



Théophile Hamel, *Madame Charles-Hilaire Têtu, née Elizabeth O'Brien, and Her Son Eugène*, 1841, oil on canvas, 115.1 x 97.2 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Théophile Hamel (1817–1870) was an important portrait painter of the Canadian bourgeoisie during the nineteenth century. Madame Charles-Hilaire Têtu (ca. 1807–1881), who belonged to one of the most powerful families in the Kamouraska region of Quebec, is shown seated on an

upholstered chair, wearing a dark teal satin dress with a lace or chiffon collar and luxurious shirring that makes the silk fabric ruffle in abundant pleats. In contrast to Hamel's typically more restrained portraits, this figure is shown with lavish accessories such as her lace headdress, which is ornamented with flowers and ribbons, and the gold watch necklace in her hand. Her young son Eugène, who was then three years old, is wearing a dress with a wide neckline and empire waist. Young boys wore dresses like girls and women because they were not yet men and were thus deemed unworthy of donning men's clothing. The young boy plays with the chain of the watch necklace as the mother keeps the precious watch out of his reach. The figures are set against red curtains that are parted to reveal an abstracted landscape behind the boy; this probably represents the region of the lower Saint-Lawrence, alluding not only to the Têtu family's power over the region, but also to the future role of the young Eugène within the public sphere. The family's social status is thus signified by this landscape and by Madame Charles-Hilaire Têtu's sumptuous costume.

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