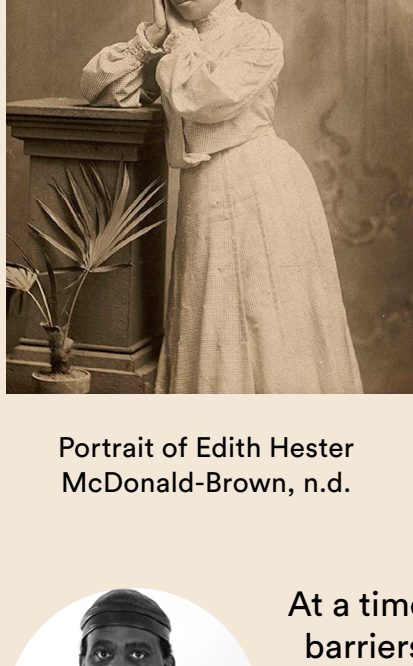
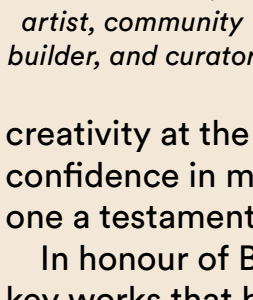


FEBRUARY 20, 2026

EDITH HESTER MCDONALD-BROWN
CANADA'S FIRST BLACK WOMAN ARTIST*Rediscovering a long-overlooked talent.*

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

Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, *Highland Cattle*, 1906, collection of the Brown-Howe family, Africville, Nova Scotia.

David Woods, artist, community builder, and curator

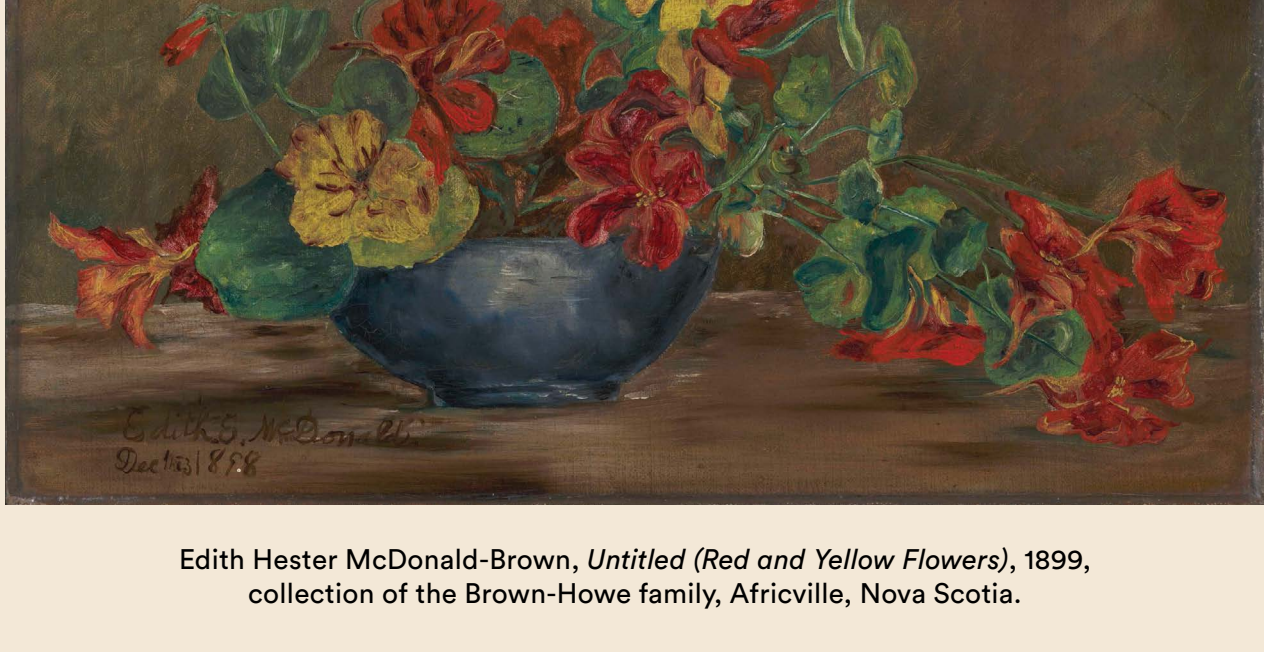
At a time when Black artists in this country faced profound barriers to training and recognition, Edith Hester McDonald-Brown (1886–1954)—now understood to be the first recorded Black woman artist in Canada—created a compelling body of work that has only recently begun to receive sustained attention. Thanks to curator David Woods, who last year created the exhibition *From Africville: The Paintings of Edith MacDonald-Brown* at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery in Halifax, we now know about McDonald-Brown, whose paintings offer rare insight into African Canadian creativity at the turn of the twentieth century. Her few surviving works reveal her confidence in moving between still lifes, landscapes, and genre scenes—each one a testament to her skill and ambition.

