

World's Most Beautiful Museums

by Kristin Conard

Canadians aren't known for controversy, but Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum stirred up passions when it unveiled "The Crystal" addition in 2007. Architect Daniel Libeskind's angled steel, aluminum, and glass structure looks as if it crashed into the side of the Neo-Romanesque museum—which is either brilliant or appalling, depending on whom you ask.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and the museums we've selected fit different definitions of the term. They aren't confined to major cities, but will inspire you to consider destinations that may not be on your radar and to make a museum a part of your next trip.

After all, they're more than just a pretty façade. A beautiful museum like the Royal Ontario stirs our emotions and challenges us. As Alain de Botton, author of *The Architecture of Happiness*, says: "We used to build temples, and museums are about as close as secular society dares to go in facing up to the idea that a good building can change your life (and a bad one ruin it)."

Good museums often draw beauty from their surroundings, whether by incorporating local materials or using surfaces that can interact with the shifting light and weather. At Brazil's Museu Oscar Niemeyer, the glass-encased Annex ("The Eye") tops a 60-foot-wide yellow pillar above a pool. The mutating reflection of the sky in the glass exterior and in the water below makes each viewing feel unique.

In one famous case, a beautiful museum actually made its location more attractive: Frank Gehry's buzzed-about Guggenheim put Bilbao, Spain, on the tourist map when it opened in 1997. The museum's titanium panels look like fish scales, and its 50-foot atrium is partially illuminated by light streaming from the "metallic flower" of the roof.

Justin Davidson, architecture critic for *New York* magazine, admires the Guggenheim Bilbao for working within its context and for drawing on the past. "The spirit of the Bilbao is essentially Baroque," he says. "The curvature of its surfaces and in the quality of its forms—I think Gehry reinvented the Baroque for the contemporary age."

Even though beauty thrives on reinvention, that doesn't mean the contemporary always trumps the classic. There's a timeless appeal to a museum like the Hermitage in St. Petersburg or the original Guggenheim in New York. Read on to discover which beautiful museum resonates most with you.

MAS Museum: Antwerp, Belgium

Architects Neutelings and Riedijk alternated between red sandstone from India and glass panes to give this riverfront museum a distinctive look that's modern even as it

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recalls the 16th-century storehouses used in Antwerp's old port. The connection to the city is in the details as well: if you look closely at the 203-foot-tall building, you'll see 3,185 silver hands, the symbol of Antwerp. The vertical "boulevard"—a series of elevators that follow the glass spiral of the building—provides sensational new views of the harbor and rooftop from every level and leads to the rooftop, open until midnight.

Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art: Kansas City, MO

The original limestone building, with its Ionic columns and grand, almost temple-like Neoclassical design, dates back to the 1930s. In 2007, the museum got a renovation and a modern extension: a series of five cubes or "lenses" made of clear and translucent glass designed by Steven Holl. The lenses are integrated with the surrounding landscape, following the slope of the lawn, and they're a dramatic, yet complementary counterpoint.

Museum of Islamic Art: Doha, Qatar

I. M. Pei toured the Muslim world for inspiration and wound up creating a museum that is beautiful in its simple, dynamic design, which echoes traditional Islamic architecture. The pale sand-colored stone blocks form a five-story tower that casts long shadows once night falls. A row of palm trees and a waterfall feature lead to the entrance of the museum—built on a private, man-made island on the harbor.

National Museum of Art: Osaka, Japan

While much of this museum is subterranean, its visible steel and glass exterior makes a bold impression, curving skyward up to 170 feet. Award-winning architect César Pelli wanted to mimic bamboo reeds waving in the wind, though his creation also gets compared to a set of wings. The play of the light filtered through into the lobby provides an ever-changing feel to the interior gallery space, which gets hidden support (and waterproofing) from a nearly 10-foot-thick concrete wall.

Royal Ontario Museum: Toronto

Local architects Darling and Pearson unveiled the original Italianate Neo-Romanesque museum building in 1914. A few renovations and additions followed (the 1933 expansion added a Neo-Byzantine façade), but things only got controversial with the 2007 debut of "The Crystal." The museum's gem collection inspired Daniel Libeskind's deconstructionist design of five interlocking prisms made of steel beams, aluminum, and glass. Some were appalled, while others applauded the building's daring departure from the norm.

