

# The Salon Room

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Heavily gilded frames, rich glowing colours, myriad painting genres and techniques, and paintings hung floor-to-ceiling: The Salon Room at NGV International perfectly captures the lavish displays so loved of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Salons.

The Art Services Team work hanging  
The Salon Room at NGV International  
Photo: Predrag Cancar

When the National Gallery of Victoria opened (as the Museum of Art) in 1861, the Paris Salon, founded in 1725, and the Royal Academy of Arts in London, founded in 1768, were at their peak. With few private or public galleries then in existence, the annual or biannual exhibitions held at these venues afforded the only place for many artists to exhibit their work, and thousands applied to be included in these prestigious shows. The aim was to exhibit as many works as possible, in Paris up to 4000 at a time, hence the density of the displays.

Patrons paid for the privilege of seeing the shows, which were well attended by the public as well as collectors, curators, dealers and, of course, other artists. Many of the works in the NGV's Salon Room were first presented to the public at the Paris Salon or at the Royal Academy and were acquired by the Gallery during these exhibitions.

All the artists represented here exhibited their work in these venerable institutions.

Traditionally the works exhibited were selected by juries, and with so many works, where the paintings were hung on the wall became an issue in itself. At the Paris Salon there was a Hanging Committee to determine in which room, and at what level, works would be displayed. While the hangings were often somewhat random, with little continuity or thematic grouping, the officials exercised a degree of control, banishing unpopular or controversial works to a very high or very low position. At the traditional *vernissage*, the preview of the exhibition, artists would come to add their final varnish or finishing touches to their work, but also to see where on the wall they had been hung. Being at eye level, or 'on the line', gave an artist a far better chance of being appreciated. Being relegated to ceiling height could be disastrous.

This style of dense hanging was also prevalent in the burgeoning public art galleries of the nineteenth century and early displays at the NGV were modelled on the Salon style. This method of hanging only began to lose favour towards the end of the 1800s with the growth of small art societies, artists' groups and private dealers, resulting in smaller but more regular exhibitions and fewer artists exhibiting together.

The NGV's Salon Room captures the mood of the Salon era, in both style and quality, with works by masters such as Daumier, Delacroix and Millet. As Laurie Benson, Curator, International Art, explained, 'This has given us the chance to bring out paintings that we haven't had on display recently. Because we have such a strong collection of Impressionist pictures, we rarely have a chance to hang our realist or romantic French paintings, especially smaller-scale ones.'

Stretching up the wall are narrative and history paintings, genre, landscape and more, though such is the richness of the NGV's holdings of nineteenth-century art that the works here are grouped thematically. The south wall comprises narrative paintings; religious, mythological or secular. Within this framework, further groupings of emblematic paintings and studies of the human figure have been made.

On the north wall are landscapes, townscapes and genre paintings, with a further clustering of images depicting the family and the plight of children at this time. Where possible, works that have been painted by artists using a very fine technique have been hung at a lower level. Sculpture too was a feature of the Salons, hence the inclusion of 18 sculptures here.

Hanging the works in the Salon Room took not just curatorial patience in choosing works and allocating space but was a logistical exercise. In all there are 96 paintings, some hung only 40 mm apart, with the highest painting just 100 mm from the ceiling. Every work was measured and then laid out on the floor like a giant jigsaw to ensure it would fit, then balance and proportions of individual works were taken into consideration. It took six crew, two scissor lifts and a forklift about four weeks to hang this dramatic new installation.



**The Salon Room  
19th Century Painting  
and Sculpture**

free  
entry

**NGV INTERNATIONAL**  
Level 2