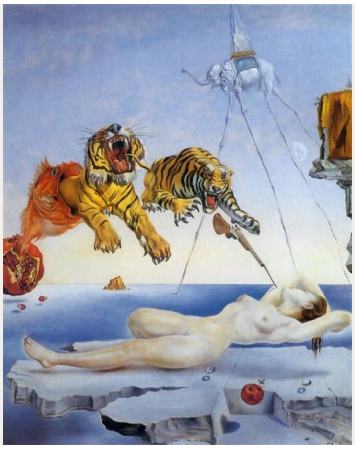
MADRID, SPAIN

Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza: Masterpieces

Twenty paintings from the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection, from Rogier van der Weyden to Rothko.



The Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid grew out of a private collection assembled by the Thyssen-Bornemisza family. Its range is unusually wide, running from medieval painting through the Renaissance and into the twentieth century, which makes it a useful companion to the Prado and the Reina Sofía.

The twenty paintings chosen here cover much of that ground, from early Netherlandish panels by Rogier van der Weyden and Petrus Christus to Rothko. They are not in date order. Over so long a span the same subjects come round again in very different hands, and the sequence lets some of them meet. There are two Crucifixions, by Uccello and Zurbarán, and two toilet scenes: a mythological one by Rubens and one by Boucher set among fabrics and screens. Other recurrences are less expected. The moon appears over Friedrich's Easter morning and again above O'Keeffe's New York, in very different company.

Artline made this selection from the museum's documented holdings, independently of the museum. Dates and attributions keep the qualifications given in the records. Where sources disagree, as they do over the date of the Dalí, both versions are given.

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/thyssen-bornemisza

The selection · 20

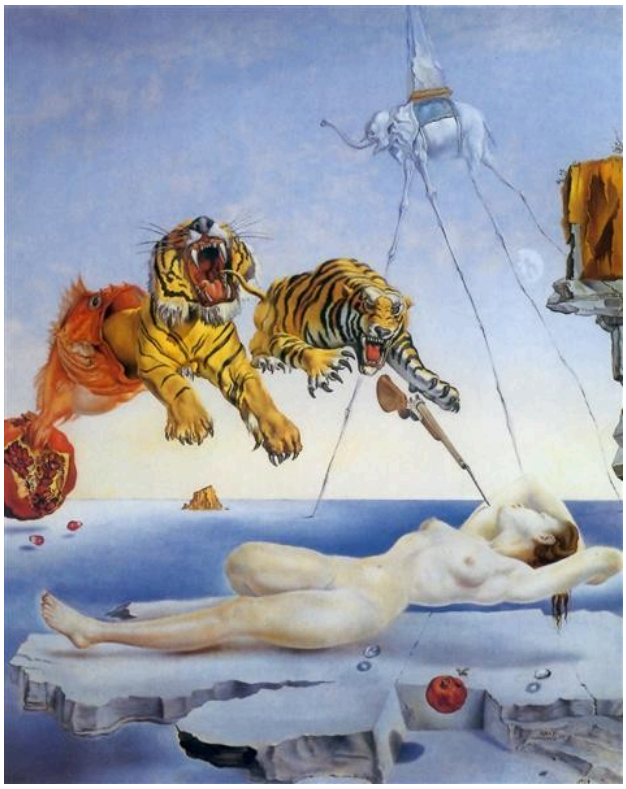
1. Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate a Second before Awakening
   Salvador Dalí · 1947 in the current Thyssen record; c. 1944 in the Dali Foundation catalogue
2. A Bend in the River Loing in Summer
   Alfred Sisley · 1896
3. The Apotheosis of Hercules
   Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo · 1765
4. Young Knight in a Landscape
   Vittore Carpaccio · 1510
5. The Crucifixion
   Paolo Uccello · 1438
6. Christ on the Cross
   Francisco de Zurbarán · 1627
7. Easter Morning
   Caspar David Friedrich · 1835
8. The Grand Canal from Campo San Vio
   Canaletto · 1723
9. The Happy Pierrot
   Jean-Antoine Watteau · 1712
10. New York with Moon
    Georgia O'Keeffe · 1925
11. Our Lady of the Dry Tree
    Petrus Christus · c. 1450
12. Piazza San Marco Looking East
    Canaletto · c. 1723
13. Saint Catherine of Alexandria
    Caravaggio · c. 1598–99
14. Black, Red, Black
    Mark Rothko · 1968
15. The Cook
    Gabriël Metsu · c.1657 - c. 1667
16. Landscape at Dusk
    Vincent van Gogh · 1885
17. The Toilette
    François Boucher · 1742
18. The Toilet of Venus
    Peter Paul Rubens · 1608
19. The Virgin and Child
    Rogier van der Weyden · 1432
20. A Balcony, Boulevard Haussmann
    Gustave Caillebotte · 1880

