

Philadelphia: Art Mecca of the Mid-Atlantic

BY NANCY BEA MILLER



Philadelphia was founded in 1682 by members of the Religious Society of Friends (“Quakers”), who traditionally viewed the fine arts as “self-intoxicating and untruthful,” encouraging “vain imaginings,” and distracting people from what was truly important in life. Fortunately, the anti-arts agenda for their “City of Brotherly Love” never gained much traction: artists and innovators soon poured into Philadelphia, attracted by a vibrant economy that openly welcomed people of all creeds and ethnicities. Almost from the start, these colorful newcomers quickly outnumbered the plain-minded Quakers. Ironically, one of America’s first folk artists, Edward Hicks (1780-1849), was himself a Quaker, and even a minister. The Quakers accepted this “defeat” gracefully, and the city has never looked back.

“Philly” is rich in art history, but also positively sparking with contemporary artistic currents. As home to the nation’s first art school, it now boasts seven such institutions, plus art departments at its numerous colleges and universities. Not surprisingly, this wealth of students keeps new ideas flowing and new art emerging. Nor is it surprising that Philadelphia leads the nation in public art: the country’s first nonprofit organization dedicated to it, the Fairmount Park Art Commission (now the Association for Public Art), was founded here in 1879. Additionally, Philadelphia pioneered the “Percent for Art” model, which requires both public and private developers to incorporate public artworks in their building projects. As a result, Philadelphia has outdoor sculptures created by three

In 1998, muralist Meg Saligman (b. 1965) completed *Common Threads* on the side of an eight-story building at the corner of Broad and Spring Garden Streets. More than 6,000 people see it every day since a major subway stop is located nearby.





The Pennsylvania Academy's Furness building features richly decorated interiors that frame such large-scale works as native Pennsylvanian Benjamin West's *Christ Rejected* (1814).

of historical masterworks shown in delicate counterpoint to cutting-edge works in non-traditional media. The oldest of PAFA's current buildings, stunningly designed by Frank Furness in 1875, is located just a block from City Hall (an enormous Second Empire monument adorned with hundreds of sculptures by A.M. Calder). Originally the Furness building housed both the school and museum, and it still contains working studios where Thomas Eakins taught and Mary Cassatt studied, as well as a large hall containing 147 casts of classical sculpture (artworks in their own right), from which students still learn to draw. Just next door is PAFA's newer 11-story Hamilton

consecutive generations of the Calder family: Alexander Milne Calder, Alexander Stirling Calder, and Alexander "Sandy" Calder.

Philly also has the distinction of being the U.S. city with the most murals. For this, we can thank the 1984 creation of the City of Philadelphia **Mural Arts Program**, an organization that seeks to beautify neighborhoods and provide a constructive outlet for at-risk youth. To date, the program has created more than 3,500 murals made by teams of professional and volunteer artists. Many are true works of art, designed by well-known locals like Sidney Goodman, Meg Saligman, and Michael Webb. Philadelphia claims the second-largest mural anywhere: *How Philly Moves* covers nearly 85,000 square feet along the side of a parking garage at the airport. Though murals can be seen everywhere you go, I highly recommend taking one of the Mural Arts Program's bus tours, which highlight the most significant examples.

Philadelphia's civic life has always been enhanced by its situation at the center of the Eastern Seaboard near New York, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., by its proximity to fertile farmland, and by its large and efficient port. These assets have facilitated incoming and outgoing tides of creative energy, even as the city's Quaker heritage of quietude has kept its ego in check. Somehow it makes sense that Philly's leading sister city is Florence: both teem with museums, and indeed there are 16 in "Center City" alone. (A recent survey ranks Philadelphia number one among American downtowns in number of museums per resident.)

MUSEUMS

For lovers of traditional art, Philadelphia is a treasure house. As suggested above, America's first art school and museum can be found at the **Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts**. Founded in 1805 by the painter Charles Willson Peale, the sculptor William Rush, and other notables, "PAFA" remains a positive force in the art world today. The museum focuses exclusively on American material, with extensive collections

Eduard Charlemont (1848-1906)

The Moorish Chief

1878, Oil on panel, 59 1/8 x 38 1/2 in.

