WARSAW, POLAND

National Museum in Warsaw: Masterpieces

Twenty works: Polish history painting, portraits and landscapes, with a few pictures from elsewhere in Europe



The National Museum in Warsaw holds Polish art alongside paintings from other European traditions, and this selection leans heavily towards the Polish. History painting has a prominent place, on subjects that carry weight in Polish memory but may need explaining elsewhere. Only one picture, though, is a battle in the ordinary sense: Jan Matejko's The Battle of Grunwald. His court scene turns on a jester and a letter. Elsewhere, history is mostly a matter of waiting, whether for Maksymilian Gierymski's insurgent patrol, halted in open country, or for Jacek Malczewski's convicts on the road to Siberia.

Many of the other pictures hold back on incident in much the same way. There is no human observer in Józef Chełmoński's partridges in the snow, and no prominent building or traveller in Gierymski's marshes. The portraits run from Jacques-Louis David's grand equestrian display to women whom the titles describe but do not name. The self-portraits run from Anna Bilińska's, left unfinished, to Leon Wyczółkowski's costume piece in pastel. The other pictures from outside Poland are a literary subject attributed to Charles Alphonse Dufresnoy and an inn scene by Adriaen Brouwer.

The works were chosen from the museum's documented holdings, independently of the museum. Dates and attributions keep the qualifications given in the records. The order is not a route through the galleries, and a work's inclusion here does not mean it is on display.

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-museum-warsaw

The selection · 20

1. The Battle of Grunwald
   Jan Matejko · 1878
2. Stańczyk during a Ball at the Court of Queen Bona
   Jan Matejko · 1862
3. Equestrian Portrait of Stanisław Kostka Potocki
   Jacques-Louis David · 1781
4. Four
   Józef Chełmoński · 1880
5. Partridges in the Snow
   Józef Chełmoński · 1891
6. Jewish Woman with Oranges
   Aleksander Gierymski · c. 1880 - 1881
7. Peasant Coffin
   Aleksander Gierymski · 1894
8. In the Orangery
   Olga Boznańska · 1890
9. Portrait of a Black Woman
   Anna Bilińska · 1884
10. Unfinished Self-Portrait
    Anna Bilińska · 1892
11. Polish Hamlet: Portrait of Aleksander Wielopolski
    Jacek Malczewski · 1903
12. Foot Washing: A Siberian Scene
    Jacek Malczewski · c. 1886
13. Convicts on the Way to Siberia
    Jacek Malczewski · 1890
14. In the Painter's Studio
    Leon Wyczółkowski · 1883
15. Self-Portrait in a Chinese Robe
    Leon Wyczółkowski · 1911
16. Insurgent Patrol
    Maksymilian Gierymski · 1873
17. Marshes at Sunset
    Maksymilian Gierymski · c. 1868–1869
18. Landscape with a Birch Grove
    Maksymilian Gierymski · c. 1868–1869
19. Aeneas and Dido
    Charles Alphonse Dufresnoy · 1650–1700
20. Smokers in an Inn
    Adriaen Brouwer · 1627 - 1630

01 / 20

The Battle of Grunwald

Jan Matejko

1878 · National Museum in Warsaw



Jan Matejko. Battle of Grunwald. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

The victory commemorated here was won in 1410. Matejko painted it centuries later, when Polish history carried urgent political meaning, so what we see is a reconstruction shaped by that climate, not a record. Horses, banners, armour and bodies are packed so tightly that almost no clear ground shows between them. There is no single line of action to follow. The eye moves from one struggle to the next without settling, so the viewer has to piece the triumph together from fragments of combat.

Object source · Open artwork

02 / 20

Stańczyk during a Ball at the Court of Queen Bona

Jan Matejko

1862 · National Museum in Warsaw



Jan Matejko. Stańczyk during a Ball at the Court of Queen. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

Through a doorway the ball carries on, bright and busy. On this side of it the jester sits alone and still, hands clasped, with a letter lying near him. The drama comes from a piece of news, not an action. Whatever the letter reports, he seems to be the only person present who has grasped what it means. Matejko leaves him in the red costume of an entertainer yet makes him the most serious figure in the picture. The courtiers enjoying themselves beyond the doorway sharpen the point.

Object source · Open artwork

03 / 20

Equestrian Portrait of Stanisław Kostka Potocki

Jacques-Louis David

1781 · Oil on canvas · National Museum in Warsaw



Jacques-Louis David. Equestrian Portrait of Stanislas Kostka Potocki. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/jacques-louis-david/equestrian-portrait-of-stanislas-kostka-potocki-1781 · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

Stanisław Kostka Potocki lifts his hat as if to acknowledge an audience, and his horse raises a leg. Both movements have energy, but David holds it in check. Stone architecture frames horse and rider, and the formal arrangement turns a greeting into a display of authority: an arrival staged as a public event.

