

Emma's Top 15 Picks:
Eighteenth-Century and Romantic-Period Artworks at the National Gallery of Canada

1. Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=5363>



The Battle of the Plains of Abraham, in 1759, shaped Canadian history, with the British General Wolfe's victory over the French General the Marquis de Montcalm outside Québec City. Benjamin West's canvas has echoed equally through Canadian art history, as a vivid image of the moment when our nation began to assume its current shape – and electrified British art lovers, as it seemed to open a new path for history painting. West brought together a new combination: grand strategies of composition and expression united with the familiar details of contemporary dress. Horatio Nelson greatly admired this painting, with its powerful depiction of a commander dying on the field of glory. Kent Monkman is a contemporary Canadian artist of Cree ancestry, and in his 2008 painting, *The Academy*, Monkman takes over West's figure of the seated Indigenous warrior (see <http://www.ago.net/agopeoplechoice>) – a sign of how *The Death of General Wolfe* continues to haunt the Canadian imagination.

For a reading of West's painting as history painting, see Chapter 8 of Mark Salber Phillips's *On Historical Distance* (Yale UP, 2013). Mark is leading one of the seven seminar workshops at NASSR 2017, on "Why All the Fuss About Fresco? The Fine Arts Commission and the Re-decoration of the Houses of Parliament."

2. Thomas Gainsborough's *Ignatius Sancho*, 1768.

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=10147>



Thomas Gainsborough's portrait of Ignatius Sancho is the first European painting that the National Gallery of Canada acquired. It's a wonderful choice, because this portrait has a truly transatlantic significance. Ignatius Sancho was born on a slave ship and orphaned at two. The Duke of Montagu met Ignatius by chance, appreciated the young child's talents, took him into his own household, and proved a supportive patron. Ignatius Sancho's witty, heartfelt letters to his contemporaries and his musical compositions were used as evidence that Africans could be just as intelligent and feeling as Europeans. According to legend, Thomas Gainsborough painted this evocative likeness in under two hours in Bath.

3. Joshua Reynolds's *Charles Churchill*, 1755

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=13065>



On Sir Joshua Reynolds's death in 1792, William Blake wrote a rude little verse:

When Sr Joshua Reynolds died
All nature was degraded;
The King dropped a tear into the Queen's ear;
And all his Pictures Faded.

Blake's verse speaks to Reynolds's exalted place in the British art world, favoured by royalty as Founder and first President of the Royal Academy: a powerful Establishment figure. Blake also notes a major technical flaw in Reynolds's canvases, for even during Reynolds's lifetime, many of his paintings faded or cracked, due to his reliance on chemically unstable pigments.

However, even when living sitters saw their Reynolds portraits assuming ghostly hues before their eyes, they rarely minded. It is a tribute to the ongoing experimental nature of Reynolds's artistic practice. This portrait of Charles Churchill is in a contrapostal stance, weight distributed on the diagonal, similar to Greek and Roman statues and to Reynolds's groundbreaking portrait of Commodore Augustus Keppel from 1752. Nowadays, we feel that it is a very familiar strategy to add grandeur to a portrait by borrowing a pose from classical statuary – but when Reynolds began to do this in the 1750s, it was nearly unprecedented in British art.

Daniel O'Quinn is leading a seminar workshop at NASSR 2017 on the topic of Reynolds: "Living Through Crisis: Sir Joshua Reynolds, Decolonization and the Dialectical Image."

4. George Romney's *Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant)*, 1776

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=5361>



George Romney is perhaps best known now for his portraits of Lord Nelson's lover, Lady Emma Hamilton. Here, Romney is painting an acclaimed and heroic man rather than a bohemian woman who scandalized her contemporaries. Thayendanegea's name means "two sticks bound together for strength," and as a war leader he was indeed a source of strength to the Iroquois Confederation to which he belonged. The British knew him as "Joseph Brant," and accorded him the rank of Captain during the Revolutionary War, when the Iroquois Confederation allied with the British. Romney painted him during Thayendanegea's visit to England to negotiate his nation's role in the war. The silver gorget which he wears in the painting was presented to him by George III.

