



— THECOLLECTOR — TRAVEL FOR ART & HISTORY BUFFS

7 Small Museums That Are Better Than the Giants

The world's greatest art experiences are often found in unassuming rooms. Discover seven brilliant small museums.

Written by Laura Pattara · Published Aug 8, 2026

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THE PREMISE

The world's greatest museums have, in a very real sense, been ruined by their own greatness.

The Louvre gets ten million visitors a year. Visit in July, and you will feel every single one of them. The seven small museums on this list are the antidote: intimate, unhurried spaces where the art has not been buried under the weight of its own reputation.

Several hold collections that rival anything in Paris or London. None of them will make you line up for two hours to see a painting.



The Seven

FOUR COUNTRIES • FIVE OF THEM FREE OR NEARLY SO

01 Musée de l'Orangerie Paris

02 The Frick Collection

03 Sir John Soane's Museum London

04 **Museo Nazionale di Palazzo Mansi** Lucca

05 The Menil Collection

06 **Museo Soumaya, Plaza Loreto** Mexico City

07 The Wallace Collection London

01 PARIS, FRANCE

Musée de l'Orangerie

Originally built in 1852 as a greenhouse for the citrus trees of the Tuileries Palace, it was later adapted to fulfill a very different purpose: housing eight of Claude Monet's monumental Water Lilies panels. The canvases wrap around two elliptical rooms in an unbroken panorama that Monet designed himself, and were installed in 1927, just months after his death.

Spend an hour in the Orangerie's elliptical galleries, and you will understand why Monet called them a refuge of peaceful meditation.
Source: Wikimedia Commons





There are no ticket barriers between you and the paintings, no protective glass, and the rooms are rarely crowded. Naturally lit from overhead skylights, the rooms are sized so that standing at the center places you at the precise distance Monet intended.

The Water Lilies panels, by Monet,
20th century, photo by Steven Zucker.
Source: Flickr

Downstairs, the Jean Walter and Paul Guillaume collection — Cézanne, Renoir, Matisse, Picasso, Modigliani, Rousseau — serves almost as an afterthought to the two oval rooms upstairs.



02 NEW YORK CITY, USA

The Frick Collection

Housed in the Beaux-Arts mansion on Fifth Avenue that the coke and steel magnate Henry Clay Frick built between 1913 and 1914, the collection operates on an almost domestic scale, and that scale is what makes it so very enticing. Rather than admire Vermeer's *Officer and Laughing Girl* behind velvet ropes, you're in a cozy room where you can sit on a bench, just inches away.

If you consider the Metropolitan Museum of Art a cathedral, then the Frick is a drawing room.

