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Sotheby's Guide to the Best Art Museums in Paris

By Arabella Bowen

*Paris museums showcase some of the world's most storied collections—nowhere else can you see Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and Monet's *Water Lilies* in the same day. The biggest contemporary art fair, [FIAC](#) draws global collectors to Paris in October, but there's always something new for art lovers to see year round. Make the most of your time with Sotheby's guide to essential Paris art museums, including hidden gems and insider tips.*

MAJOR MUSEUMS

Paris is home to peerless collections of Old Masters, Impressionist, and post-Impressionist works. If you're short on time, prioritize these three major museums. You'll see every major name in Western art in their incredible galleries.

MUSÉE DU LOUVRE

Rue de Rivoli, 75001 Paris | [Website](#)



INTERIOR VIEW, MUSÉE DU LOUVRE

This legendary institution is Paris's imperial treasure house par excellence, featuring countless masterpieces—the *Mona Lisa*, *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, and *Venus de Milo*, to name but three—set in the vast splendor of one of the world's most stunning palaces, entered via I. M. Pei's iconic glass pyramid, installed in 1988.

INSIDER TIP: The museum stays open until 9.45pm on Wednesdays and Fridays and is rarely busy after 7pm. For expedited access during the day, enter via the Rue Richelieu entrance.

MUSÉE D'ORSAY

1 Rue de la Légion d'Honneur, 75007 Paris | [Website](#)



INTERIOR VIEW OF THE MUSÉE D'ORSAY

The Musée d'Orsay houses one of the world's most impressive collections of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art in a splendid Beaux Arts former railway station. From Monet's *Woman with a Parasol* to Gauguin's *Les Repas*, the museum gives visitors access to spectacular works that have shaped the narrative of Western art history.

INSIDER TIP: The charming Café Varenne up the street is popular with local gallerists for its reliable bistro menu and inviting red leather banquettes. Bon Marché is a few more steps away.

IMPRESSIONIST & MODERN ART

An Artistic Tour of Paris Landmarks

CENTRE POMPIDOU

Place Georges-Pompidou, 75004 Paris | [Website](#)



INSTALLATION VIEW OF LATIFA ECHAKHCH, *L'AIR DU TEMPS*, AT THE CENTRE POMPIDOU

The 1977 opening of this progressive arts venue affirmed France's commitment to contemporary art. The building's startling post-modern architecture shelters Europe's largest collection of Modern and contemporary art, with more than 60,000 works

that refreshingly celebrate giants of the avant-garde far beyond the usual suspects. Nevertheless, the many masterpieces by artists including Wassily Kandinsky, Henri Matisse, and Joan Miró still reign supreme.

INSIDER TIP: The Atelier Brancusi, around the back, is a reconstruction of Romanian-born artist Constantin Brancusi's studio, complete with the artist's sculptures, drawings, paintings, and photographic prints. The Carpenter's Workshop gallery and new Lafayette Anticipations are just a few steps away.

SMALL MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Smaller Paris museums and art foundations showcase exceptional collections from Impressionist masters to serious, groundbreaking contemporary art. With more time to spare, add these excellent arts venues to your must-see list.

FONDATION LOUIS VUITTON

8 Avenue du Mahatma Gandhi, 75116 Paris | [Website](#)



EXTERIOR VIEW OF THE FRANK GEHRY-DESIGNED FONDATION LOUIS VUITTON IWAN BAAN

Opened to the public in 2014, in a striking building conceived by Frank Gehry in the bucolic Bois de Boulogne, this private museum designed to house Bernard Arnault's impressive art collection stages several exhibits a year, culling pieces from the LVMH CEO's collection of contemplative, Pop, Expressionist, and Music & Sound art.

INSIDER TIP: The world's largest collection of Claude Monet works is housed at the Musée Marmottant Monet just outside the Bois de Boulogne.

LE GRAND PALAIS

3 Avenue du Général Eisenhower, 75008 Paris | [Website](#)



ANISH KAPOOR'S LEVIATHAN INSIDE THE NAVE OF THE GRAND PALAIS " "

Built for the Exposition Universelle of 1900, the Grand Palais's Beaux Art building itself is a marvel of Art Nouveau and Classicism. Inside, temporary exhibits range from Old Masters to contemporary art; knock-out site-specific installations occasionally take over the spectacular Nave (pictured), under a conservatory-style glass roof.

INSIDER TIP: Don't miss the adjacent Petit Palais, home to the [Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris](#) (City of Paris Museum of Fine Arts). Its small but well chosen collection spans the antiquities to 1920s. The onsite café also opens onto a magnificent interior garden.

MUSÉE DE L'ORANGERIE

Jardin des Tuileries, Place de la Concorde, 75001 Paris | [Website](#)



MONET'S WATER LILIES AT THE MUSÉE DE L'ORANGERIE © PHOTO R.M.N. - GERARD BLOT / H.LEWANDOWSKI

Built in 1852 to shelter the groves of the Republic, the Orangerie is renowned for its permanent installation of eight of Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* murals in a pair of elegant oval galleries. The site was chosen by the artist himself and is a miraculous success, creating a unique haven of peaceful meditation. The balance of the collection is also rich in Impressionist and Post-Impressionist masters.