01 / 20

Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate a Second before Awakening

Salvador Dalí

1947 in the current Thyssen record; c. 1944 in the Dali Foundation catalogue · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Salvador Dalí. Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate a Second before Awakening. Image: WikiArt. Copyright protected (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Copyright protected (WikiArt label)

A woman sleeps while an impossible sequence unfolds above her. Fish, tigers and other forms follow one another, each painted with hard-edged clarity, though only dream logic links them. The title reads almost like a diagnosis: it fixes the moment, a second before waking, and names the cause, a bee's flight around a pomegranate. Whether that accounts for the tigers is another matter.

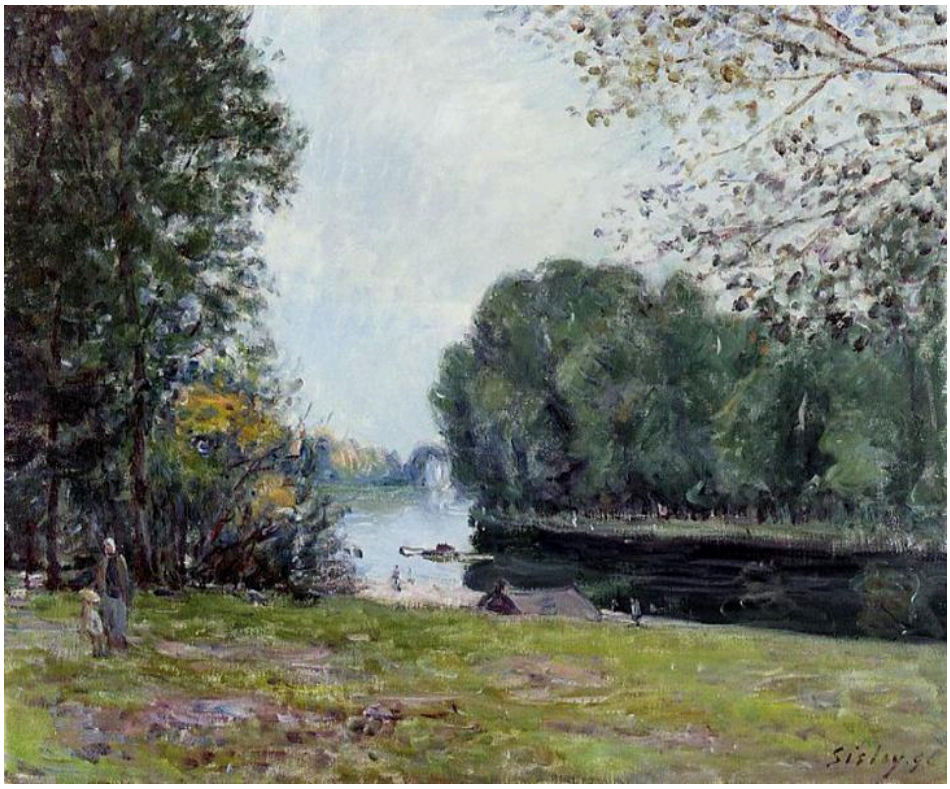
Object source · Open artwork

02 / 20

A Bend in the River Loing in Summer

Alfred Sisley

1896 · Oil on canvas · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



A Turn of the River Loing, Summer. WikiArt; Alfred Sisley. Proportional resizing and JPEG compression; source frame preserved. · Public domain

Not the Loing in general but a bend in it, and the bend is the point. Beyond the near bank the river turns away and its further course is hidden. Trees and grass line the water, the reflected light changes along its length, and a few small figures at the water's edge give the scale.

