

10 Best Museums in Washington, D.C.

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If there's one thing Washington knows how to do, it's a museum.

One of Washington, D.C.'s biggest draws are its museums, an activity dismissed by (too) many as a snoozefest or a little tired. Our nation's capital, however, has mastered the art of creating tailored and intriguing explorations of art, history, and culture. Don't believe it? You'll find temples dedicated to everything from the development of spycraft and space travel to

serious dives into modern art and African American history. Even better, most of them are free to enter. They provide experiences you just can't miss when you're in town, but there are so many, it can be hard to figure where to start. So to help, here are our picks for the best museums in Washington.





National Museum of African American History and Culture

It's hard to imagine improving upon the grandeur of the historic **National Mall**, miles of greenery surrounded by world-class monuments and museums. But in September 2016, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture did just that. This relatively new addition to an iconic landscape houses artifacts, photography, and other media that reflect African American culture and experiences. Here you'll find Harriet Tubman's personal hymnal and silk lace and linen shawl, a bill of a sale for a young enslaved girl, Louis Armstrong's trumpet, photos capturing the participation of Black women during the Civil Rights Movement, and a collection of costumes from 'The Wiz'. Given the scope and size of the space (85,000 square feet), this is best saved for a day when you have plenty of time to devote.



Planet Word

Planet Word explains itself as "the museum where language comes to life," which means it's not driven by artifacts or a collection, per se. This place is all about the fleeting words we use every day to express ourselves, without even thinking about it. While it seems like a niche topic—one that English majors, book lovers, foreign language learners, and linguists will love—founder and former teacher Ann Friedman hopes to spark conversations and an appreciation for literacy in everyone who visits. Located at 13th and K Streets NW at Franklin Square, this free museum opened in October 2020.



Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

Nothing is off limits at the Hirshhorn, whose vast permanent collection boasts a fine range of pioneering sculpture, digital media, photography, video, performance-based pieces, and more, all from 21st-century innovators. On our most recent visit, a seismic new commission of **abstract paintings by Mark Bradford** encircled the entire third level inner-circle galleries, while an **exhibit by Yayoi Kusama** complete with her famed Infinity Mirror Rooms will soon open. Designed in a hollow drum lifted 14 feet off the ground and surrounded by sculpture-filled gardens, the Hirshhorn is an ideal space to see contemporary art.



National Children's Museum

On Pennsylvania Avenue, just a few blocks from the National Mall, kids get a museum all about child's play (with some education snuck in too). Designed to appeal to toddlers up to elementary schoolers, this brand-new iteration of the National Children's Museum opened in February 2020. The Visiting Exhibit Hall highlights traveling exhibits for children from around the world, and this fall, kids will learn about the universe of Finnish cartoon characters the Moomins. Clips from cartoons are displayed, with Marimekko floor pillows to sit on and crafts to create. As with the rest of the museum, the lower-level space feels light and bright, with white paint everywhere and bursts of bright colors. Note that the first thing you will see as you enter the museum is the Dream Machine, a cloud-like, rigging-covered, three-story slide and climbing structure that kids can (and do) clamber up and slide down for an hour, if you let them.



National Gallery of Art

Perched near the U.S. Capitol Building, the National Gallery of Art is one of the most impressive museums in the city. Founded by Andrew W. Mellon, the museum comprises two buildings: the West Building, modeled after the Roman Pantheon, and the East Building, designed by modernist architect I.M. Pei. On a nice day, you could hardly do better than a stroll through the museum's Sculpture Garden, which hosts jazz concerts in summer and an ice rink in winter. It also has the most classic collection in the city, with a focus mainly on European and American paintings, sculpture, prints, photographs, and other media. You'll find a number of works from famed artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Johannes Vermeer, and Rembrandt, as well as later pieces from the likes of Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Jackson Pollock, and Roy Lichtenstein. The Sculpture Garden contains works by Marc Chagall and Joan Miró, as well as Robert Indiana's famous "AMOR."



National Museum of American History

The National Museum of American History's brief is all-encompassing: tell the story of America using a collection of more than 1.8 million historical objects. For a quick jaunt through the highlights, the museum suggests seeing the original Star-Spangled Banner, the lunch counter from Greensboro's famous sit-in during the Civil Rights movement, Dorothy's ruby slippers from "The Wizard of Oz," Julia Child's exact kitchen, and Michelle Obama's inauguration dress in "The First Ladies" exhibit. Most exhibits are ongoing, but recent special exhibits include "Reckoning with Remembrance: History, Injustice, and the Murder of Emmett Till." In pre-pandemic times, this was school group field trip central—and a must-stop for tourist families as well. (Note that a number of exhibits are temporarily closed due to the pandemic, but are slated to return in late 2021.)



National Museum of Natural History

It's impossible to miss the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. Set on the National Mall, this 1910 Beaux-Arts building with a soaring rotunda is one of the most visited museums in D.C.—and the world—bringing in 4.2 million visitors in 2019. That's for good reason: this museum has the world's largest natural history collection with 146 million artifacts and specimens, including the ones at the recently reopened dinosaur hall.



Phillips Collection

Tucked amid the beautiful row houses of Dupont Circle this modern art museum was established in 1921 in a Georgian Revival house that once was the family home of museum founder, Duncan Phillips. The setting is at once intimate and sophisticated, making it a favorite for Washingtonians. The modern art museum focuses on Impressionist and modern art, and outdoes itself on both accounts. The permanent collection boasts Renoir's famous "Luncheon of the Boating Party," as well as works by Georgia O'Keefe, Pablo Picasso, Vincent van Gogh, and Richard Diebenkorn. An intimate Rothko Room consists of a lone bench surrounded by four of the abstract expressionist's paintings. The Phillips Collection is currently celebrating its 100th anniversary, and to commemorate the centennial, visual artist Daniel Canogar created a digital piece using an algorithm to meld 550 pieces from the museum's collection into a mesmerizing, swirling projection.



National Building Museum

In a city flush with stately—and historic—edifices, the National Building Museum, which is dedicated to architecture, engineering, and design, still manages to stand out. Built in the late 19th century as the headquarters of the United States Pension Bureau, the building was modeled after a Roman palace. Past exhibitions have explored a wide range of subjects: the secret U.S. cities that were erected with the development of the atom bomb; the lives of a low-income renters facing eviction; and the architectural innovations—such as tiny houses—that have evolved as America has changed. A new **upcoming exhibition** examines the U.S.-Mexico border wall through the lens of architecture and design. The best time to visit is in summer, when the Great Hall is transformed into an elaborate, immersive exhibition; say, a “beach” teeming with nearly one million plastic beach balls, a glacial sea of icebergs, or a 60-by-60-foot maze.



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is an important space for somber reflection. Set just off from the National Mall, this museum is a worthy stop for visitors, school groups, and locals alike who wish to join the museum in ensuring that the horrors of the Holocaust can never happen again. The permanent exhibition here takes you on a chronological journey from the rise of the Nazi party to the ghettoization and mass murder of Jews and, finally, to their liberation following the Allied victory. Beyond the permanent exhibition, other exhibitions allow visitors to explore topics such as America's role in the Holocaust or how Burma's Muslim minority, [the Rohingya](#), became targets of genocide.