In honour of Black History Month, we take a closer look this week at several key works that bring McDonald's practice into sharper view. Seen together, they shed light on the Halifax-born painter's artistic influences and the conditions under which she persevered. They also point to the significance of her contributions and the need to more fully acknowledge her place in Canadian art history.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

COMMAND OF A CLASSICAL GENRE

Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, *Untitled (Red and Yellow Flowers)*, 1899, collection of the Brown-Howe family, Africville, Nova Scotia.

Though born in Nova Scotia, McDonald is believed to have received artistic training in Montreal, where she moved with her family in the late 1890s. Her earliest known work, *Untitled (Red and Yellow Flowers)*, dates from this period. The painting reflects the academic traditions common to art education at the time, including close study from established models. Executed with measured, nearly invisible brushstrokes and careful attention to colour and composition, the work is an early indication of McDonald's disciplined approach to still life.

Learn more

DRAMA IN DETAILS

Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, *Highland Cattle*, 1906, collection of the Brown-Howe family, Africville, Nova Scotia.

McDonald's artistic training laid the foundation for a practice marked by technical control and close observation. In genre scenes, she carefully set her animal subjects within lush natural environments. This is especially evident in *Highland Cattle*, 1906, her best-known surviving work. Depicting a herd grazing across a rolling pastoral landscape, the painting demonstrates McDonald's assured brushwork, vivid use of colour, and nuanced handling of light and texture. Here, her technique heightens the mood and visual drama of the scene.

Learn more in *Halifax Art & Artists: An Illustrated History*

PAINTING PLACE AND POSSIBILITY

Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, *Untitled (Lake Scene)*, 1909, collection of the Brown-Howe Family, Africville, Nova Scotia.

Painting outdoors, or *en plein air*—which made it possible to capture shifting light, atmosphere, and immediate encounters with the natural environment—became an increasingly popular method among Canadian artists at the turn of the twentieth century. McDonald's *Untitled (Lake Scene)*, 1909—a winter landscape depicting a snow-covered shoreline, bare trees, a small bridge, and a distant house beneath a glowing sky—reflects this wider engagement with landscape as both subject and lived experience. While there is no direct evidence that McDonald worked outdoors, art historian Adrienne R. Johnson [notes](#) that she would not have been bound by the same constraints that white women artists faced. “On the off chance she did work *en plein air*, her being Black could have afforded her the ability to do so.”

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REDISCOVERING EDITH HESTER
MCDONALD-BROWNInstallation views, *From Africville: The Paintings of Edith MacDonald-Brown*, 2025, at MSVU Art Gallery, Halifax.

McDonald's work remained largely absent from public view for much of the twentieth century, reflecting the broader under-documentation of Black artistic production in Canada. A major turning point came in 1998, when her paintings were exhibited as part of curator David Wood's exhibition *In This Place: Black Art in Nova Scotia*. This helped spark renewed interest in her life and work. Woods later expanded this effort through the 2025 exhibition *From Africville: The Paintings of Edith MacDonald-Brown* at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery in Halifax. This exhibition brought together nine of the thirteen surviving works attributed to the artist. Foundational research by scholar Adrienne R. Johnson has also been critical in reconstructing McDonald's biography and artistic legacy, helping to re-establish her place within Canadian art history.

