

THEMATIC TOUR

BLACK



MUSÉE
DES BEAUX-ARTS
de LYON
MBA-LYON.FR



Explore the world of black in our collections via this thematic tour. From the Renaissance to the 21st century, find out more about how the colour black is used by artists for its plastic qualities, symbolic and social significance. Localize the works on the floor plans, the accompanying texts will highlight the different aspects of the theme.

LEVEL 2



1

JOOS VAN CLEEVE
PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN

Ca. 1520, oil on panel

This man in black stands out against a blue background with its variable shades of colour, which is modulated by the light source. The fine detail of his face and hands stands in contrast to his clothes, painted in almost monochrome black. The bourgeoisie adopted the colour black in the 16th century as a sign of social distinction. Black was a difficult colour to obtain, hence its high production costs, and it was not subjected to the dress customs of that period, when sumptuous reds and peacock blues were reserved for princes. The sober qualities of the black used in this work reflect the elegance of the subject, who was probably an Italian merchant living in Antwerp.



2

JUSEPE DE RIBERA THE REPENTANCE OF SAINT PETER

17th century, oil on canvas

The somber background creates a strong contrast with the pale face of Saint Peter who, according to the New Testament, had denied Jesus. This opposition carries out a symbolic intensity. Obscurity dominates, but the tear-filled look of Saint Peter is turned upwards, as if he were seeking pardon and light. This clear-obscure effect – ‘Tenebrism’ – was characteristic of the influence of Caravaggio on 17th century Spanish painters. It lends itself to the contrasting use of fine detail, such as seen in Saint Peter’s work-worn hands. A stone, a well-worn book and a key can be seen on the lower right. They confirm the saint’s identity, a reminder of the Christ’s declaration in the Gospel – ‘And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.’



3

MICHEL JANSZ VAN MIEREVELD PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN

1625, oil on panel

This unknown woman seems to be rigidly corseted in her attire. The black, which was much in vogue in the dominantly Protestant Holland of the 17th century, is modulated by subtle effects of light that produce a shimmering effect on the satin and the fan’s feathers. The sober quality of the background highlights decorative details such as the jewels, the brocaded corsage, the lace sleeves and the imposing collar embroidery. These features, as well as the artist, who was one of the portraitists of the aristocracy and the *haute bourgeoisie*, indicate the high social rank of the subject. Protestant painters favored sobriety, somber tones and subtle changes in shading. This rejection of brighter colours set them apart from Catholic Reformation painters, who preferred a much richer chromatic palette.



4

LOUIS JANMOT
THE POEM OF THE SOUL:
THE WRONG PATH

1854, oil on canvas

In this scene, which is taking place in a foreboding architectural setting, two adolescents are walking up a flight of stairs under the inquisitive look of the figures clad in the black robes of professors, standing in recesses of the wall. This painting is one of a series of eighteen canvasses in the same format that illustrate a poem of over 2,800 verses. It is completed by a set of sixteen drawings. This project took up fifty years of the artist's life. *The Poem of the Soul* is a religious work that narrates the mystical history of just one soul, and the artist attempts to convince the spectator of his theme by using heavily symbolic scenes. In this example, the colour black symbolizes the dangers of secular teaching threatening the Christian souls of the two central characters of *The Poem of the soul*.



5

PIERRE PUVIS DE CHAVANNES
PRINCESS MARIE CANTACUZÈNE

1883, oil on canvas

Dignity and melancholia characterize this portrait of Marie Cantacuzène, the partner and muse of painter Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. Her dress is painted in almost uniformly relief-free black and only the knot in her neck scarf and the veil over her hair offer any contours, thanks to the subtle effect of light. The black accentuates the pale aspect of her hands and face, which are painted with additional texture, adding to the depth and intensity of her facial expression. The use of black in this work expresses the psychological state of the model. It does not allude to mourning, and the artist declared: "This person is not a widow. [...] She is in a solemn, benevolent and dignified frame of mind. [...] People with a reflective disposition do not think in a joyful manner, but in this case there is no apparent grief."