INSIDER TIP: Stop into the nearby [Hemingway Bar](#) at the Ritz for a Serendipity, the signature cocktail of Calvados and Champagne created by legendary head barman Colin Field.



IMPRESSIONIST & MODERN ART

21 Facts About Claude Monet

MUSÉE PICASSO PARIS

5 Rue de Thorigny, 75003 Paris | [Website](#)



OUTSIDE VIEW OF THE PICASSO MUSEUM

Unparalleled in quality and scope, the world's largest Picasso museum is also the only one to present both Picasso's complete painted, sculpted, engraved, and illustrated oeuvre and a precise record—through sketches, studies, drafts, notebooks, etchings in various stages, photographs, illustrated books, films and documents—of the artist's creative process.

INSIDER TIP: The surrounding streets are chock-full of contemporary galleries. Pop into [David Zwirner](#), [Thaddaeus Ropac](#), and [Perrotin](#), among others, and stop for provençale fare at [Chez Janou](#) and pour-over coffee at [Fragments](#) near the Place des Vosges.

SOTHEBY'S PARIS

76 Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, 75008 Paris | [Website](#)



SOTHEBY'S PARIS EXHIBITION

Located in a magnificent hotel particulier across from the Elysée Palace, Sotheby's France headquarters regularly mounts museum-caliber exhibits ahead of major contemporary art and Impressionist auctions. The elegant interiors are a draw of their own, thanks to an elegant revamp by Peter Marino in 2013.

INSIDER TIP: Chef Eric Frechon's exquisite, three-Michelin starred [Epicure](#) restaurant is right up the street, inside the five-star Bristol Hotel. Reservations are essential.

PALAIS DE TOKYO

13 Avenue du Président Wilson, 75116 Paris | [Website](#)



EXTERIOR VIEW, PALAIS DE TOKYO PHOTO: FLORENT MICHEL / 11H45

Describing itself as an “anti-museum,” this dynamic art institution presents a rotating program of special exhibits that showcase some of the most ground-breaking contemporary artists working today, making excellent use of its cavernous halls to present daring installations that engage and entertain.

INSIDER TIP: Unusually for a museum, the Palais de Tokyo stays open until midnight from Wednesday to Monday and its three onsite restaurants are draws of their own, especially so the chic and sumptuous [Monsieur Bleu](#).

HIDDEN GEMS

Beyond the main cultural sites, Paris is also home to wonderfully intimate museums, some in in Belle Époque mansions.

FONDATION CARTIER

261 Boulevard Raspail, 75014 Paris | [Website](#)



EXHIBITION VIEW OF AUTOPHOTO AT THE FONDATION CARTIER POUR L'ART CONTEMPORAIN PHOTO: LUC BOEGLY

Housed in an airy building designed by French architect Jean Nouvel, the Fondation Cartier ranks as France's first corporate foundation for the promotion of contemporary art. It regularly commissions new works that enrich its collection and mounts unique exhibits, often highlighting current global themes.

INSIDER TIP: The foundation's Nomadic Nights showcase site-specific art installations, often in its wild garden created by artist Lothar Baumgarten.

MUSÉE DES ARTS DECORATIFS (MAD)

107 Rue de Rivoli, 75001 Paris | [Website](#)



EXTERIOR VIEW OF THE MUSÉE DES ARTS DÉCORATIFS

To connoisseurs of luxury and style, this decorative arts museum near the Louvre is a vast trove of wonders without equal in Europe. The evolving fashions and cosmopolitan savoir faire of French life unfurl in a stunning panorama from the Middle Ages to the present, including a sequence of beloved period rooms. Terrific special exhibits pull from the best of the collection.

INSIDER TIP: The cool nearby Café Kitsuné makes coffee to go—a rarity in Paris. The delightful Ellsworth just outside the Palais Royal does small plates and a great-value prix-fixe lunch.

MUSEE RODIN

77 Rue de Varenne, 75007 Paris | [Website](#)



THE GATES OF HELL GALLERY AT THE MUSÉE RODIN © P. TOUNEBOEUF - OPPIC TENDANCE FLOUE

Opened in 1919 in an 18th-century mansion known as the Hôtel Biron, the Musée Rodin highlights French sculptor Auguste Rodin's greatest works, including *The Thinker*, *The Gate of Hell*, and *The Kiss*, in a splendid building with an ornamented façade and a magnificent formal sculpture garden and chapel.

INSIDER TIP: The onsite café has a splendid outdoor terrace with prime views of the museum's sculpture garden.

Further Afield: 5 Terrific Collections Worth a Visit



From Montmartre to the residential 16th arrondissement, these unique institutions house intriguing collections well worth a detour, including the world's largest collection of Monets and a capsule collection of Dali works.

About the Author

Arabella Bowen

Arabella Bowen is a writer and editor specializing in travel and culture. She was previously the Editor in Chief of Fodor's and always travels for the art.

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