Philadelphia Museum of Art; John G. Johnson Collection, 1917





In 2007, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts jointly acquired the *Portrait of Dr. Samuel T. Gross* (“The Gross Clinic”), the 8-foot-high masterwork by local legend Thomas Eakins (1844-1916). More than 3,600 individuals and organizations donated \$68 million, the price required to prevent Philadelphia’s Jefferson Medical College from selling this oil on canvas to the National Gallery of Art and the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Keeping it in Philadelphia became a point of civic pride during the 18-month-long fundraising campaign.

The Moorish Chief (1878), and *Maternal Caress* (1896) by Philadelphia’s own Mary Cassatt. Finally, the galleries devoted to local superstar Thomas Eakins never fail to stir my imagination.

In 2007, the PMA opened the Perelman Building, a 1927 Art Deco-period annex right across the street. It currently houses rotating displays of photography, textiles, and industrial design, as well as special exhibitions, particularly of contemporary artists. Though a free shuttle carries visitors from one building to the next, an easy walk allows visitors to admire many fine sculptures along the way, ranging from the popular statue of Rocky Balboa (who famously ran up and down the PMA’s monumental staircase) and Emmanuel Frémiet’s newly re-gilded *Joan of Arc*, who glitters among the leafy trees.

Just a few streets down the broad Benjamin Franklin Parkway is the elegant little **Rodin Museum**, which has been administered by the PMA since it opened in 1929. Its neoclassical building was designed by architects Paul Cret and Jacques Gréber to contain the local cinema impresario Jules Mastbaum’s collection of Rodin sculptures, still one of the largest holdings of this artist’s

building, which houses much of the school and gallery spaces for more contemporary exhibitions. These edifices are connected by Lenfest Plaza, where visitors flock to have their photographs taken beside Claes Oldenburg’s 51-foot-high *Paintbrush* and the crashed plane installed by artist Jordan Griska (*Grumman Greenhouse*). My own personal favorites in the collection here include Margaret Foster Richardson’s *A Motion Picture* (1912), Fairfield Porter’s *Under the Elms* (1971-72), and Winslow Homer’s *The Fox Hunt* (1893).

The **Philadelphia Museum of Art** is one of the largest museums in the U.S. and attracts visitors from around the world with its huge collections and innovative exhibitions. Founded in 1876, the PMA sits like a temple of golden stone on its hill overlooking the city. Its holdings are so extensive that you could easily devote several days to exploring them, moving from century to century, country to country. (Fortunately, the PMA contains excellent dining options, ranging from a cafeteria to an elegant bistro.) It’s difficult to name a standout gallery here, but I personally never miss the medieval and Renaissance collections, a lovely display of five paintings by Henri Fantin-Latour, Eduard Charlemon’s

work anywhere. Of particular note are *The Gates of Hell*, which were not cast in bronze before Rodin died in 1917. In a typically Philadelphian gesture of brotherly love, Mastbaum ordered two sets of the doors to be cast — one for his native city, and one for the Musée Rodin in Paris. Of special interest here is the gallery housing only maquettes, Rodin’s “doodles” in plaster, including one in wax that really allows us to glimpse the master’s mind at work.

The Rodin Museum’s newest neighbor is the **Barnes Foundation**, which in 2012 moved to Philly’s “museum mile” on Benjamin Franklin Parkway from its original location in suburban Merion, a long-delayed move that had sparked decades of controversy. There is no denying that this handsome new facility makes the famous Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and Fauve holdings of Dr. Albert C. Barnes (1872-1951) accessible to many more visitors, and indeed the Barnes is now more popular than ever. Therefore, be sure to reserve your admission tickets far in advance: only rarely will you be lucky enough to “walk in,” so better not risk it. (Note: during the summer only, on the first Sunday of the month, the Barnes allows anyone to enter without reservations, subject

The *Joan of Arc* sculpted by France's Emmanuel Frémiet (1824-1910) was regilded recently.



to space.) Designed by Tod Williams and Billie Tsien of New York, the new Barnes precisely re-creates the surprising displays of the Merion mansion's rooms and galleries, but with much-improved lighting and "architectural pauses" between many galleries that allow visitors to recover from the visual stimulation of these famously overcrowded rooms. The Barnes contains so many masterpieces that it's hard to choose a favorite, but I am always happy to revisit Cézanne's *Bathers at Rest* (1876-77).

