PHILADELPHIA

11 Best Museums in Philadelphia

11 PHOTOS

by NANCY DEPALMA
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There's Revolutionary history around every corner—but that's not the city's only draw.

Liberty and justice for all. It's not just a sentiment: It's a mission statement coursing through the veins of this city, where you can walk in the Founding Fathers' footsteps at Independence Hall, and see how they lived (and partied) at Powel House. But there's more to the city's story than the Revolution: There are world-class art collections at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and at the Barnes; rare books at The Rosenbach in Rittenhouse; sequined revelry at the Mummers Museum; and an inside look into the macabre world of medicine at The Mütter. Read on for the 11 best museums in Philadelphia.
National Museum of American Jewish History

Founded in 1976 by members of the Mikveh Israel congregation, this museum is known as the “synagogue of the American Revolution;” its location on Independence Mall serves as an important reminder that American independence included religious freedom as one of its most valuable tenets. The prodigious collection counts more than 30,000 objects of Jewish Americana, all of which weave together the community's experience. In the permanent collection, you'll find exhibits chronicling Jewish immigration, the American Jewish experience during World War II, and the community’s current challenges. The Hall of Fame, whose inductees include Albert Einstein and Leonard Bernstein, among others, is of particular interest.
ACTIVITY

**Museum of the American Revolution →**

Standing sentry on a prime corner lot across from Independence Park, the Robert A.M. Stern-designed Museum of the American Revolution is a must-visit after wandering the historic halls across the street. Just don't expect the same, tired narrative you were taught in elementary school—this museum takes a different track entirely. Exhibits are honest and raw, eschewing the overwrought, often whitewashed version of events to highlight the overlooked perspectives of Native Americans, African Americans, and women.

ACTIVITY

**Science History Institute →**

The Franklin Institute might be Philadelphia’s best-known science museum, but the Science History Institute (formerly the Chemical Heritage Foundation) is an insider-favorite. The museum, which pays homage to the actual practice of science and its life-changing discoveries, is located right in the heart of Old City, on the ground floor of the Institute’s contemporary glass building. Despite its small size, it completely delivers with a fascinating collection of items, all of which serve to elucidate the mysteries of everyday life—how crayons get their colors, or how plastics are made.
ACTIVITY

Mummers Museum →

As symbolic as cheesesteaks and pretzels, the mummers are a Philadelphia institution. These costumed performers celebrate in all their finery just once a year on New Years Day, with the first official, city-sponsored parade taking place in 1901. Established in 1976, the Mummers Museum chronicles the history, meaning, and most of all, the costumes, of this annual folk festival. There’s a small display downstairs, with a videotaped performance of the mummers in action, but upstairs is where you’ll find the real fun. Take an up-close look at the costumes, which are mirrored, sequined, and feathered—the more outrageous, the better. You’ll learn the difference between a ‘fancy’ and a ‘comic’ while poking around, but the best bit comes at the end, where you can deck yourself out mummer-style with one of the many bejeweled costumes on the rack, and attempt the performers’ signature strut.
Independence National Historic Park

Philadelphia is the only UNESCO World Heritage City in the United States precisely because of what transpired right here, and it's not just one museum or historic landmark: Rather, it's a collection of buildings that played host to events that shaped American independence, or honor that hard-fought heritage. Begin at the Visitor Center to get your bearings and your timed (free!) ticket to Independence Hall, then stop by the Liberty Bell Center for a look at ostensibly the most famous broken item in the world. Afterwards, wander the park’s other historic buildings, including Carpenters Hall, the meeting site of the first Continental Congress, then make your way to the Benjamin Franklin Museum for a look at the historical figure's many accomplishments. Just note the airport-style security (and subsequent foot traffic) you’re bound to encounter at the Liberty Bell Center and at Independence Hall, and make you wear comfortable shoes; you’ll be doing a lot of walking.
ACTIVITY