Guggenheim: Bilbao, Spain

With its attention-grabbing twisted and reflective walls, Frank Gehry's museum famously put Bilbao on the tourist map when it opened in 1997 (on time and on budget, which doesn't usually happen with this size project). The building is made of glass, limestone, and titanium panels that look like fish scales. Its organic curves are designed to catch the light, and the 50-foot atrium—a typical Gehry element—is illuminated in part by light streaming from the “metallic flower” of the roof.

Hedmark Museum: Hamar, Norway

Set on 400 grassy acres near Mjøsa Lake, the Hedmark Museum complex features open-air exhibitions, a rebuilt 18th-century farmhouse, even an herb garden. The jewel in its crown, however, is the ruins of a cathedral constructed in the 1150s and partially destroyed in 1567. The four grand arches that remain are now sheltered under a soaring triangle of glass and steel. The setting has become popular for weddings and events, so you might have to wait for a break in the action to peek inside.

Hermitage: St. Petersburg, Russia

One of the world's oldest museums, founded by Catherine the Great in 1764, is a complex of six sherbet-colored buildings with a prime location between the Neva River and the Palace Square. The grandest is the green-and-white Winter Palace, which takes up an entire block (one estimate cites 1,945 windows). The one-time imperial residence has a double tier of columns, a golden dome, and opulent gallery rooms with Baroque and Rococo flourishes.

Milwaukee Art Museum: Milwaukee

Shaped like a cross and made of concrete and steel, Eero Saarinen's abstract, Modernist War Memorial Center seemingly floats on a pedestal. Compare its block form to the Quadracci Pavilion, Santiago Calatrava's sculptural, white postmodern take on a Gothic cathedral complete with flying buttresses and a vaulted ceiling. And then get ready for the most spectacular feature: the Burke Brise Soleil, a moveable sunscreen in the form of a pair of wings with a 217-foot span that actually moves at select times throughout the day.

Museu Oscar Niemeyer: Curitiba, Brazil

The official name honors its Brazilian architect (now 95 years old), but it's more commonly called the Museum of the Eye after its latest addition. Finished in 2002, the glass-encased Annex (“The Eye”) is perched atop a 60-foot-wide yellow pillar and

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accessed by a long curving ramp. The constantly changing reflection of the sky in the glass exterior and the reflecting pool below makes each viewing feel unique. A curving tunnel running beneath the reflecting pool connects the Annex to the original 1967 Niemeyer building.

Musée d'Orsay: Paris

Inaugurated as a train station for the 1900 World's Fair, this elegant building on the Left Bank of the Seine officially became a museum in 1986. Luckily, the original architectural ornamentation and stately arches of the Beaux-Arts-style station remain. And inside, the arched glass barrel ceiling lets plenty of natural light flood the sculptures in the long main hall. Stop at the café to see the Seine through the huge metal clock, a legacy of the museum's railroad roots.

Modern Art Museum: Fort Worth, TX

Japanese architect Tadao Ando's five pavilions surround a tranquil 1.5-acre reflecting pond. The flat-topped buildings are made of 40-foot-high panes of glass that let in natural light for the exhibits while also providing views of the city and the well-kept grounds. A visit during the day means you can see one of the 2,600-plus works of modern art, but if you come by at night—perhaps for dinner at Café Modern—you'll see the pavilions lit up rather like giant floating lanterns.

National Museum of Australia: Canberra

Fifty thousand years of Australian history fit into this colorful museum, which architect Howard Raggatt modeled on the theme of knotted ropes meant to connect the different strands of the country's people and history. The museum entrance acts as the center of the knot, and one of its trailing ropes is the Uluru line with its 98-foot roller-coaster-like loop. The exterior of the semicircular museum itself is covered in aluminum panels with words written on them in Braille.

Guggenheim: New York City

Frank Lloyd Wright's spiraling reinforced concrete is a triumph of modern architecture. But back in the 1950s, his design was so foreign as a use for a museum that it had to be executed by a builder with a background in constructing parking garages. The sleek spirals are the ramps in the museum's interior that lead visitors from exhibit to exhibit and allow for unique displays of art. While the building itself is a piece of art—a kind of inverted ziggurat—some artists see the museum as a challenging place to display work.