5. Joseph Wright of Derby's *The Captive*, 1775-1776



In one sense, this is an unusual scene for Joseph Wright of Derby. Wright is not generally known for his illustrations of literary works, and this painting is based on a scene from Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768). Parson Yorrick is reckoning the consequences of having neglected to bring a passport on his travels, and he imagines wearing away days and years in captivity. In other ways, this canvas is quite typical of Wright, with a single, strong light source dramatically illuminating an otherwise dark indoor scene.

6. Philip James de Loutherbourg's *A Midsummer Afternoon with a Methodist Preacher*, 1777

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=9722>



De Loutherbourg is probably best known to literary scholars as the artist whose painted décor, commissioned by William Beckford in 1781, helped spur the young nobleman to compose *Vathek*. De Loutherbourg is also noted for his "Eidophusikon," dating to the early 1780s. The Eidophusikon is a miniature theatre that used moving transparencies – that is, paintings on glass, illuminated from behind, and in motion, anticipating cinematic effects by a century. As well as great renown at the Paris Salon, de Loutherbourg enjoyed commercial success as a theatrical scene designer and painter, collaborating with David Garrick. This canvas, with its caricatured figures, gives a strong sense of a theatrical event and audience; the sharp foreshortening from the little group in the foreground to the preacher in the middle ground show us how de Loutherbourg conveyed the illusion of depth in his works.

7. Henry Fuseli's *The Dream of Belinda*, 1780-1790



Fuseli created two images inspired by Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1711-1714): one of the Cave of Spleen, destined for engraving, and this oil painting of *The Dream of Belinda*. For some time, art historians misidentified the subject as Queen Mab, for Fuseli's imagination makes significant additions to Pope, and even overshadows the original subject. A sleeper dreaming figures that erupt into the canvas is one of the hallmarks of Fuseli's painting; one of his best-known canvases is the troubling and enigmatic *The Nightmare* (1782; <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/gothic-nightmares-fuseli-blake-and-romantic-imagination>).

8. Sir Henry Raeburn's *Jacobina Copland*, c. 1794-1798

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=6339>



"If you are a fair woman," eighteenth-century advice ran, "go to Raeburn. If you are a florid man, go to Reynolds." Sir Henry Raeburn is best known now as the portraitist of the men of the Scottish Enlightenment, but this lovely portrait shows Raeburn's sensitivity in painting female sitters, with its sitter's direct, enquiring gaze and its glowing background. Jacobina Copland's wrapped gown and hairstyle *à la citoyenne* show the politicization of fashion in the 1790s.

9. Antonio Canal, called Canaletto's *St. Mark's and the Clock Tower, Venice*, c. 1735-1737

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=10045>



"I stood in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs, / A palace and a prison on each hand," wrote Byron. "I saw from out the wave her structures rise / As from the stroke of the enchanter's wand." Few cities had such a grip on the Romantic imagination as Venice, and few painters did as much as Canaletto to shape Britons' vision of Venice. This painting does not include the water of the canals and the lagoons that defines Venice, but it is full of the details of Venetians' daily lives – and their dogs' – in the presence of historic edifices and landmarks.

10. Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun's *Countess Tolstoya*, 1796

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=205150>



Vigée Le Brun was one of the foremost female artists of the Romantic era. Having been portraitist to Marie Antoinette, she was forced into over a decade of exile during the French Revolution. Vigée Le Brun turned her banishment to good effect; like Sir Joshua Reynolds, she travelled in Italy to imbue her art with classical and Renaissance influences. She then travelled through Europe, documenting its various courts with portraits of influential aristocratic families through generations. This portrait of the Countess Anna Ivanovna Tolstoya is one of her first to pose a female figure, with loosely bound hair, in a natural setting beside a waterfall, a quintessentially Romantic composition that Vigée Le Brun was to repeat throughout her career.