Learn more

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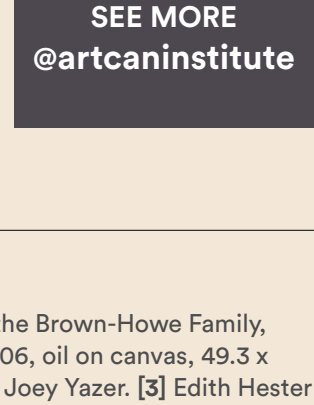
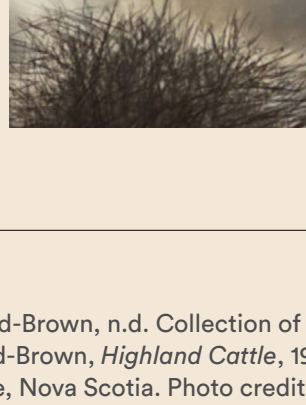
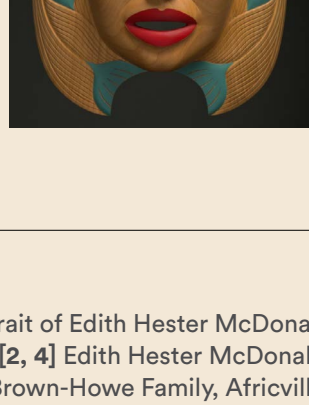
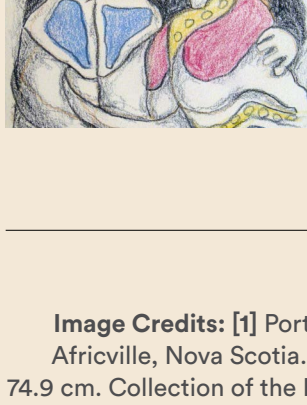
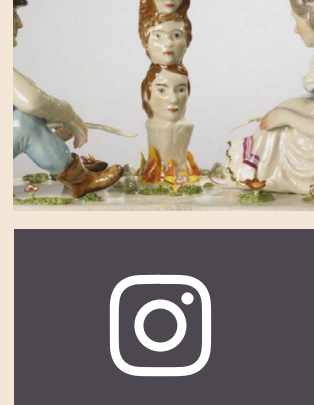
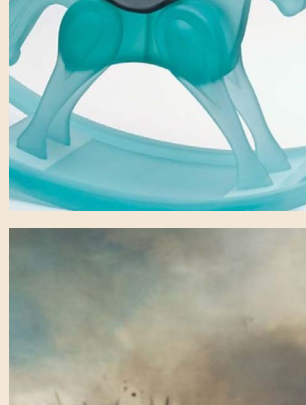
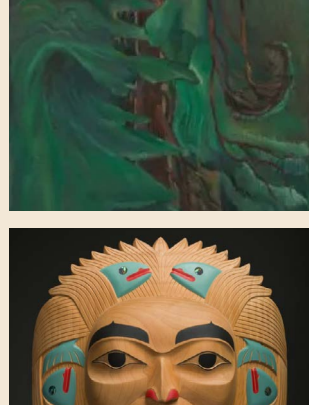
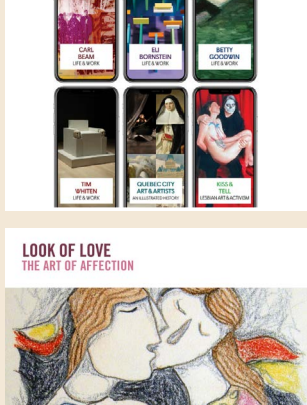
for more on great art in Canada

Image Credits: [1] Portrait of Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, n.d. Collection of the Brown-Howe Family, Africville, Nova Scotia. [2, 4] 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. [3] Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, *Untitled (Red and Yellow Flowers)*, 1899, oil on canvas. Collection of the Brown-Howe Family, Africville, Nova Scotia. Courtesy of MSVU Art Gallery. Photo credit: Keely Hopkins. [5] Edith Hester McDonald-Brown, *Untitled (Lake Scene)*, 1909, oil on canvas. Collection of the Brown-Howe Family, Africville, Nova Scotia. Courtesy of MSVU Art Gallery. Photo credit: Keely Hopkins. [6] Installation view, *From Africville: The Paintings of Edith MacDonald-Brown*, 2025, at MSVU Art Gallery, Halifax. Courtesy of MSVU Art Gallery. Photo credit: Keely Hopkins. [7] Installation view, *From Africville: The Paintings of Edith MacDonald-Brown*, 2025, at MSVU Art Gallery, Halifax. Courtesy of MSVU Art Gallery. Photo credit: Keely Hopkins.