG-compressed; selected source frame preserved. · Public domain

Beckmann leaves only a narrow strip of horizon, so the heavy sky presses down on the broken water. Yellowish strokes descend through the dark clouds and cut across the rolling movement of the sea below. Given the title, they may be lightning. For all the turbulence, the divisions are emphatic, and the storm keeps a firm structure rather than dissolving into haze.

Object source · Open artwork

10 / 20

Solstice of the Sunflower

Paul Nash

1945 · Oil on canvas · National Gallery of Canada



Paul Nash. Solstice of the Sunflower. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/paul-nash/solstice-of-the-sunflower-1945 · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

Nash enlarges the sunflower until its head rhymes with the sun, repeating the same circular form in different parts of the landscape and at two scales that could never meet in an ordinary view. That invented relationship organises the picture, and botanical accuracy alone would not have produced it. The title does the same thing in words by giving the flower a solstice of its own.

Object source · Open artwork

11 / 20

Portrait of a Man with a Felt Hat

Lorenzo Lotto

1541 · Oil on paper · National Gallery of Canada



Lorenzo Lotto. Portrait of a Man with a Felt Hat. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/lorenzo-lotto/portrait-of-a-man-with-a-felt-hat-1541 · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

The title identifies Lotto's sitter only by his felt hat, and the picture offers little else to go on. In this oil on paper he looks straight out, his face framed by broad dark clothing, and nothing in the setting indicates his rank or profession. So the hat, held in one hand, has a good deal to do. It occupies the hand and gives the pose something specific. Without it, the body would present itself quite differently.

Object source · Open artwork

12 / 20

Portrait of a Gentleman

Bronzino

c. 1552 · Oil on wood · National Gallery of Canada



Bronzino. Portrait of a gentleman. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/agnolo-bronzino/portrait-of-a-gentleman · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

Lotto's man has only his hat. Bronzino's gentleman is given a companion: a small sculpture, a second figure standing beside the living one. The object shares the work of social presentation with the face. It ties the sitter to the world of collected things and suggests cultivation and taste, though on its own it cannot tell us everything the man knew or valued.

Object source · Open artwork

13 / 20

Anna Ivanovna Tolstaya

Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun

1796 · National Gallery of Canada



Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun. Anna Ivanovna Tolstaya. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

Rocks and trees take the place of an official interior. Anna Ivanovna Tolstaya rests her head, her drapery hangs loosely, and the pose looks informal. It is no less arranged for that. Her apparent ease is built from dress, gesture and setting, and Vigée Le Brun controls each of them.