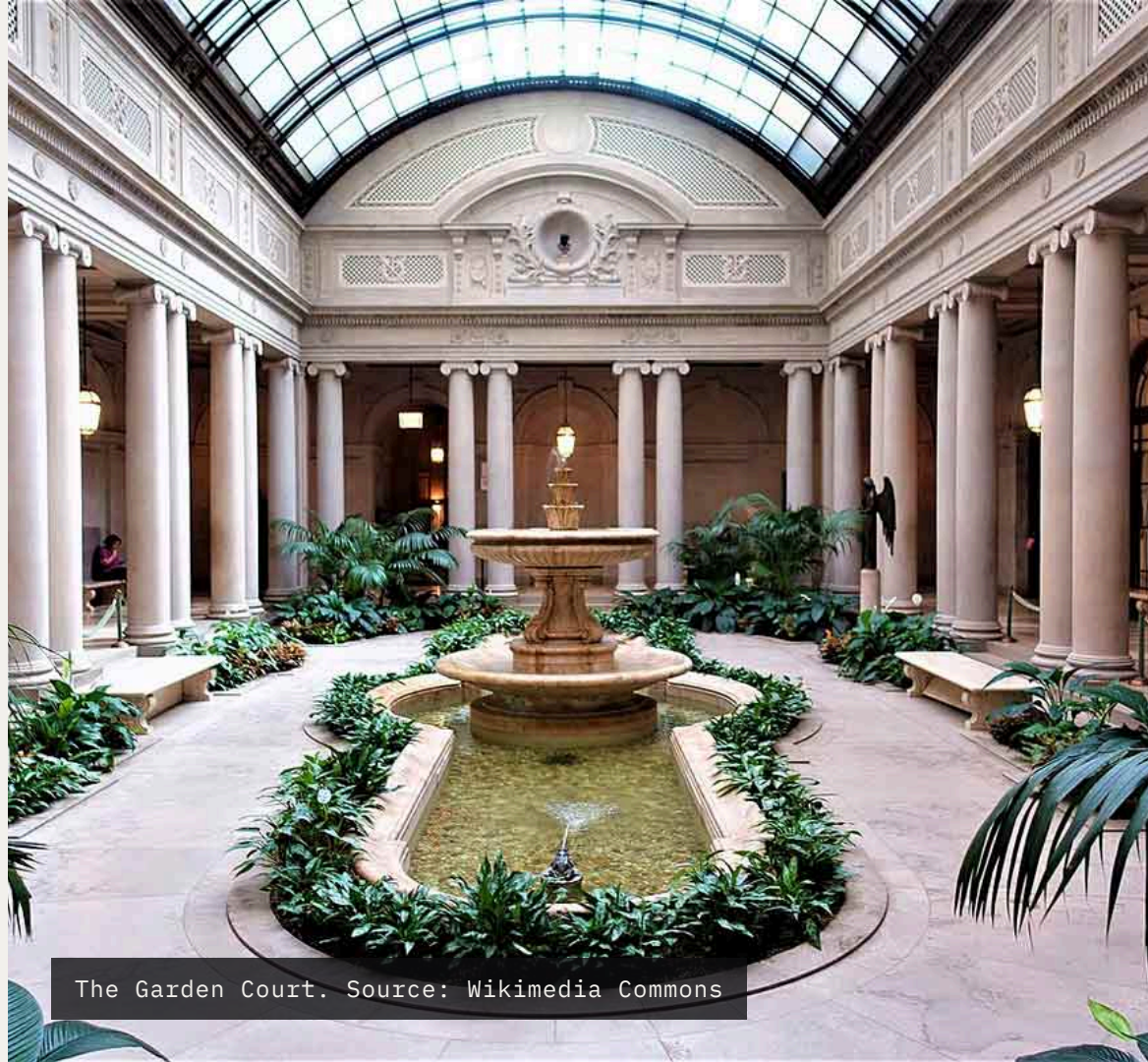
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Frick never intended for these works to be trophies, but as furnishings to be lived with, and that intention is still palpable.

The intimate collection includes Holbein's portrait of Thomas More, Rembrandt's 1658 self-portrait, Bellini's St. Francis in the Desert, and an El Greco that will likely stop you dead in your tracks. The Garden Court, a glass-roofed courtyard with a fountain, is one of the most civilized places to sit in Manhattan.

SIDE NOTE

The Frick reopened its original mansion in 2025 after a five-year, \$220 million renovation. The restored spaces, including the newly accessible second floor, are more beautiful than ever.



The Garden Court. Source: Wikimedia Commons

03 LONDON, ENGLAND

Sir John Soane's Museum

He spent decades turning three adjoining Georgian townhouses at Lincoln's Inn Fields into a personal monument to curiosity. He filled every surface — walls, ceilings, alcoves, and secret panels — with antiquities, paintings, architectural fragments, and cork and plaster models until the rooms themselves became a kind of three-dimensional collage.

This is the strangest house in London and one of the strangest museums anywhere. Don't miss it!

Source: Wikimedia Commons



Hogarth's complete eight-painting *Rake's Progress* series is here, displayed in a picture room whose hinged wall panels fold open to reveal yet more paintings behind them.

The basement holds an alabaster sarcophagus of Seti I, purchased by Soane in 1824 for £2,000 after the British Museum declined it. When the 3,000-year-old alabaster vault arrived, Soane threw a three-day party attended by hundreds of guests.

The lighting throughout the house is theatrical genius, with mirrors and colored glass casting light on every packed surface.

INSIDER TIP

Admission is free at this small museum, but numbers are limited. Go early, take your time, and open *every* door you are permitted to open.



Seti I Coffin at the Soane. Source: Wikimedia Commons



04

LUCCA, ITALY

Museo Nazionale di Palazzo Mansi

A 17th-century aristocratic residence preserved almost completely intact: a suite of state rooms hung with silk brocade, a gilded alcove bedroom said to be one of the finest examples of Baroque interior design in Italy, and a pinacoteca whose collection punches far above the city's size — Pontormo, Tintoretto, Veronese, and a Bronzino portrait that would cause a sensation in Florence.

The most extraordinary thing about Palazzo Mansi is that you almost never encounter more than a dozen other visitors. Source: Wikimedia Commons



Standing alone in a frescoed ballroom that took thirty years to decorate, in a city whose very streets have barely changed since the 1700s, produces a specific kind of vertigo: the head-spinning sense that history has not been reconstructed here; it simply never left.