Object source · Open artwork

03 / 20

The Apotheosis of Hercules

Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo

1765 · Oil · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo. Apotheosis of Hercules. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/giovanni-domenico-tiepolo/apotheosis-of-hercules-1765 · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

An apotheosis is a raising to divine status, here that of Hercules, and the picture is built around the upward movement the word implies. Giandomenico Tiepolo packs a crowded assembly into an oval and lets the shape decide the arrangement. Darker figures and clouds gather towards the rim, while a brighter opening marks the direction of ascent. The scene is composed to be seen from below.

Object source · Open artwork

04 / 20

Young Knight in a Landscape

Vittore Carpaccio

1510 · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Vittore Carpaccio. Portrait of a Knight. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

A young man in armour stands firmly in a landscape full of plants, animals and a rider. Carpaccio gives him the concentrated focus of a portrait, and the details around him look as though they ought to tell us who he is. Perhaps they do. But the sitter's identity is uncertain, and so is the meaning of the individual details.

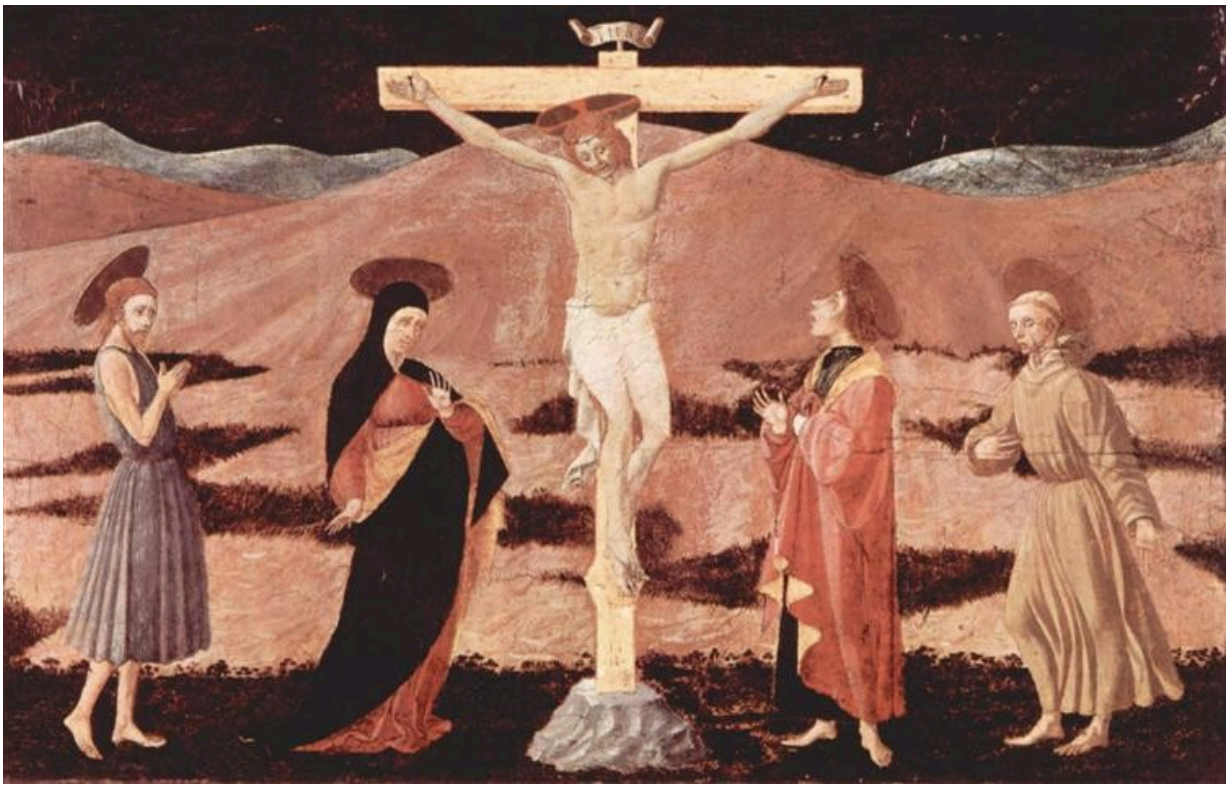
Object source · Open artwork

05 / 20

The Crucifixion

Paolo Uccello

1438 · Tempera on panel · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Christ on cross. WikiArt; Paolo Uccello. Proportional resizing and JPEG compression; source frame preserved. · Public domain

For a scene of suffering, this is remarkably orderly. The cross rises through a low, broad group of mourners, its upright set against their horizontal line, and the angular hills of a simplified terrain hold the bodies apart. Each mourner has a fixed place in relation to the death at the centre.

Object source · Open artwork

06 / 20

Christ on the Cross

Francisco de Zurbarán

1627 · Oil on canvas · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Francisco de Zurbarán. Christ on the Cross. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/francisco-de-zurbaran/christ-on-the-cross-1627 · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

Beside Uccello's, this is a Crucifixion made by subtraction: no mourners, no hills, almost no setting at all. Against near black, the pale body and the white cloth carry the image, and the cross supports them. Nothing around the figure tells the story. The viewer has to bring it.

Object source · Open artwork

07 / 20

Easter Morning

Caspar David Friedrich