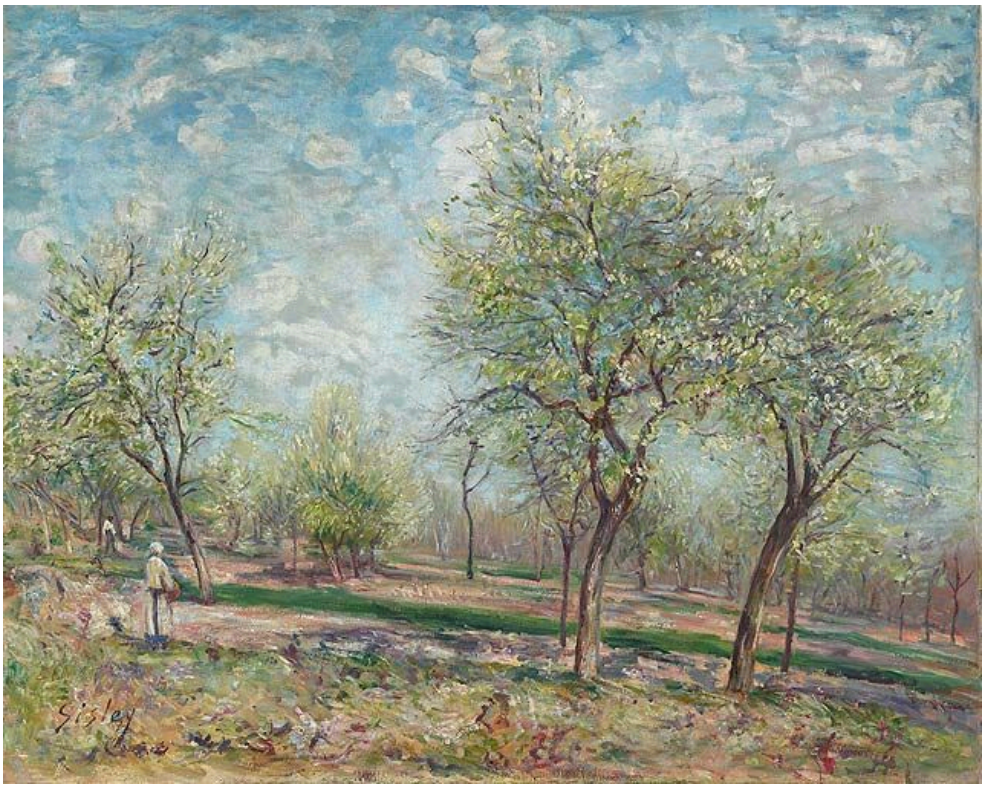
Object source · Open artwork

14 / 20

Apple Trees in Bloom

Alfred Sisley

1880 · National Gallery of Canada



Alfred Sisley. Apple Trees in Bloom. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

In Sisley's orchard no tree is singled out, which makes it almost the reverse of Thomson's pine. Trunks recur at regular intervals, and pale blossom breaks up their outlines. Depth comes from the gaps between the trees and from small shifts of colour and tone as the eye moves back into the space. Nothing happens at the centre, and the orchard needs nothing to.

Object source · Open artwork

15 / 20

September Afternoon, Eastern Townships

John Arthur Fraser

1873 · National Gallery of Canada



John Arthur Fraser. September Afternoon, Eastern Townships. Image credit: John Arthur Fraser; Source credit: The AMICA Library. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Resized and JPEG-compressed; selected source frame preserved. · Public domain

Sheep rest on the near shore, small and calm. Beyond them, water and mountains recede into paler distances under a broad sky. The flock never takes over the picture, but it gives the foreground a lived-in scale and a measure for the much larger terrain behind.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: 18159

16 / 20

A Shot in the Dawn, Lake Scugog

John Arthur Fraser

1873 · National Gallery of Canada



John Arthur Fraser. A Shot in the Dawn, Lake Scugog. Image credit: John Arthur Fraser; Source credit: The AMICA Library. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Resized and JPEG-compressed; selected source frame preserved. · Public domain

This time the title promises an event, yet Fraser's figure and dog are tiny beside the wide water and the changing dawn sky. Light and space fill almost the whole surface. Is the shot the subject, or only the occasion for painting the dawn? The proportions of the picture suggest the latter.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: 6938

17 / 20

At the Rogers Pass

John Arthur Fraser

1886 · National Gallery of Canada



John Arthur Fraser. At the Rogers Pass, Summit of the Selkirk Range, B.C.. Image credit: John Arthur Fraser; Source credit: 1. The AMICA Library 2. Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, Ottawa. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Resized and JPEG-compressed; selected source frame preserved. · Public domain

In Fraser's other pictures here, a flock of sheep or a figure with a dog gives the distance a measure. At the Rogers Pass has no large figure in the foreground to do that job. Dark conifers fill the nearer valley and bare, sunlit peaks rise beyond. The distance comes instead from the successive bands of ground between the peaks and the viewer, and from the change from dark woodland to bright, open heights.

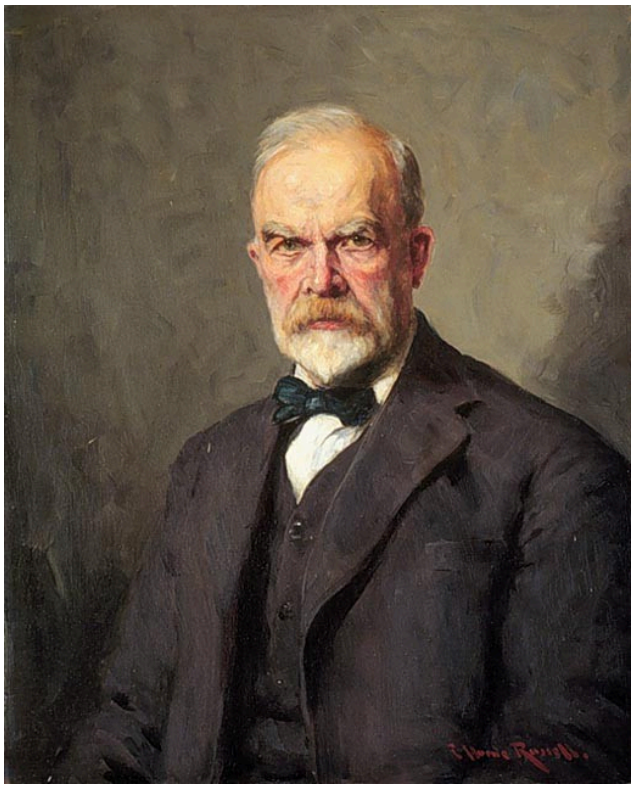
Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: 4227