Object source · Open artwork

04 / 20

Four

Józef Chełmoński

1880 · Oil on canvas · National Museum in Warsaw



Józef Chełmoński. Four. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/jozef-chelmonski/four · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

Four horses stretch across the low canvas as the carriage drives over wet ground beneath an open sky. Chełmoński shows their speed through the horses' legs and the uneven positions of the team, and the long horizontal format gives them room to run.

This is the smaller Warsaw version. The much larger Four-in-Hand in the National Museum in Kraków is a related but separate painting, and the translated titles make the two easy to confuse.

Object source · Open artwork

05 / 20

Partridges in the Snow

Józef Chełmoński

1891 · National Museum in Warsaw



Józef Chełmoński. Partridges in the snow. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/jozef-chelmonski/partridges-in-the-snow · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

After the team in Four, Chełmoński's partridges are almost motionless. They huddle together on a field of snow that runs back to a faint, low horizon. He paints them small, which makes their exposure plain. Apart from the birds and the scattered traces they have left, the field is nearly empty, so each dark body stands out sharply against the pale ground. There is no human figure, and the open snow gives the flock no shelter.

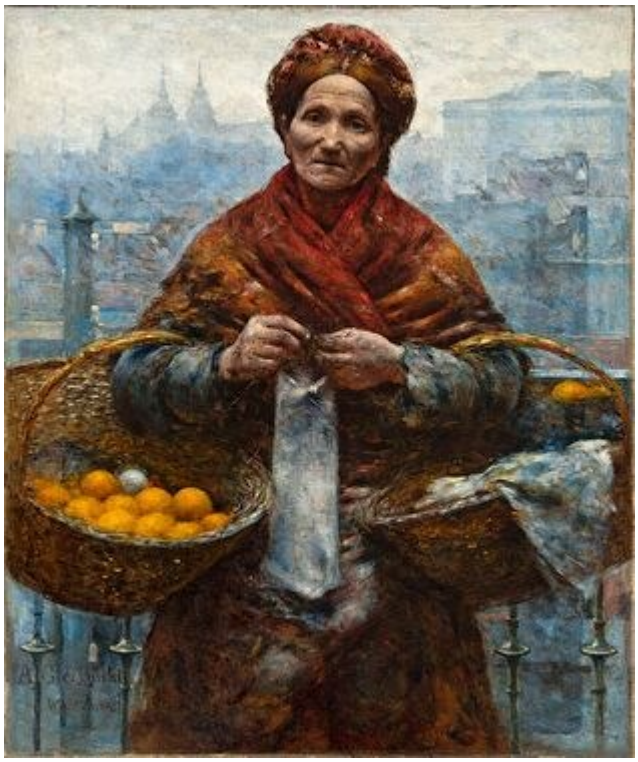
Object source · Open artwork

06 / 20

Jewish Woman with Oranges

Aleksander Gierymski

c. 1880 - 1881 · Oil on canvas · National Museum in Warsaw



Aleksander Gierymski; National Museum in Warsaw; Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie. DOMENA PUBLICZNA (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression of the source reproduction. · DOMENA PUBLICZNA

The catalogue identifies her only as a Jewish woman and records no name, yet Aleksander Gierymski gives her the attention a portrait sitter would receive. He brings her close and paints her from the front, so that she is the subject of the picture rather than an incidental figure in a street scene. Her baskets show how she makes her living. What holds the eye, though, is her face and the careful handling of her layered clothing.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: MP 5526 MNW

07 / 20

Peasant Coffin

Aleksander Gierymski

1894 · Oil on canvas · National Museum in Warsaw



Aleksander Gierymski; National Museum in Warsaw; Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie. DOMENA PUBLICZNA (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression of the source reproduction. · DOMENA PUBLICZNA

A small blue coffin rests in an ordinary yard. The mourners sit apart from one another, and their grief shows in stillness, with no conspicuous gesture of lament. The gaps between them count for as much as their postures. Behind them are the house and a resting dog, everyday life carrying on in plain view. Nothing is heightened for effect, and that directness makes the picture hard to look at.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: MP 964 MNW

08 / 20

In the Orangery

Olga Boznańska

1890 · Oil on canvas · National Museum in Warsaw



Olga Boznańska [qualified attribution: malarka; ;]; National Museum in Warsaw; Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie. DOMENA PUBLICZNA (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression of the source reproduction. · DOMENA PUBLICZNA

