

French  
paintings  
1800–1945

Anatomy of  
a collection

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Exhibition  
Leaflet

MUSÉE CANTONAL  
DES BEAUX-ARTS  
LAUSANNE  
Espace Focus

## French paintings 1800–1945. Anatomy of a collection

The Musée Arlaud opened in 1841 on the Place de la Riponne in Lausanne. Looking to enrich its collection, the painter Marc-Louis Arlaud was to donate some of his own works as well as pictures from various French and Northern European schools of art. The collection, however, long remained grounded in an insistence on national and cantonal identities, and throughout the second half of the 19th century it was resolutely focused on contemporary painters from Romandy, the French-speaking Western cantons of the Swiss Confederation, regardless of where these artists lived and worked, whether in Switzerland or abroad. There would be a few gifts from patrons following in Arlaud's footsteps which expanded and enhanced the young institution, but French painting proved rare.

While Émile Bonjour was director (from 1894 to 1935), the museum, with only a few exceptions, carried on the same policy when acquiring pieces. French artworks did enter the collection but more or less by chance, following a donation or a bequest. Given that the museum's budget was modest, the priority continued to be the acquisition of works by Swiss painters. But it is to Bonjour above all, a shrewd negotiator, that the museum owes the addition of Henri-Auguste Widmer's collection to its holdings. The Lausanne physician promised in 1924 to donate this extensive group of artworks, a gift that would eventually take place in two phases in 1936 and 1939. The arrival of over one hundred French paintings and pastels—not counting the many Italian, Belgian, and Swedish works—fundamentally changed the face of the museum's collection. In this way the institution opened up to acquiring and displaying the artistic output of one of Switzerland's neighbours—and no longer sporadically.

Jean Descoullayes, the museum director from 1936 to 1951, was far from sharing his predecessor's enthusiasm for the Widmer Bequest. Few were the pieces, as he saw it, that showed anything of interest, and he judged most of them to be only fit for the tip, worthy of the city dump. Between April 1948 and April 1949, he exchanged nearly 110 artworks from the Widmer Collection for only five that belonged to the Lausanne art dealer Joseph-Louis Reichlen. Descoullayes's lack of sound judgement also led him to acquire works of doubtful attribution, even mere copies. All the same he did purchase the occasional piece to complete certain series or groups of artworks and bolstered the presence of French artists he was interested in, such as Albert Marquet, Maurice Utrillo, and Maurice Denis.

Ernest Manganel, the director of the museum from 1951 to 1962, put in place an acquisitions policy that shows a decisive turn to contemporary art. This preference was to be confirmed under René Berger, who served as the director from 1962 to 1981. While they did not turn down donations or bequests of older pictures, Manganel and Berger do not seem to have actively tried to land new pieces from the 19th and early 20th centuries, even though such works were heavily represented in private collections of the region. Nevertheless, thanks to gifts to the museum, the collection did grow to include a painting by a young Théodore Géricault, a view of Lausanne and Lake Geneva by Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, and several landscapes by Utrillo.

We have to wait until the final decade of the 20th century for the Widmer Bequest to become the catalyst of a more ambitious acquisitions policy, which was carried out in particular under the directorships of Jörg Zutter and Bernard Fibicher, and has been continued right up to the present day.

Although not on the scale of the Widmer Bequest, the Frey-Besson Donation in 2004 allowed the museum to acquire an additional painting by Auguste Renoir and works by the former Nabis Maurice Denis and Ker-Xavier Roussel. In 2006, thanks to a bequest made by Edwige Guyot, pictures by two prestigious artists, Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro, also entered the collection. The questioning of an art history compartmentalised by schools pushed the museum to acquire works that establish connections between Swiss and French art.

Finally, the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts's project for a new building, which became a reality when the museum reopened in 2019 at its current address on the Plateforme 10 site, has encouraged collectors and foundations to lend or donate artworks, notably paintings by French artists.

Exhibition curators:

Camille Lévêque-Claudet, Curator, MCBA, and Camille de Alencastro, Assistant Curator, MCBA

Find more French artworks on the first floor, in the collection display (room 3).

Publication:

Camille Lévêque-Claudet and Camille de Alencastro (ed.), *Catalogue raisonné des peintures et des pastels français du Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne (1800–1945)*, Lausanne, Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, 2025, 224 p., Fr. CHF 35.–  
Available at the MCBA Book- and Giftshop  
→ [shop.mcba@plateforme10.ch](mailto:shop.mcba@plateforme10.ch)

Events:

Reservations are required for all events:  
→ [mcba.ch/agenda](http://mcba.ch/agenda)

Guided tours with the exhibition curators (in French)  
Thursday, 16 April and 21 May at 6.30 pm

Guided tour for the Ami-e-s du MCBA (in French)  
Tuesday, 12 May at 12.30 pm

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