18 / 20

Edmond Dyonnet

George Horne Russell

c. 1920 · National Gallery of Canada



George Horne Russell. Edmond Dyonnet. Image credit: George Horne Russell; Source credit: Cybermuse des beaux arts du Canada. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Resized and JPEG-compressed; selected source frame preserved. · Public domain

Dark clothing and a restrained background leave Dyonnet's face and the white of his collar as the main areas of light. Bronzino gave his sitter a sculpture, but Russell includes few objects that tell us anything about Dyonnet. The likeness depends on small adjustments of tone that model the head and distinguish the features.

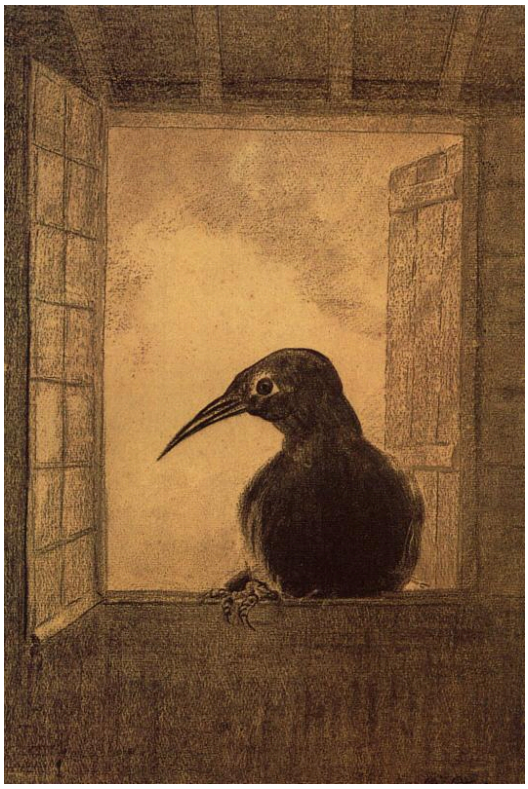
Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: 17947

19 / 20

The Raven

Odilon Redon

1882 · National Gallery of Canada



Odilon Redon. The Raven. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/odilon-redon/the-raven-1882 · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

A dark bird perches in a confined interior, close to an open window. Redon defines its head and beak sharply and keeps attention on this small, watchful presence. The title carries a literary association, but the image does not retell a story. It stays with the bird, its position and the enclosed room.

Object source · Open artwork

20 / 20

Oedipus Taken Down from the Tree

Jean-François Millet

1847 · National Gallery of Canada



Jean-François Millet. Oedipus Taken Down from the Tree. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

The subject comes from the ancient Oedipus story: the exposed infant Oedipus is being taken down from the tree. Millet gathers the figures round the small, vulnerable body and encloses the group with dark branches, and the light falls where the child is being lifted and supported. As in West's Death of General Wolfe, a group converges on a single body. Here, though, the figures are taking a child's weight rather than witnessing a death, and they handle it with care.

Object source · Open artwork

Size on screen

Keep the recorded dimensions in mind when comparing these works on screen, where a small portrait and a large painting can look the same size.

Further reading

The Elements of Drawing

John Ruskin · Read free · English

Ruskin's book is built around exercises in observing natural forms, and they apply directly to the landscapes here. It also works as a foil. Ruskin asks for continuous, accurate description, while Thomson, MacDonald and later painters simplify, rearrange and invent. Reading him beside their pictures makes those choices easier to see.

Museum website · Official collection guide

Sources and visitor information checked: 2026-10-12

Artline · National Gallery of Canada: Masterpieces