Also in Center City, though off "museum mile," is the **Rosenbach Museum & Library**. Set in the heart of the picturesque Rittenhouse-Fitler district, this 1860s townhouse provides a serene setting for wide-ranging collections of rare books, manuscripts, furniture, jewelry, silver, paintings, prints, drawings, and sculpture. Of particular note is the collection of more than 500 portrait miniatures painted by American and European artists between the 16th and 19th centuries. The Rosenbach's "flat" artworks include standouts by Thomas Sully, Gilbert Stuart, Aubrey Beardsley, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, and William Blake, as well as a rare piece attributed to Angelica Kauffmann. This institution is also the leading repository for illustrations and manuscripts by the children's author-illustrator Maurice Sendak (1928-2012), selections from which are always on view. The Rosenbach Museum & Library and the Free Library (the central branch of the city's public library system) recently announced their plan to merge and create the Rosenbach of the Free Library of Philadelphia Foundation. This union will instantly become one of the greatest collections of rare books, manuscripts, Americana, and fine art anywhere.

Further afield, yet still within the city limits, is the **Woodmere Art Museum**, situated in the affluent neighborhood of Chestnut Hill and dedicated to "telling the stories of the art and artists of Philadelphia." Given the richness of those stories, the collection naturally has a wide scope of both historical and contemporary art. Housed in a magnificent Victorian mansion, the Woodmere opened in 1940 with a core collection that includes Frederic Church's renowned *Sunset in the Berkshire Hills* (1857), and also works by Benjamin West, Daniel Garber, Violet Oakley, and many more local talents. Surrounded by several acres of gardens dotted with contemporary sculptures, the well-designed galleries make the Woodmere well worth a detour. Opening here in October is a survey of longtime PAFA instructor Peter Paone's fantastical flower and vegetal imagery, followed in November by highlights from the broad array of local artists' prints and drawings assembled by the collectors Ann and Don McPhail.

GALLERIES AND OTHER VENUES

Philadelphia's strategic location halfway between Boston and Washington, D.C., helps explain its thriving contemporary art scene. Recent

years have seen many artists immigrating to Philly, particularly from New York, because Philadelphia is a "kinder, gentler" place for creative types to live: its much lower cost of living comes with a vast array of opportunities for education, employment, and exhibition.

The biggest concentration of contemporary galleries can be found in the Old City district, which has a long-established *First Friday* tradition: on the first Friday evening of every month, galleries open their doors and herald new exhibitions with a district-wide party. Throughout this immensely popular event, Old City's streets are thronged with art lovers, vendors, and merry-makers of all kinds, everyone from tango dancers to freestyle saxophonists. Many galleries promptly follow up with *First Sunday*, an afternoon tradition that is also popular though significantly less crowded, such that attention can actually be paid to the art. Many collectors head to *First Friday* to check out the buzz, then return on Sunday to make

more considered choices. So many galleries (not to mention restaurants and boutiques) line the Old City's cobbled streets that it is impossible to list them all, but the most established ones, with the strongest stables of representational artists, are **Artists' House Gallery**, **F.A.N. Gallery**, **Rodger LaPelle Gallery**, and **Rosenfeld Gallery**. Other Old City sites that include representational art to some degree are **Bluestone Fine Art Gallery**, the **Center for Art in Wood**, the **Clay Studio**, the **Fabric Workshop & Museum**, **Dalet Gallery**, **Liz Afif Gallery**, and **3rd Street Gallery**.

Other top galleries are spread out around Center City: **Gallery 313** (all photography), **Gross McCleaf Gallery** (contemporary realism), **Newman Galleries** (living and historical masters of representation), and **Schwarz Gallery** (historical, especially American). Mixing in superb representational art to their diverse programs are **Cerulean Arts**, **Dolan/Maxwell**, **Locks Gallery**, and **Schmidt-Dean Gallery**. And please don't neglect two other areas of the city endowed with clusters of galleries, antique shops, and craft boutiques — Main Street in Manayunk, and Germantown Avenue in Chestnut Hill.

To see what's trending in "new now" art, consider visiting **Bridgette Mayer Gallery** off Washington Square, or even the **Institute of Contemporary Art** in West Philly. More adventurous souls can visit the alternative art spaces popping up all over town; most display experimental work in modern media like video, but I'm pleased to see the occasional dollop of representation folded into the conceptual mix. The shortlist of such galleries includes **Arch Enemy Arts**, **Marginal Utility**, **Pterodactyl**, **Tiger Strikes Asteroid**, and **Vox Populi**.

