



A Local Canvas: Portraits from Bytown

Image: William Raphael, "Alonzo Wright", c.1885, oil on canvas, Bytown Museum, P626

This program allows students to explore the Bytown Museum's *A Local Canvas* virtual exhibit, with a focus on portraits. Students explore the styles and functions of portraiture, with a focus on the historical context of the artwork. This senior-level program also encourages critical-thinking and research, and gives students the opportunity to produce a unique art piece of their own.

Program Duration: 90-120 minutes

Grade Level (Ontario): Grade 11 (AVI3M), Grade 12 (AVI4M)

Curriculum Connections (Ontario)

AVI3M | Grade 11 Visual Arts, Mixed

During this program, students will:

- B1.1 analyse their initial response to art works
- B1.2 deconstruct the visual content and the use of elements and principles of design in their own art work and the work of others
- B1.3 explain, with reference to particular works, both historical and contemporary, how knowledge of an art work's cultural and historical context, achieved through research, has clarified and enriched their understanding of the work's intent and meaning
- B2.1 analyse the function and social impact of different kinds of art works in both past and present societies

AVI4M | Grade 12 Visual Arts, Mixed

During this program, students will:

- B1.1 demonstrate the ability to support their initial responses to a variety of art works with informed understanding of the works' artistic form and function
- B1.2 deconstruct with increasing skill and insight the visual content and the use of elements and principles of design in their own art work and the work of others
- B1.3 explain in detail, with reference to a variety of historical and contemporary art works, how knowledge of a work's cultural and historical context, achieved through extensive research, has clarified and enriched their understanding and interpretation of a work's intent & meaning
- B2.1 analyse, on the basis of research, the function and social impact of different kinds of art works in both past and present societies

Delivery Details

This program consists of independent and exploration-based study, best suited to individual or small-group work. Students will require access to the Bytown Museum's website in order to view the virtual [A Local Canvas](#) exhibit. If students choose to complete the extension component of the program, they will require access to materials with which to produce art, as well as a camera and internet access to [share](#) their piece with the Bytown Museum.



Image: W.A. Sherwood, "Captain Henry Allan Bate", 1896-1910, oil on canvas, Bytown Museum, P254

A Local Canvas: Portraits from Bytown



What is Portraiture?

Prior to photography, **portraiture** was one of the only ways to document someone's appearance. However, portraiture is subjective, and can emphasize or minimize certain features, giving insight into the **sitter's** life, personality, achievements, and more. For example, the facial expression or pose of the sitter often represent their implied personality traits; similarly, the portrait's setting or depiction of accessories can contextualize the sitter's life.

About this Program

This program explores the Bytown Museum's newest temporary exhibit, *A Local Canvas: Paintings from the Bytown Museum Collection*. This exhibit features a broad mix of paintings from the museum's collection, and covers a variety of topics from the region's history.

During this program, you will navigate the Bytown Museum's virtual exhibit, where you will examine the paintings, discuss your impressions of them, and research their subjects, artists, and historical backgrounds to inform your interpretation of them.

The exhibit can be accessed here:

<https://bytownmuseum.com/exhibitions/temporary-gallery/>

After your analysis, you will have the opportunity to create an art piece of your own, inspired by the *A Local Canvas* exhibit. You will then be able to share this with the Bytown Museum, for a chance to have your work featured on its social media pages!

Image: "Unidentified Man", n.d., oil on canvas, Bytown Museum, P178

Part A: Exploring the Exhibit

Visit the Bytown Museum's website and explore the [A Local Canvas](#) exhibit using the virtual tour.

Choose any one of the portrait paintings for your analysis, and answer the following questions.

Which portrait did you select?

What is your initial impression of the painting? Without doing any prior research, discuss the painting's subject, mood, and possible messages.

- What artistic strategies contribute to this impression? Consider elements such as colour, line, space, shape, technique, etc.

Examine the portrait, making note of the sitter and their surroundings. What elements of portraiture contribute to your impression of the painting? Consider the messages conveyed by elements such as facial expression, body language, clothing/accessories, and setting.

Part B: Research

In order to interpret your chosen portrait more accurately, it is important to investigate its background. This includes elements such as the background of the artist and subject, and the historical and societal context of the portrait's time period.

Using details from the exhibit and your own research, consider:

- Who is the sitter? What is their background, role, and legacy?
- When and where was the portrait painted? What significant historical events and trends were characteristic of that time and place?
- Can you find any details about the artist? Do their history, bias(es), or style contribute to the presentation of the portrait?

Part C: Discussion & Reflection

Discuss your research with a group or partner.

- Does your research impact your impression of the portrait?
- Has your interpretation of it changed from your initial impression? Why or why not?

After your research and analysis, what do you think is the purpose/function of this portrait?

SAMPLE: Portrait Analysis

Part A: Exploring the Exhibit

Painting selected: W.H. Sadd, "Portrait of Colonel By", n.d., oil on canvas, Bytown Museum, P299 (Note: This portrait is not from the A Local Canvas exhibit.)

This painting presents Col. John By. My first impression is that the painting is celebrating its **subject**, presenting it with grandeur. According to the exhibit, Col. John By supervised the construction of the Rideau Canal.



The painting seems to present the subject in a reverent way. For example, the subject is centred on the canvas, and the concentration of bright **colour** in the sitter's features brings attention to the subject, whereas the surroundings do not attract attention. The subject of the painting has a darker **value**, and the colour value gradually decreases farther from the subject. Similarly, the artist used the concept of **space** to make the subject the focal point of the painting. The subject's surroundings are negative space, so they do not detract from the sitter.