6

CLAUDE MONET ROUGH SEA AT ÉTRETAT

1883, oil on canvas

Claude Monet painted this work during a stay in Normandy, and like all Impressionist artists he painted a number of landscapes *in situ*. For them, the colours of nature leave little room for black. In this work, the black obtained from traditional pigments is replaced by 'almost blacks' by using blue, red and green tones, rich in nuances. Influenced by the scientific theories of Isaac Newton, who affirmed that black and white are not colours, and by those of Eugène Chevreul, which demonstrate how a colour changes when it comes into contact with another colour, the Impressionists often omitted black from their palettes. Auguste Renoir once said with respect to this phenomenon: "One day one of us ran out of black and used blue instead. Impressionism was born!"



7

RAOUL DUFY BLACK CARGO

1952, oil on canvas

In the center of this work, the green silhouette of a cargo ship emerges from a large black shape. Very dense in its center, this obscure zone progressively melts into the more lively colours that surround it. Dufy is putting into practice his paradoxical conception of light which holds that "With the sun at its zenith, we see black. We are blinded and can see nothing in front of us." This animated composition, with its wide range of freely chosen motifs, revisits Sainte-Adresse near Le Havre, in ruins after the bombings of the Second World War. Raoul Dufy painted this work – one of the last in the *Black Cargos* series – towards the end of his life whilst he was in the United States for treatment for polyarthritis, which made it difficult for him to use his hands.

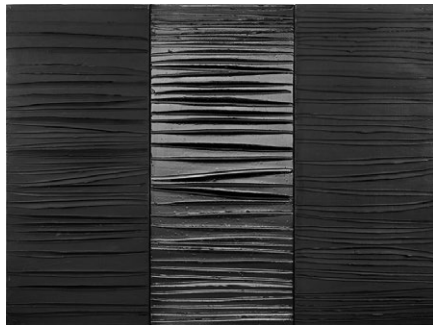


8

HANS HARTUNG
T. 1955-33

1955, oil on canvas

An eye-catching strip of light runs through the canvas from top to bottom, piercing the blue-black translucent background which has been painted energetically. The background is overlaid by a bundle of black lines and three large strokes of an intense and opaque black that bring the painting to life with their curved movement. The artist appears to have improvised these rapid and frenetic gestures. The resulting contrast between the homogenous background and the vigor of the black contours are striking and illustrate the painter's controlled 'violence'. The manner in which the work is interpreted is left to viewers, thus allowing them to mentally imitate the unbridled gestures contained within the work.



9

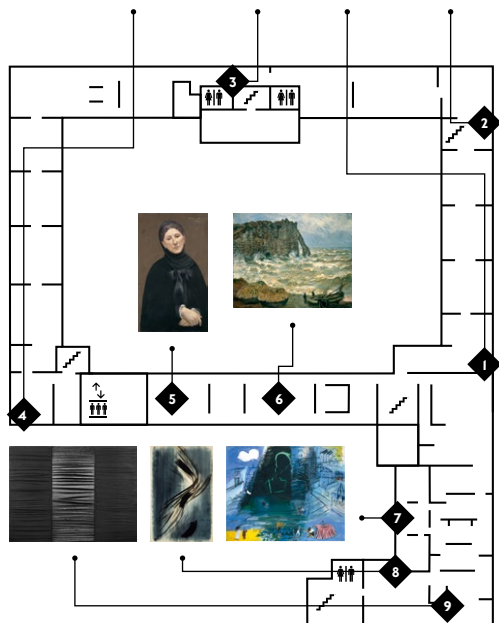
PIERRE SOULAGES, PAINTING
181 X 244 CM, 25 FÉVRIER 2009

2009, acrylic on canvas

This painting is invaded by black, whose texture and matter play with light in alternating lines of matt and gloss. It is representative of the concept that Pierre Soulages began to develop in 1979, calling it *outré-noir* (*ultrablack*). In this canvas, the paint is horizontally incised by a blade that deposits all excesses of paint on the edges of the lines. The grooves represent an opposing feature to the vertical sides of the supports. This 'line game' is reinforced by modulations in the effects of light, which is reflected out of or absorbed into the painting. The artist's technique creates shifting light within the work, and the viewer is able to follow the light's variations by moving to one side or another of the work.

"*Outrenoir* signifies that 'beyond the black is reflected light which is transmuted by the black'." (Soulages, 1996)

LEVEL 2



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