Like Aleksander Gierymski's orange seller, the woman in Boznańska's orangery holds a basket. The seller's baskets are her livelihood. This one is a practical object that sits a little oddly in a cultivated interior. Tall plants surround her, but her pale clothing and composed pose keep her distinct among them. Boznańska claims little for the scene. There is no story, only a figure in a glasshouse.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: MP 401 MNW

09 / 20

Portrait of a Black Woman

Anna Bilińska

1884 · Oil on canvas · National Museum in Warsaw



Anna Bilińska-Bohdanowiczowa [qualified attribution: malarka; ;]; National Museum in Warsaw; Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie. DOMENA PUBLICZNA (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression of the source reproduction. · DOMENA PUBLICZNA

The title describes the sitter only by the colour of her skin, and the catalogue gives no name for her. Bilińska places her in a studio arrangement. Pale drapery and gold jewellery frame her face, and her dark skin is set against pale cloth. Within that arrangement, though, the pose keeps an individual character: she turns to look beyond the picture, not at us.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: MP 5531 MNW

10 / 20

Unfinished Self-Portrait

Anna Bilińska

1892 · Oil on canvas · National Museum in Warsaw



Anna Bilińska-Bohdanowiczowa [qualified attribution: malarka; ;]; National Museum in Warsaw; Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie. DOMENA PUBLICZNA (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression of the source reproduction. · DOMENA PUBLICZNA

The face is resolved, but parts of the clothing and surroundings are not, and in places the preparation lies bare. This lets us see Bilińska's method quite openly: she was building the picture up section by section and had taken the head furthest. Her firm stance holds the image together across these unequal stages of finish, so it still works as a picture where it stops.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: MP 261 MNW

11 / 20

Polish Hamlet: Portrait of Aleksander Wielopolski

Jacek Malczewski

1903 · Oil on canvas · National Museum in Warsaw



Jacek Malczewski; National Museum in Warsaw; Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie. DOMENA PUBLICZNA (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression of the source reproduction. · DOMENA PUBLICZNA

The title does much of the work. Calling Aleksander Wielopolski a Polish Hamlet invites us to see a man caught between alternatives, and the composition supports that reading. He is placed between two women who differ in age and dress, one bright, the other restrained. The picture does not say what they stand for. Where Wielopolski stands in the group matters as much as his likeness, which pushes the portrait towards allegory. The choice is left unmade.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: MP 369 MNW

12 / 20

Foot Washing: A Siberian Scene

Jacek Malczewski

c. 1886 · National Museum in Warsaw



Foot washing (Siberian scene). Jacek Malczewski; Source credit: National Museum in Warsaw. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Full-frame resize and JPEG compression. · Public domain

Malczewski approaches Siberian exile from very close. Hands reach towards a bare foot, and the painting centres on this small act of care rather than on any wide view of hardship. In the dim interior only some faces and some cloth can be made out, which keeps the encounter intimate. The expressions vary: both weariness and tenderness register.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: MP 1198 MNW

13 / 20

Convicts on the Way to Siberia

Jacek Malczewski

1890 · National Museum in Warsaw



On the way to exile (Convicts on the way to Siberia). Jacek Malczewski; Source credit: National Museum in Warsaw. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Full-frame resize and JPEG compression. · Public domain

The title speaks of a journey, but the convicts have stopped, crowded into a room where waiting is part of the ordeal. Seated and reclining bodies show fatigue in several forms, and a standing figure breaks their low arrangement. Foot Washing narrows exile to a single gesture. This picture spreads it across a group and makes confinement on the road a subject in itself, without the drama of departure or arrival.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: MP 1049 MNW

14 / 20

In the Painter's Studio

Leon Wyczółkowski

1883 · National Museum in Warsaw



Leon Wyczółkowski. In the painter's studio. Image credit: Leon Wyczółkowski; Source credit: National Museum in Warsaw. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Resized and JPEG-compressed; selected source frame preserved. · Public domain

A woman stands beside a large framed picture, among other images and studio furnishings. The picture does not say who she is. Her presence makes the room a social setting as much as a workplace, a place where people come across art and stand near it.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: MP 5530 MNW

15 / 20

Self-Portrait in a Chinese Robe

Leon Wyczółkowski

1911 · Pastel · National Museum in Warsaw



Leon Wyczółkowski. Self-Portrait In Chinese Tailoring. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/leon-wyczolkowski/self-portrait-in-chinese-tailoring · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

Bilińska's unfinished self-portrait leaves its preparation bare. This pastel, by contrast, is densely worked, with no empty space around the figure. The patterned robe and the blue textile behind it are so busy that they nearly merge, and only contrast keeps the face at the centre. The Chinese robe is a costume, part of how Wyczółkowski chose to present himself.