Since the artist made Col. John By the focus of the painting, many **details** can be found in his image. His **face** seems to be gazing into the distance, and appears to be proud or content; similarly, **his body language** shows that his chin is held high. The artist has not created the illusion of **movement**. Col. By is **wearing** what seems to be a military uniform, so he likely had a high-ranking military status. This makes sense, as the exhibit indicated that he was in charge of the Rideau Canal project. The **setting** of the portrait does not show Col. By in a particular location, so it is likely that the **purpose** of the portrait has been painted as a general commemoration or to mark the culmination of his exploits.

Overall, I think that this painting was created to commemorate someone of high historical importance.

Part B: Research

The **sitter** in this painting is Lt-Col. John By. He was a member of the Royal Engineers, and oversaw the construction of the Rideau Canal. Col. By had a long military history. For example, he enrolled in the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich in 1797, and served in England for a few years before being deployed to Canada to work on fortifying Québec. After about 8 years here, he returned to serve in England and retired after working as an engineer officer at the Royal Gunpowder Mills. Nonetheless, he was recalled to service in 1826 and sent to Canada once again to oversee the construction of the Rideau Canal. Although the project was a huge success, Col. By faced criticism for overspending on the project, and despite being cleared of any wrongdoing, he passed away only 3 years after the Canal's completion in 1832, not having been widely celebrated for his work. Since then, Col. By has been commemorated for his work on the Canal, for example by the Bytown Museum's research, exhibits, and programs. (Source: The Canadian Encyclopedia)

The Canal project that Col. By oversaw was a **significant historical event**. The Rideau Canal was constructed because after the War of 1812, it became apparent that the Canadian region and the



St-Lawrence River were quite vulnerable to any attack from the south. As such, the Rideau Canal was built to improve defenses and create a reliable transportation route between Montreal and Kingston. The Canal itself is 202km long, and runs between Kingston and Ottawa (then Bytown). The construction of the Canal was instrumental to the growth of Bytown, because it caused an influx of immigration to the area and the subsequent development of much new infrastructure. As such, Col. John By's work contributed largely to the growth of the Ottawa region as we know it today. (Source: Bytown Museum)



This portrait was painted by **artist** W.H. Sadd. Sadd was born in Toronto in 1864, and died in Manotick in 1954. He was primarily known for his colourful oil paintings of local Ottawa- and Toronto-region landscape and culture. Although the portrait is undated, the fact that Sadd was born in 1864 suggests that Col. By's likeness was painted several decades after his death. This likely contributed to Sadd's portrayal of Col. By in a more grand, reverent way. Therefore, it is likely that Sadd's interpretation of Col. By was influenced by the fact that public opinion of Col. By improved in the decades following his death. Additionally, Sadd's history of painting colourful landscapes and cultural vignettes likely contributed to his liberal use of colour in the painting, as many other portraits of notable figures at the time were done in more sombre, dignified, and conservative colour schemes. (Source: Department of Canadian Heritage)

Top Image: W.H. Sadd, "Long Island Lock House", n.d., watercolour on paper, Bytown Museum, P297

Lower Image: W.H. Sadd, "City Registry Office", n.d., ink on paper, Bytown Museum, P274

Part C: Discussion & Reflection

After researching the subject, artist, and context of this portrait, I have a **better understanding** of why Col. John By was portrayed as he was. For example, understanding that the **artist's perspective** of Col. By was influenced by several decades of societal reflection on his achievements likely explains why Col. By was depicted so positively. If Sadd had lived during the era immediately following the Canal's construction, his view of Col. By may have been influenced by accusations of financial mismanagement towards Col. By. Similarly, the fact that Sadd's artistic interest is primarily colourful scenery hints at the reasoning for his vibrant colour choice for Col. By's portrait.

Understanding Col. By's legacy in Bytown and on the Rideau Canal project makes me think that he merits the positive commemoration painted by Sadd. My **interpretation** of this portrait is similar to my initial impression of it, although it is now more nuanced and better-informed. I think that this painting's **purpose** is to commemorate Col. John By and his achievements, and serves the **function** of preserving him positively in public memory.

Part D: Extension Activity

After your reflections on portraiture, we invite you to create a portrait of your own! You may choose any subject as your sitter. For example, you may choose a sitter from the *A Local Canvas* exhibit, a friend, or even yourself! You may also use any artistic mediums or techniques to create this portrait. Pay special attention to techniques such as colour and space, and consider how your own history and perspectives influence your art.

As you create your portrait, consider some of the following features to convey your work's message and purpose:

- Body language and facial expression
- Clothing and accessories
- Setting/surroundings

We would love to see your artwork!

If you choose, you can submit your artwork to the Bytown Museum using this [form](#). You may have the chance to have your art posted on the Bytown Museum's social media pages. The link to the form is:

<https://forms.gle/g3NSJS1UT5whL83DA>

You can see the Bytown Museum's current social media pages at:

[@bytownmuseum](#) on Instagram

[Bytown Museum | Musée Bytown](#) on Facebook

Image: William Charles Forster, "Portrait of Musician – John Peter Pruden", 1778-1868, oil on canvas, Bytown Museum, P635



Thank you for participating!



About the Bytown Museum

Housed in Ottawa's oldest stone structure, the Bytown Museum explores the city's history from the early years of Rideau Canal construction, through the rough and tumble days of Bytown, to its emergence as Canada's capital and beyond.

The Bytown Museum is Ottawa's museum, exploring the stories and values of an evolving city and its residents from its First Peoples through the early days as Bytown to present day Ottawa. The Museum is committed to engaging our visitors and community in discovery and dialogue as we aim to deepen the many connections within and between our diverse communities.