Mütter Museum of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia

The Mütter Museum, housed within a portion of The College of Physicians of Philadelphia, can trace its origins back to 1858, when Dr. Thomas Mütter donated his collection of medical models and specimens in an effort to honor medicine's heritage and celebrate its advancements. The museum's 25,000-item collection, spread between two floors, includes everything from medical instruments and wax models, to bones and anatomical, or “wet,” specimens, all ranging from the fascinating, to the disturbing, to the downright disgusting. A few highlights include a Civil War-era set of amputation instruments, a jar of skin from a patient with a skin-picking disorder, and a giant, desiccated colon that'll have you eating kale for weeks. All gawking aside, it's a true testament to the study and practice of medicine.
Founded in 1876 as part of the Centennial Exposition, the Philadelphia Museum of Art moved to its current home atop Benjamin Franklin Parkway in 1928. The museum is a Philadelphia icon, immortalized in pop culture thanks to Rocky and his famous run up the stairs. Tourists continue the tradition for their requisite photo, but it’s what’s indoors that’s really rewarding: A comprehensive 225,000-work-strong collection of everything from a Japanese teahouse and Chinese palace hall to Renaissance masterpieces, plus works by Manet, Monet, and Degas. Van Gogh’s famed *Sunflowers* is on display here, as is Cézanne’s *The Large Bathers*. Romantics can also glimpse the wedding dress of Philadelphia’s own princess, Grace Kelly, while modern art aficionados will delight in Duchamp—the museum is home to the largest collection of the artist’s work anywhere in the world.
Though it's home to one of the world's most extensive collections of Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and Early Modernist paintings, it's not just what's displayed inside that the Barnes that makes it a standout. (Though the 3,000 items amassed by Dr. Albert Barnes are jaw-dropping, and include the world's largest collections of Renoir and Cézanne, among others.) Barnes wasn't only a collector; he was an innovator who often flouted convention. He displayed the works in ensembles, pairing pieces in arrangements that encouraged viewers to look at the works in an entirely new way. This display method was painstakingly replicated when the museum moved from a gallery on his 12-acre arboretum to the city's new contemporary home on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in 2012.
ACTIVITY

The Rosenbach →

Occupying two brownstones in tony Rittenhouse Square, The Rosenbach is a house museum and rare book library with an awe-inspiring collection of British and American literature. The museum was once the private home of the Rosenbach brothers, rare book dealers who curated the libraries of some of America’s most influential families, including the Folgers and Huntingtons. The collection they amassed—now composed of some 400,000 items, ranging from rare books and manuscripts, to pieces of art, decorative objects, and furnishings—is widely considered one of the finest in the country. Between the two libraries on view, which are organized both regionally and chronologically, visitors can get a look at items including the second folio of William Shakespeare's plays, Bram Stoker’s handwritten notes for Dracula, and the only surviving copy of Benjamin Franklin’s Poor Richard's Almanac.

ACTIVITY

Rodin Museum →
A brownstone that is an oasis in the urban landscape. The Rodin Museum occupies a prime location on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. After all, the city’s main thoroughfare was modeled after the Champs-Élysées. Founded in 1929 by philanthropist Jules Mastbaum, the Rodin Museum is home to the largest collection of works by the renowned sculptor outside of France. There are 150 bronzes, marbles, and plasters on display both indoors and out. It includes original casts of some of Rodin’s most acclaimed works, including perhaps his best-known, *The Thinker*. The Beaux-Arts building designed by French architect Paul Cret is complemented by a lush exterior masterminded by landscape architect Jacques Gréber. A cast of Rodin’s famed “Gates of Hell” has graced the portico since 1929 and coupled with the beautiful setting, it makes a popular, if unfortunately named, site for wedding photos. The Rodin Museum is now under the watchful eye of its big sister, The Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Photo: Alamy

**ACTIVITY**

**Powel House**

Philadelphia is a city full of historic landmark buildings, so what makes The Powel House a must-see? Well, for starters, the Society Hill home, which dates back to 1765, is one of the best preserved examples of Colonial Revival architecture in the U.S.—but it’s also what transpired behind closed doors that makes it worth a visit. Home to Elizabeth Willing Powel and her husband, Samuel, the Powel House played host to a number of Independence-era...
items were sold to the Philadelphia Museum of Art (now on view in their Powel rooms), visitors to the home will still see museum-quality clocks, artwork, and furnishings. Correspondence between George Washington and Elizabeth Powel is a highlight, as is the blue-and-white china—the same used at Mount Vernon—gifted from Martha to Elizabeth.