1835 · Oil on canvas · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Easter Morning. WikiArt; Caspar David Friedrich. Proportional resizing and JPEG compression; source frame preserved. · Public domain

Three walkers head away between bare trees, under a sky in which the moon is still visible. What makes this Easter morning rather than any early walk? Friedrich paints no miracle. If the picture answers its title, it does so through light and season: a moon lingering in the morning sky, trees not yet in leaf. The walkers help too. Small as they are in the landscape, their movement along the path gives it a purpose.

Object source · Open artwork

08 / 20

The Grand Canal from Campo San Vio

Canaletto

1723 · Oil on canvas · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Canaletto. Grand Canal, Looking East from the Campo San Vio. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/canaletto/grand-canal-looking-east-from-the-campo-san-vio-1723 · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

The title names the viewpoint. From Campo San Vio, Canaletto fits foreground steps, small boats and long palace façades into a single, legible space. His carefully managed perspective sets out the large structure first, and the boats can wait. Small as they are beside the palaces, each can still be followed on its own course across the water.

Object source · Open artwork

09 / 20

The Happy Pierrot

Jean-Antoine Watteau

1712 · Oil on canvas · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Happy Pierrot. WikiArt; Jean-Antoine Watteau. Proportional resizing and JPEG compression; source frame preserved. · Public domain

A costumed company gathers round a musician among trees. They are playing theatrical roles, but no clearly bounded stage contains them. The pale costume, presumably the Pierrot of the title, catches the eye first, and the title's claim comes with it. Is its wearer really as happy as all that? The costume announces a role, not the mood of the person inside it, and pauses and still faces in the group unsettle the cheerfulness.

Object source · Open artwork

10 / 20

New York with Moon

Georgia O'Keeffe

1925 · Oil on canvas · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Georgia O'Keeffe. New York with Moon. WikiArt source label: Georgia O'Keeffe Fair Use. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/georgia-o-keeffe/new-york-with-moon · Georgia O'Keeffe Fair Use (WikiArt source label)

There is no open view of the city. O'Keeffe paints the buildings from below, and their height hems in the sky that the moon of the title has to share. Overhead, hard architectural edges meet softer forms. Lower down and nearer to us, a streetlamp and a red accent claim attention of their own, so the moon has competition.

