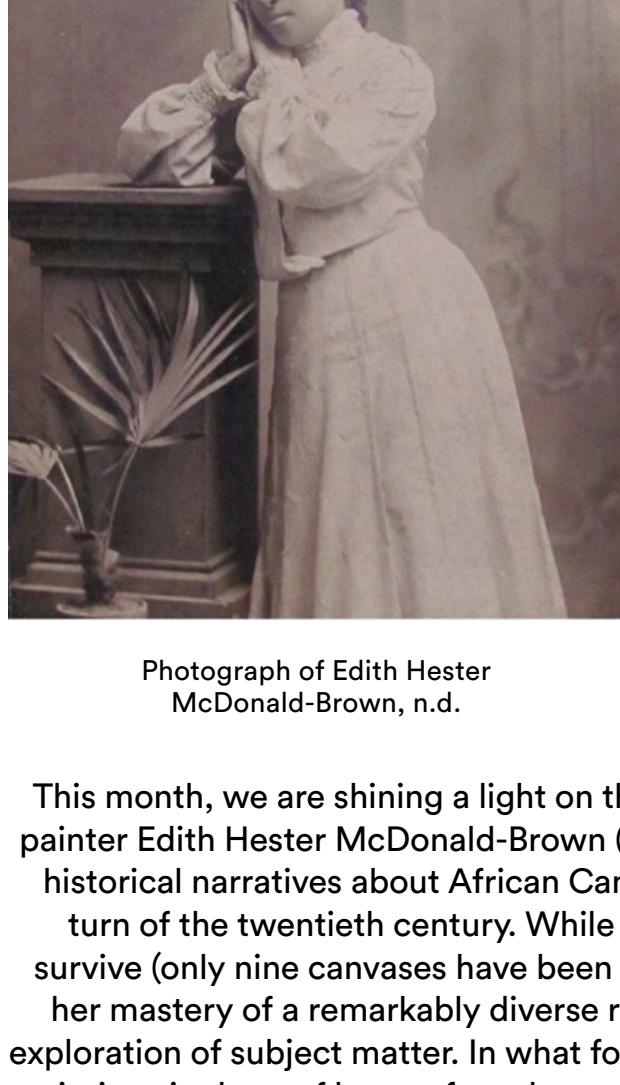


EDITH HESTER MCDONALD-BROWN PAINTING BOLDLY ACROSS GENRES

In honour of Black History Month, we are looking at the creative legacy of this groundbreaking painter from Nova Scotia



Photograph of Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, n.d.



Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, *Landscape with Waterfall*, n.d.

This month, we are shining a light on the visionary creations of the Halifax-born painter Edith Hester McDonald-Brown (1880–1956), whose artistic works rescript historical narratives about African Canadian life and cultural production at the turn of the twentieth century. While just a handful of McDonald's paintings survive (only nine canvases have been attributed to her), the few that do reflect her mastery of a remarkably diverse range of styles and demonstrate a broad exploration of subject matter. In what follows, we take a closer look at McDonald's paintings in three of her preferred genres, including a vibrant still life, a charming landscape, and a dazzling genre painting. As scholar Adrienne R. Johnson notes in her research on the artist, "McDonald's work is an exemplary testimony [to] ... the legacy of African Canadian female artists' creative contributions, aspirations, agency, and intellectual authorship." We hope that this artist's work, story, and talent inspire connection and inspiration in the classroom.

— The Art Canada Institute Education Team

AVENUES TO EXPLORE

Culture and Community



Seaview African United Baptist Church, 2016, photograph by Dennis Jarvis.

McDonald was raised by a middle-class family in Africville, a segregated community located on the outskirts of Halifax. Founded in the early 1800s by a wave of Black refugees—many of whom were former enslaved people promised freedom and land in Nova Scotia—Africville was to its inhabitants a vibrant and close-knit community despite being the target of municipal neglect and discrimination throughout its history. Between 1964 and 1967, Africville residents were forcibly relocated from their homes and the community was razed, leading to the destruction of many cultural objects and artifacts. Today, a museum (pictured above) commemorating Africville's history stands upon the former site of the Seaview African United Baptist Church, which was once a communal hub.

Learn more about the history of Africville and Black Nova Scotia with a teaching resource by the [Canadian Museum of History](#).

Still-Life Arrangements



Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, *Still Life*, 1913.