Bedroom at the Palazzo Mansi.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

The tapestries are Flemish, and the furniture is original.

05

HOUSTON, TEXAS, USA

The Menil Collection

Built by the philanthropists John and Dominique de Menil and opened in 1987 in a Renzo Piano building specifically engineered to filter the fierce Texas light into something gentle and even, the Menil houses one of the greatest private art collections ever assembled. Admission is *permanently* free.

Houston is not the first city that comes to mind in any discussion of world-class art, and that is exactly why the Menil Collection will catch you off guard. Source: Wikimedia Commons

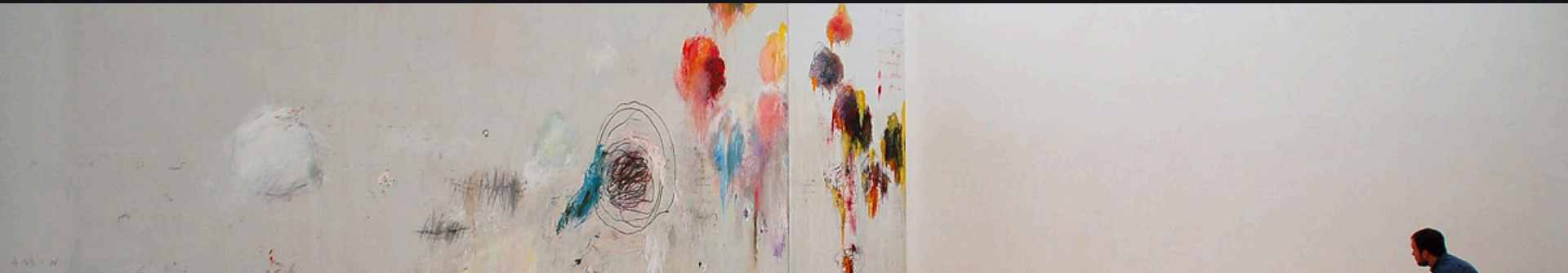


The collection is genuinely strange but in the best sense. Paleolithic bone tools sit near Surrealist objects because the de Menils saw no real fundamental distinction between them.

A dedicated Cy Twombly Gallery occupies a separate Renzo Piano building on the same campus.

The Rothko Chapel, a short walk away, is a non-denominational meditative space containing fourteen large paintings that may be the most powerful room of abstract art in existence.

Untitled (Say Goodbye Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor), by Cy Twombly, 1994, photo by Keith Ewing.
Source: Flickr





06 MEXICO CITY, MEXICO

Museo Soumaya

But not the one you've heard of.

Everyone mentions the Soumaya at Plaza Carso — the gleaming aluminum-tiled tower designed by Fernando Romero. Yet far fewer people know that the original Museo Soumaya, still operating in the Plaza Loreto neighborhood, is an entirely different experience. It's smaller, quirkier, and in many ways, much more rewarding.

Both Soumaya locations in Mexico City are free to visit, but the Plaza Loreto branch draws a fraction of the visitors. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The art collection gathered by billionaire Carlos Slim is eccentric in ways that major museum acquisitions rarely permit. There are works by the circle of Leonardo and Michelangelo alongside an astonishing hoard of European decorative arts, including Limoges enamels, Vienna porcelain, religious retablos, and Mexican colonial silverwork.

The philosophy seems to have been acquired for pure love rather than any kind of curatorial coherence, which gives the Plaza Loreto building an almost cabinet-of-curiosities vibe.