Object source · Open artwork

11 / 20

Our Lady of the Dry Tree

Petrus Christus

c. 1450 · Oil on panel · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Petrus Christus. Our Lady of the Dry Tree. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/petrus-christus/our-lady-of-the-dry-tree · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

The dry tree of the title is exactly that: bare, lifeless-looking branches close round Mary and the Child, and golden letters hang among them. Writing, plant forms and sacred figures are combined in a compact image that does not behave like an ordinary landscape. The tree is less a setting than a frame, and because it looks so dead, the pair stand out all the more.

Object source · Open artwork

12 / 20

Piazza San Marco Looking East

Canaletto

c. 1723 · Oil on canvas · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Canaletto. Piazza San Marco Looking East along the Central Line. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/canaletto/piazza-san-marco-looking-east-along-the-central-line · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

Canaletto's other view in this selection is close in date to the Grand Canal, but it trades water for stone. The arcaded rows lead the eye to the basilica, and the plan of the square is clear at once. The pedestrians take longer. Small and scattered, they break the broad paving into separate encounters and paths, doing for the piazza what the boats do for the canal.

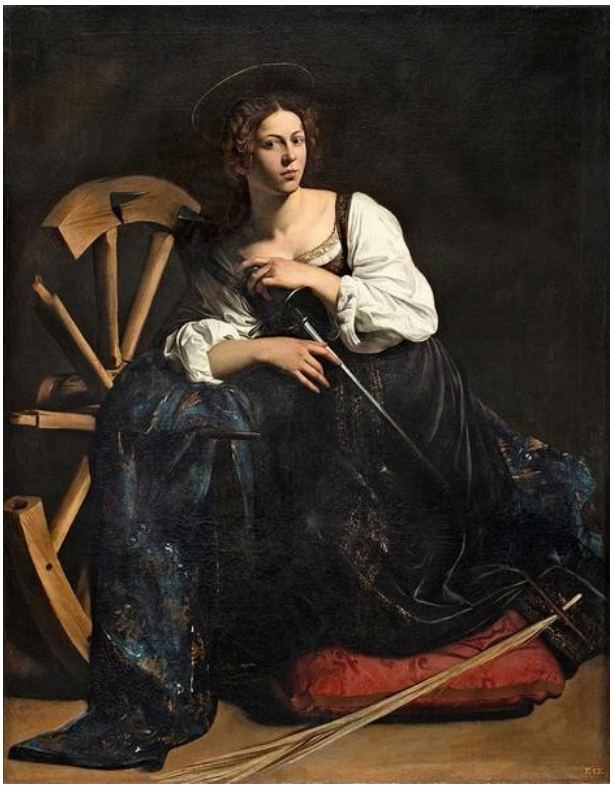
Object source · Open artwork

13 / 20

Saint Catherine of Alexandria

Caravaggio

c. 1598–99 · Oil on canvas · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Caravaggio. Saint Catherine of Alexandria. Image: WikiArt. Public domain (WikiArt label). Proportionally resized and JPEG compressed; no crop. · Public domain (WikiArt label)

Catherine kneels and looks straight out of the picture. Around her, at oblique angles, lie the broken wheel and the sword, the instruments of her martyrdom. They are there to identify her, not to show the martyrdom taking place, and it is her direct gaze, more than the story, that holds the picture.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: 81 (1934.37)

14 / 20

Black, Red, Black

Mark Rothko

1968 · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Mark Rothko. Black, Red and Black. WikiArt source label: Mark Rothko Fair Use. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/mark-rothko/black-red-and-black-1968 · Mark Rothko Fair Use (WikiArt source label)

The title reads like an inventory, and at first it seems a complete one: a red band between dark areas, its edges soft and uneven. But the painting rests on close differences, and a quick look flattens the darks into a uniform black. Given time, the relationships between the areas begin to emerge, and the inventory starts to look too short.

Object source · Open artwork

15 / 20

The Cook

Gabriël Metsu

c.1657 - c. 1667 · Oil on canvas · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Gabriël Metsu. The Cook. WikiArt source label: Public domain. Proportional resize and JPEG compression; no crop. Source: https://www.wikiart.org/en/gabriel-metsu/the-cook · Public domain (WikiArt source label)

Fish, vessels and a white-covered table might have made a still life, but this picture is named after a person. Metsu attends closely to provisions and equipment, which make the work of preparing food concrete and specific, yet the cook's face stays clearly visible among them. The room is set up for work, not as a display of plenty.