Object source · Open artwork

16 / 20

Insurgent Patrol

Maksymilian Gierymski

1873 · Oil on canvas · National Museum in Warsaw



Maksymilian Gierymski; National Museum in Warsaw; Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie. DOMENA PUBLICZNA (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Full-frame proportional resize and JPEG compression of the source reproduction. · DOMENA PUBLICZNA

After the crush of Grunwald, Maksymilian Gierymski's patrol has almost too much room. The riders have halted in open country with few landmarks, under a broad, pale sky, and the low terrain leaves them exposed. They watch and wait. Their watchfulness gives the empty ground a weight that no visible encounter has yet justified. Whatever they are watching for has not appeared.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: MP 418 MNW

17 / 20

Marshes at Sunset

Maksymilian Gierymski

c. 1868–1869 · National Museum in Warsaw



View of marshes at sunset. Maksymilian Gierymski; Source credit: National Museum in Warsaw. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Full-frame resize and JPEG compression. · Public domain

Pools and dark grasses break the foreground into uneven patches, and the main opening is a narrow strip of distant light at the low horizon. Above it the clouds take over, so weather and failing light decide how much can be seen. No prominent building or traveller turns the marsh into a setting for some other subject.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: MP 1366 MNW

18 / 20

Landscape with a Birch Grove

Maksymilian Gierymski

c. 1868–1869 · National Museum in Warsaw



Landscape with a birch grove. Maksymilian Gierymski; Source credit: National Museum in Warsaw. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Full-frame resize and JPEG compression. · Public domain

This picture is dated to the same years as Marshes at Sunset, but it shows a drier, paler place. A sandy track curves through slender birches towards open fields, and the undergrowth is set down in small, specific marks. The track offers a way into the landscape, but nobody is on it.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: MP 1367 MNW

19 / 20

Aeneas and Dido

Charles Alphonse Dufresnoy

1650–1700 · National Museum in Warsaw



Charles Alphonse du Fresnoy. Aeneas and Dido.. Image credit: Attributed to Charles Alphonse du Fresnoy. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Resized and JPEG-compressed; selected source frame preserved. · Public domain

The painting is attributed to Dufresnoy and dated only broadly. Figures in robes of distinct colours gather around a seated woman. Attendants, gestures and vessels give the meeting of Aeneas and Dido a ceremonial scale without hiding its centre. The painter organises the group through colour and placement and allows little dramatic incident, so the literary subject comes across more as a formal reception than a moment of high feeling. Even so, the gestures read as an exchange between individuals.

Object source · Open artwork

20 / 20

Smokers in an Inn

Adriaen Brouwer

1627 - 1630 · Oil on copper · National Museum in Warsaw



Adriaen Brouwer. Smokers in an Inn. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/adriaen-brouwer/smokers-in-an-inn · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

Nobody here is arranged for show, which puts the picture about as far from David's Potocki as this selection goes. One man raises a pipe, and the others have settled around a small table in unequal poses, absorbed in what they are doing. Brouwer neither preaches about their leisure nor dignifies it. The picture is painted on copper. Warm light draws faces and clothing out of the dark room, though not every detail emerges with the same clarity.

Object source · Open artwork

Names and roles

Some of the people in these pictures keep their names: Stanisław Kostka Potocki, the jester Stańczyk, Aleksander Wielopolski. Others are known only by description. One title calls a woman Jewish and another calls a woman Black, while the mourners in Aleksander Gierymski's yard and Malczewski's convicts appear as groups without names. Having a name does not settle how a person is shown, because almost every named figure here comes with a role attached. Wielopolski's name comes with Hamlet's. Stańczyk is identified by his office as jester as much as by his name. Potocki is named in full but appears mainly through the trappings of public display. Wyczółkowski, painting himself, takes on a role of his own choosing in the Chinese robe. The unnamed orange seller has no part to play beyond her trade, yet she receives some of the closest attention in the selection.

Further reading

The Practice and Science of Drawing

Harold Speed · Read free · English

Harold Speed's drawing manual discusses mass, line and the construction of portraits, and sets exercises for the reader to work through. It provides useful terms for the faces in this selection and for crowded scenes such as Grunwald. Bilińska's Unfinished Self-Portrait, where the building-up of a portrait is partly left in view, is a good place to test what he says about construction.

Museum website · Official collection guide

Sources and visitor information checked: 2026-10-12