Paintings at the Soumaya. Source:
Wikimedia Commons



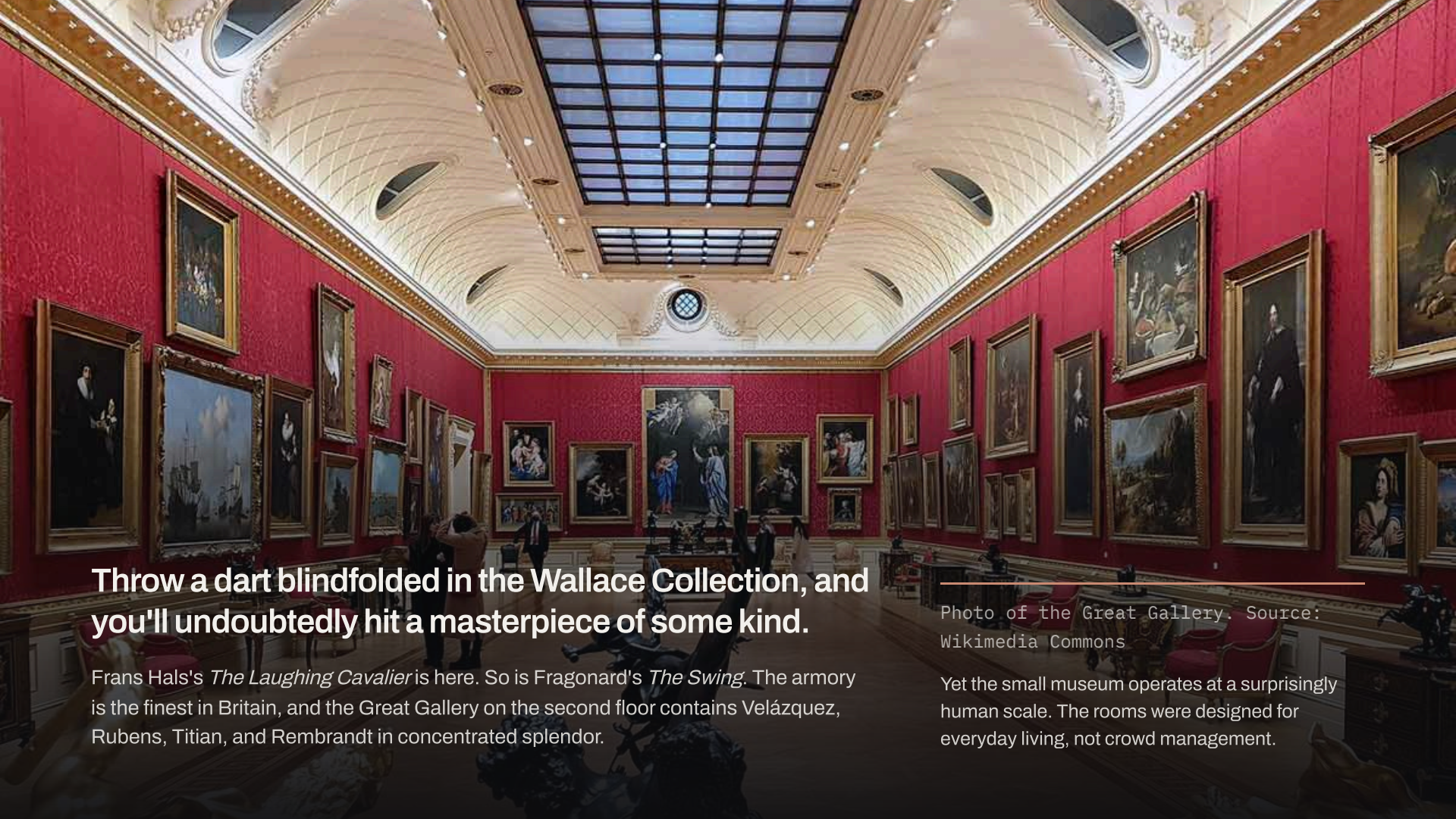
07 LONDON, ENGLAND

The Wallace Collection

The fourth Marquess of Hertford and his son, Sir Richard Wallace, spent the 19th century on a shopping spree. With almost unhinged thoroughness, they snapped up the finest French 18th-century decorative arts, armor, old master paintings, and Sèvres porcelain they could lay their hands on. The result, bequeathed to the British nation in 1897, is a collection that would be the envy of any country, and it is *free* to admire.

Hertford House on Manchester Square is perhaps the greatest argument against the idea that you need a purpose-built museum building to house exquisite art. Source: Wikimedia Commons





Throw a dart blindfolded in the Wallace Collection, and you'll undoubtedly hit a masterpiece of some kind.

Frans Hals's *The Laughing Cavalier* is here. So is Fragonard's *The Swing*. The armory is the finest in Britain, and the Great Gallery on the second floor contains Velázquez, Rubens, Titian, and Rembrandt in concentrated splendor.

Photo of the Great Gallery. Source:
Wikimedia Commons

Yet the small museum operates at a surprisingly human scale. The rooms were designed for everyday living, not crowd management.

IN CLOSING

Visit on a quiet Tuesday morning, stand alone in front of Poussin's *A Dance to the Music of Time*, and you will feel, as the fourth Marquess must have, that it belongs entirely to you.

Source: "7 Small Museums That Are Better Than the Giants"

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