Museums in Philadelphia have a little something to offer every kind of museumgoer—whether they’re lovers of world-class art, have a passion for science or want to get up close and personal with some of the nation’s most revered historic documents. Follow this guide to discover the 12 best museums Philadelphia has to offer, and pair your visits with our list of the best Philadelphia attractions for a well-rounded, in-the-know romp through the City of Brotherly Love. Pro tip: Check our guide to the best free things to do in Philadelphia to find out which days of the week and month some of these spots offer gratis admission. It’ll put a little more change in your pocket when your belly starts growling for the best Philly cheesesteak in Philadelphia.

RECOMMENDED: Full guide to the best things to do in Philadelphia
The best museums in Philadelphia

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Philadelphia Museum of Art

The Philadelphia Museum of Art is renowned for so much more than its role in *Rocky*. Overlooking the Schuylkill River, the crown jewel of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway impresses with its world-class collection of late-19th- and early-20th-century painting and sculpture. Its permanent collection already boasts Renaissance, American, Impressionist and Modern masterworks by everyone from Picasso and Van Gogh to Brancusi and Frida Kahlo, but blockbuster special exhibitions held throughout the year bring in even more works of must-see art from around the globe. Your ticket also grants you access to the next-door Perelman Building, which holds the PMA’s acclaimed fashion and textile collection and features displays of prints, drawings, photographs and modern design.

Ben Franklin Parkway - Kelly Drive

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The Barnes Foundation

Though the decision to move the Barnes Foundation's world-renowned collection from its original home in Lower Merion, Pennsylvania (a suburb of Philadelphia) to its downtown location in Logan Square in 2012 was controversial, the merits of the pieces of art are undoubtedly staggering. The founder, Albert C. Barnes, a wealthy chemist who invented the medicine Argyrol, amassed one of the leading collections of works by impressionist and modernist masters, including Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, Pierre-August Renoir, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Henri Rousseau. With so many noteworthy artists, it's no wonder that the museum's 4,000-holdings are worth an estimated $25 billion. Check out the 2013 documentary Art of the Steal for more on the Barnes' fascinating backstory.
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

You'll know you've found the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) on Broad Street when you spot a 51-foot-high inverted paintbrush and a crashed fighter jet stuck in the pavement. These works, respectively by Claes Oldenburg and PAFA alumnus Jordan Griska, are dramatically installed on the plaza outside the elegant Victorian-era museum and art school that opened in 1805. The museum—a gem designed by Philadelphia's Frank Furness and George Hewitt in 1876—takes the viewer on a chronologically arranged tour of American art from the 1760s to today, with work by notable art all-stars including Benjamin West, Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer, Mary Cassatt, Thomas Eakins, Alice Neel, Jennifer Bartlett, Alex Katz and Frank Stella. That's in addition to an itinerary of rotating special exhibitions throughout the year.
Penn Museum
Located in West Philadelphia, the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology maintains serious scholarship and a wide-ranging collection of objects from around the globe sure to fire up your imagination and wonder. The shadowy Egyptian gallery with its 15-ton granite sphinx, ancient hieroglyph-inscribed columns and mummies will win over even the most jaded pre-teen or adult. The Chinese rotunda, with a soaring ceiling that stretches to 90 feet, houses sculptures and the famous Qing Dynasty 55-pound flawless crystal ball. Wander down hallways and discover treasures in the Etruscan, African, Greek and Canaan galleries that will bring out your inner explorer. Also, don’t miss the spectacular Middle Eastern galleries, which just opened in April 2018.
Mütter Museum

This is invariably the museum that out-of-town guests beg to be taken to when visiting Philadelphia. Agree, if you dare. It’s jam-packed with stomach churning medical oddities, anatomical anomalies and pathological specimens that never fail to generate a steady stream of gawkers. If you’re not a squeamish type, then make sure to get a good look at the Soap Lady, slices of Albert Einstein’s brain, foreign objects removed from bodies, the “corset” skeleton and wet specimens from every part of the human body. Or check out the interactive exhibit that let’s you experience what it’s like to have your arm amputated. As the museum touts, get “disturbingly informed.”

Center City West $$$$  

Philadelphia’s Magic Gardens

You’ll know you’re approaching the entrance to Philadelphia’s Magic Gardens, a non-profit art museum and gallery on South Street, when you start to notice bits of colored glass and shards of broken pottery embedded into the facades of the buildings surrounding you. Once you do arrive, there’s no mistaking that you’re in the midst of something cooler than you’d ever expected. Artist Isaiah Zagar has been creating art on South Street since the 1960s and this half-block collection is an immersive experience you won’t want to miss.