11. Antonio Canova's *Dancer*, 1818-1822

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=7390>



“Behold the Helen of the Heart!” declared Lord Byron, on seeing one of Canova’s statues. The Emperor Napoleon and Empress Josephine were also both admirers of Canova’s work; in fact, when Lord Elgin sought an artist to restore the Elgin Marbles to their original, whole state, Canova was his first choice – although Canova declined the commission, citing concerns with authenticity and preservation. Admiration for Canova transcended national and political boundaries, rendering him the foremost sculptor of the Romantic era. This charming, spritely statue provides a particularly engaging representation of his work.

12. Jacques-Louis David's *St. Jerome*, 1779

<http://www.gallery.ca/drawntoart/35.htm>



With his galvanic neoclassical figures, Jacques-Louis David brought a new style to French painting and became one of the chief artists of the French Revolution. His *The Oath of the Horatii* (1784, <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/oath-horatii>) would be seen as the embodiment of Republican virtue, courage, and self-sacrifice, and his *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1800, <http://musees-nationaux-malmaison.fr/chateau-malmaison/objet/c-le->

[premier-consul-franchissant-les-alpes-au-col-du-grand-saint-bernard](#)) is one of the most iconic Napoleonic portraits. In this *St. Jerome*, David is still adhering to seventeenth-century religious themes and styles – for instance, the way that St. Jerome is twisting and the strong contrast of light and shadow are very typical of Baroque artworks. However, the clarity and heroism that typify David’s more famous later paintings are strongly in evidence here.

13. Joseph Mallord William Turner’s *Mercury and Argus*, 1836 (partly repainted in 1840)

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=3264>



Unlike Turner’s later vortices of light, sea, vapour, and air, this is a detailed landscape, depicting a particular scene from classical mythology. Mercury is lulling the many-eyed watchman Argus to sleep, in order to free Zeus’s lover Io (transformed into a white heifer) from Argus’s scrutiny. This picture was a favourite with the great critic John Ruskin, and its light and sky hint at the development of Turner’s mature style.

14. Eugène Delacroix’s *Othello and Desdemona*, 1847-1849

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=7660>

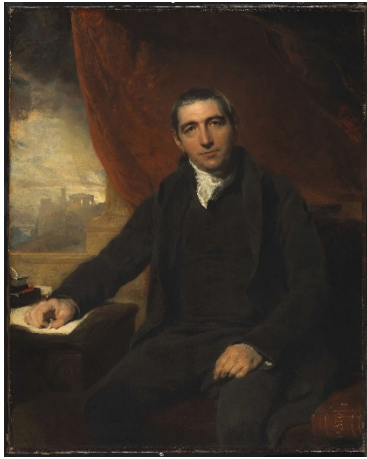


Delacroix is a late Romantic painter, but in works like *The Death of Sardanapalus*, based on Byron’s tragedy (1827, <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/death-sardanapalus>),

Delacroix shows himself to be one of the most innovative, expressive, and powerful interpreters of Romanticism. This much smaller work shares its theatrical preoccupations with British Romantic authors: the remediation of Shakespeare's dramas into painting, engraving, and interweaving with novels. Its sumptuous crimson palette gives an almost suffocatingly lush setting for Othello's violence and reflects his tortured, bloody state of mind.

15. Thomas Lawrence's *Thomas Taylor*, c. 1812

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=10389>



This last painting serves as an inspiration to us as scholars. Thomas Taylor was nicknamed both "Taylor the Platonist" and "Taylor the Pagan," reflecting his love of classical scholarship and his fearless free thinking. Sir Thomas Lawrence captures his sitter's very direct gaze, and gives him the desk laden with learned volumes and manuscripts that is traditional in scholarly portraits. Lawrence also luxuriates in the velvet textures of Taylor's clothing and curtains – and, in the background, includes the Acropolis, almost as though the remnants of Periclean Athens hover over Taylor's writing hand. We can compare this painting with an earlier Humanist portrait in the National Gallery, Bronzino's portrait of Pierantonio Bandini, which features a vivid cobalt-blue statue of Venus in the background (1550-1555, <https://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=10046>). As the painting has aged and its various layers have thinned and shifted, Lawrence's changes in composition have become visible.