Object source · Open artwork

16 / 20

Landscape at Dusk

Vincent van Gogh

1885 · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Vincent van Gogh. Landscape at Dusk. Image credit: Vincent van Gogh. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Resized and JPEG-compressed; selected source frame preserved. · Public domain

Little light is left: a narrow yellow-orange band at the horizon, above rough ground and thin trees. Van Gogh keeps the foreground uneven and subdued, so the distant glow carries more weight.

Object source · Open artwork · Inventory: 788 (1966.8)

17 / 20

The Toilette

François Boucher

1742 · Oil on canvas · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



The Toilet. WikiArt; François Boucher. Proportional resizing and JPEG compression; source frame preserved. · Public domain

The toilette, or process of dressing, takes place here in a room crowded with fabrics, screens and small objects. A seated woman and a second figure attending to clothing keep their gestures legible amid it all, and the clothing being handled seems of a piece with the textiles that fill the room. For all its decoration, the room is shown in use.

Object source · Open artwork

18 / 20

The Toilet of Venus

Peter Paul Rubens

1608 · Oil on canvas · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Venus at her Toilet. WikiArt; Peter Paul Rubens. Proportional resizing and JPEG compression; source frame preserved. · Public domain

Where Boucher spreads the toilette across a crowded room, Rubens closes in. Much of the view is filled with pale flesh, white fabric and attending hands, and the mythological subject becomes an intimate action. The figures touch directly, and Cupid's mirror adds a second line of sight, bringing an image within the image into their exchange.

Object source · Open artwork

19 / 20

The Virgin and Child

Rogier van der Weyden

1432 · Oil · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Virgin and Child. WikiArt; Rogier van der Weyden. Proportional resizing and JPEG compression; source frame preserved. · Public domain

An elaborate Gothic niche encloses the Virgin and Child, and the whole arrangement has the look of carved stone. The colour of the clothing and bodies keeps the figures from reading as sculptural ornament, so they have the look of sculpture and the life of painting at once. The niche shelters the pair and also sets them apart from the viewer's space. Petrus Christus's dry tree may work in a similar way, enclosing the figures in something lifeless: dead branches where Rogier has stone.

Object source · Open artwork

20 / 20

A Balcony, Boulevard Haussmann

Gustave Caillebotte

1880 · Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Gustave Caillebotte. Balcony, Boulevard Haussmann. Image credit: Gustave Caillebotte. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain (https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/). Resized and JPEG-compressed; selected source frame preserved. · Public domain

For a picture named after a boulevard, this shows remarkably little of it. We stand behind two men on a balcony, and their bodies and the rail already take up part of the view. Trees and neighbouring façades are visible, but the street itself is mostly out of sight, and from where we stand we presumably see less of it than they do. Looking at the city becomes something that happens within the picture: the men watch from above, at a remove from whatever is going on below.

Object source · Open artwork

Above and below

Tiepolo and O'Keeffe both put the viewer underneath, with very different results. Tiepolo's oval is made for that position: to look up at it is to follow the direction of the hero's ascent, out of the shadowed crowd and towards the light. O'Keeffe keeps us low too, but in her New York the upward look runs into architecture before it reaches the sky, and the moon gets only what the buildings leave. Height might seem the remedy. Caillebotte does lift us to a balcony, but then stands us at the back of it, behind the men and the rail, where the street below is still largely hidden.

Further reading

Impressionism: A Centenary Exhibition

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

An exhibition catalogue on Impressionism and its contexts, which you can read online or download. Here it is most useful for background on Sisley and Caillebotte, and on how the subjects of nineteenth-century painting were changing. It has little to say about the earlier and later works in this selection.

Museum website · Official collection guide

Sources and visitor information checked: 2026-10-12