Bainbridge St Booksellers Row $$$$
Institute of Contemporary Art

A small museum with a big résumé on the University of Pennsylvania’s campus, the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) has been mounting exhibitions of major contemporary artists since its opening in 1963. Established to present what was “new and happening on the art scene,” it brought Andy Warhol to Penn’s campus for his first-ever solo museum show in 1965. Since then, the ICA has presented artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Laurie Anderson, Glenn Ligon, Agnes Martin, Damian Ortega, Pepón Osorio and Lisa Yuskavage. ICA doesn’t cost a dime to tour, so stop in and get your gratis culture fix.

Woodmere Art Museum

No trip to Chestnut Hill is complete without an afternoon of art-peeping at the Woodmere Art Museum. Housed in a 19th-century stone mansion, the museum has an easily browsable nine galleries highlighting Philadelphia art and artists and classic paintings and sculptures from its 6,000-works-strong permanent collection.
Museum of the American Revolution

This new museum—a $150 million project opened in April 2017—is a fun, high-tech addition to the city’s Revolutionary War coverage. Located in Historic Old City, it has weaponry displays, immersive experiences (stand under Boston’s Liberty Tree or face a British infantry charge at the Battle of Brandywine) and thousands of artifacts, including George Washington’s headquarters tent used from 1778 to 1783. The curators have taken pains to present the war from a diversity of viewpoints, including women, slaves, Native Americans, loyalists, Southern colonists, etc.

National Museum of American Jewish History

Recommended

This museum examines all facets of what it means to be American and Jewish—from 1654 to the present. It tells stories of leadership, resilience and assimilation as it spotlights Jews fighting in America’s wars, as pioneers out West, as gangsters, athletes, entertainers, scientists, civil rights activists and more. The museum engages visitors with a variety of creative, interactive exhibits, documentaries on antisemitism, recording booths to tell your own stories and artifacts including one of Barbra Streisand’s costumes from *Yentl*, Irving Berlin’s piano and even Albert Einstein’s pipe. Though the original museum opened in 1976 at nearby Congregation Mikveh Israel, its impressive, $150 million sleek new home—right on Independence Mall—opened in 2010.
The Franklin Institute

If your kid can’t find something at this science museum to get excited about, you better check his or her pulse. A 20-foot-high marble Ben Franklin in the rotunda greets visitors upon arrival at this must-see stop in Philly. The Franklin Institute, though founded in 1824, remains on the cutting edge of science, learning and technology. Check out seriously not-lame exhibits such as Escape Rooms, the Fels Planetarium, the IMAX theater and virtual reality experiences. Then there are the perennial favorites: the four-story Foucault’s Pendulum, the Giant Heart, the 350-ton Baldwin steam locomotive and the 1948 T-33 Shooting Star jet.

Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University

This museum, founded in 1812, combines the romance of global exploration with smart, appealing programming for curious minds. Though it has an impressive scientific collection of more than 18 million plant and animal specimens, the museum’s biggest appeal to kid visitors may be the spectacular dinosaur skeletons in the front gallery or the “Big Dig” exhibit where little ones can search for dinosaur bones in a faux excavation site. Don’t miss the live butterflies that you can walk among or the charmingly nostalgic halls of dioramas mostly from the 1930s and 40s that showcase Kodiak bears, bison, moose, musk ox, zebra, gorillas, tigers, pandas and the passenger pigeon.
National Constitution Center

Who isn’t talking politics these days? Better know your rights! Opened in 2003, the National Constitution Center is devoted to the living document that reflects our nation’s founding principles and values. With interactive exhibits, lectures, tours and films, it’s a great way for children, teens and adults to brush up on history. Don’t miss the 42 life-sized bronze statues of the founding fathers in the Signers’ Hall, designed to resemble the Assembly Room in Independence Hall. (Then take a short walk across Independence Mall to see the real thing.)

Olde City

Fabric Workshop and Museum

This contemporary art museum and gift shop in the Loft District is dedicated to showcasing art made with new materials and new media. Their shows could include anything from sculpture to works on fabric to architectural exhibitions and video installations.

Middle City East
Science History Institute

Step inside this museum in Old City to catch up on all the lessons you slept through in science class. Formerly called the Chemical Heritage Foundation, the institute was established to preserve and explore the history of science—from chemistry and alchemy to molecular science—and teach the masses about all the ways in which it has influenced humankind over the centuries. The foundation’s exhaustive, world-class collection includes rare books, manuscripts and notes scribbled by influential scientists, an archive of modern and historical scientific instruments, and even paintings, sculptures and other works that intersect the worlds of science and art. Besides the permanent exhibition, “Making Modernity”, a cool, open gallery dedicated to chemistry and its influence in our daily lives, there is a schedule of temporary and rotating exhibitions throughout the year.

African American Museum in Philadelphia

Founded in 1976, this modest museum has told the story of African Americans for decades. The draw here is the traveling exhibits including recent shows celebrating Ntozake Shange’s play for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf, photography by Shawn Theodore, Dawoud Bey and Gerard Gaskins, and a multimedia exhibition on racial bias in our judicial system.