Philadelphia also has a huge number of community art centers and neighborhood arts organizations that exhibit all levels of work, from the amateur to the professional. Some standouts include **Art in City Hall**, **Asian Arts Initiative**, **Center for Emerging Visual Artists**, **Philadelphia**

The Barnes Foundation's new facility retains the idiosyncratic arrangements of paintings and metalwork designed by founder Albert C. Barnes between 1925 and 1951.

Art Alliance, Crane Arts, Fleisher Art Memorial, Mt. Airy Art Garage, Old City Jewish Arts Center, Philadelphia's Magic Gardens, Philadelphia Sketch Club (the nation's first club for artists), Plastic Club (formed because women were not admitted to the Sketch Club), Taller Puertorriqueño, University City Arts League, and William Way LGBT Community Center.

AUCTION HOUSES AND FAIRS

Though Sotheby's maintains an outpost just outside Philadelphia and Christie's has a centrally located office for appraisal appointments, the city also boasts several fine local auction houses to visit. Foremost among them is Freeman's Auctioneers & Appraisers, established in 1805; it holds more than 30 sales per year in various specialties, from paintings and prints to furniture and rare books. Freeman's was particularly beloved by generations of art students, who would haunt its famous "basement sales," where lots of lesser quality sold in an exciting silent-auction format, furnishing many a young artist's first studio with necessary furniture and bric-a-brac. (Alas, these sales ended in 1999.) For a firm so long established in Pennsylvania, it's intriguing that Freeman's only recently launched its auction series of American Art & Pennsylvania Impressionists; this past June, the painting *Steel Mills, Pittsburgh* achieved the world auction record for artist Frederick R. Wagner (1864-1940) by fetching \$45,000 — more than doubling his previous record from 2003. With its convenient Center City location and frequent sales of high-quality items, Freeman's is well worth a visit, either for a particular sale or a drop-in.

Fuller's Fine Art Auctions is an up-and-coming firm founded in 2007 and situated just a short distance from Center City in the historic neighborhood of Mt. Airy. It specializes in 19th- and 20th-century art and currently hold quarterly sales. Its warehouse saleroom is open at other times by appointment.

Material Culture has been a retailer of quirky objects, old and new, from around the world for close to two decades, but it started holding auctions only in 2012. Nonetheless, it is already making a name for itself with a large retail establishment in the East Falls neighborhood that is fun to visit and houses a popular cafe.

The Philadelphia Antiques Show was founded in 1962, making it one of the longest-running antique fairs in America. This huge and popular event, which benefits Penn Medicine, recently moved to the Philadelphia Convention Center in the heart of Center City. Held every April, it offers an abundance of quality antiques, jewelry, and decorative and fine arts to everyone from the serious collector to the happy (but well-heeled) browser. Running the same weekend is the 23rd Street Armory Antiques Show, mounted by Barn Star Productions with more than 40 dealers exhibiting American and European works in room-like settings.

As for "al fresco" shopping, the Rittenhouse Square Fine Art Show holds the distinction of being the nation's oldest outdoor show of original artworks, and is now in its 82nd year. Held every spring and fall in Center City's ritziest neighborhood, this is a juried event for which close



to 150 artists from around the country have vied for inclusion. Its popular Student Art category showcases talented pupils from Philly's many art schools, offering collectors an ideal opportunity to snap up treasures from the art world's future stars.

Now in its 24th year, the Manayunk Arts Festival is another outdoor event, a fun blend of fine and decorative contemporary arts and crafts, mounted on a street already rich in boutiques, craft galleries, and restaurants. It draws huge crowds every June to this northwestern "arts" neighborhood on the banks of the picturesque Manayunk Canal.

PLANNING YOUR VISIT

If you like finding new art to buy, please schedule your visit to Philadelphia to include a *First Friday*. The museums' websites will tell you what's showing there, and for curated lists of art happenings, see the "events" tab at visitphilly.com/withart (long-running attractions) or uwishunu.com (up-to-the minute calendars). For reviews of "cutting edge" projects, see theartblog.org. And when you're actually in Philly, consult the two free weekly newspapers — *City Paper* and *Philadelphia Weekly*.

Be warned: the only problem with scheduling an art visit to Philly is trying to fit it all in. And this survey does not even extend to the lively arts scene in nearby Bucks County (especially New Hope and Doylestown), nor the upscale suburbs of the Main Line to the west. The city itself offers plenty — a veritable hotbed of art, old and new. Philadelphia's Quaker founders may not have sought it, but their progressive commitment to tolerance and diversity truly set the stage for the "Peaceable Kingdom" of artistic impulses that thrives here today. ■

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