Though born in Nova Scotia, McDonald is believed to have received artistic training in Montreal. *Still Life*, 1913, demonstrates her unique interpretation of a classic genre of academic painting—one she would have been exposed to in a formal art school setting. Until 2013, this colourful painting was the only one of McDonald's works to have been exhibited publicly. The depiction of blossoming sweet peas is particularly striking for its nearly invisible brushstrokes and its rendering of light. An especially strong demonstration of McDonald's skill, the canvas models how carefully arranged compositional elements and the use of both vivid and subtle hues can create mesmerizing, deeply lifelike images.

To facilitate still-life projects in the classroom, see our [Teacher Resource Guide on the Elements of Art](#) for activity ideas.

Inviting Landscapes



Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, *Lake Scene*, 1909.

One of the most popular genres of Canadian painting, landscape art was an especially common subject among Halifax artists in the city's first centuries. The idyllic *Lake Scene*, 1909, offers a rare glimpse of human life in McDonald's body of scenic works, picturing three lakeside homes against a cloud-filled sky. According to art historian Adrienne R. Johnson, "McDonald's paintings do not only exemplify how she saw the landscapes she portrayed, but also illustrate how she saw herself in and navigated Canada's landscapes—psychically and physically." The painter's detailed approach to this foundational genre prompts further examination of visual elements in the world, and is the perfect springboard for observation-based classroom discussion.

Looking for landscape activities? [Our Teacher Resource Guides](#) on Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald, Norval Morrisseau, and Tom Thomson take the land and landscape as a central inspiration.

Lively Genre Scenes



Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, *Highland Cattle*, 1906.

Featuring a herd of animals against an abundant and hilly backdrop, McDonald's *Highland Cattle*, 1906, is a romantic take on the genre of animal painting, which was popularized during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Not only does this majestic work demonstrate a keen sense of escapism—such mountainous scenes are suggestive of Western Canada—but it illustrates McDonald's proficient, refined brushwork, her vivid use of colour to render lush, verdant vegetation, and her ability to create complex compositions. In this careful balance of shadow and light, students can see how technique can enhance the drama and dynamism of a painting.

Read more about historical artists from Nova Scotia in the recent publication [Halifax Art & Artists: An Illustrated History](#) by Ray Cronin.

As a bilingual organization, we are proud to offer our materials in both French and English, including this newsletter. Use the sign up links below to receive emails in your preferred language.

SIGN UP

S'INSCRIRE

If you enjoyed this newsletter, please share it.

SHARE

READ PAST NEWSLETTERS

About the Art Canada Institute

Launched in 2013, the Art Canada Institute is the only national institution whose mandate is to promote the study of an inclusive multi-vocal Canadian art history to as broad an audience as possible, in both English and French, within Canada and internationally. The ACI works with more than fifty of Canada's leading art historians, curators, and visual culture experts who are dedicated to the creation of authoritative original content on the people, themes, and topics that have defined Canadian art history.

We are creating a central digital resource to tell the world about Canada's most important works of art and where they are located. By functioning as an online art museum, a [digital library](#), and an interactive Canadian art encyclopedia, the ACI is an indispensable resource on Canada's visual heritage.

Visit us at [aci-iac.ca](#)

Thank You to Our Benefactors

We gratefully acknowledge the Founding Sponsors of The Canadian Schools Art Education Program: The Hal Jackman Foundation, The McLean Foundation, and Power Corporation of Canada.

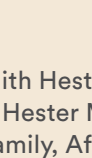
The ACI is a not-for-profit educational charity that receives no government financing or public support. Our work is made possible by an important circle of [friends, patrons, and benefactors](#).

If you would like to support our important work, please see [this page](#).

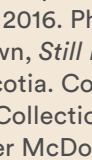
Follow us on social media



Facebook
[artcaninstitute/](#)



Instagram
[@artcaninstitute](#)



Twitter
[@artcaninstitute](#)

Image Credits: [1] Portrait of Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, n.d. Collection of the Brown-Howe family, Africville, Nova Scotia. [2] Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, *Landscape with Waterfall*, n.d., oil on canvas. Collection of the Brown-Howe family, Africville, Nova Scotia. Courtesy of MSVU Art Gallery. [3] Seaview African United Baptist Church, 2016. Photograph by Dennis Jarvis. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons. [4] Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, *Still Life*, 1913, oil on canvas, 31.7 x 38.1 cm. Collection of the Brown-Howe family, Africville, Nova Scotia. Courtesy of MSVU Art Gallery. [5] Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, *Lake Scene*, 1909, oil on canvas. Collection of the Brown-Howe family, Africville, Nova Scotia. Courtesy of MSVU Art Gallery. [6] Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, *Highland Cattle*, 1906, oil on canvas, 49.3 x 74.9 cm. Collection of the Brown-Howe family, Africville, Nova Scotia. Photo credit: Joey Yazer.