

# FOUR SEASONS

MAGAZINE



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#### A Grand Gesture

With its wealth of Old Masters, Galleria Doria Pamphilj lives up to its motto of "The Triumph of Art in the Heart of Rome."

(MUSEUMS)

## The Art of Independence

Private collections, public settings—these art and design museums exhibit a distinct air of individuality. | By Jeff Book

When Alice Walton, the daughter of Walmart founder Sam Walton, unveiled the new Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, last November, she was founding a monument to her passion for collecting, inaugurating an edifice to her own educated eye. But she was doing it in a thoroughly modern manner—opening the museum while she was still alive. The private museum has a very long pedigree. In fact, almost all early museums were private collections, born during the Age of Exploration out of a sense of curiosity and awe at the art, relics, natural specimens and other marvels brought back from distant lands. Wealthy gentlemen—collecting was a male pursuit—gathered objects and displayed them in so-called wonder >>>

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rooms or cabinets of curiosities. Some of the world’s best small museums, including London’s Wallace Collection, Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris and the Frick Collection in New York, are the heirs of this tradition. But all of them were opened as museums posthumously.

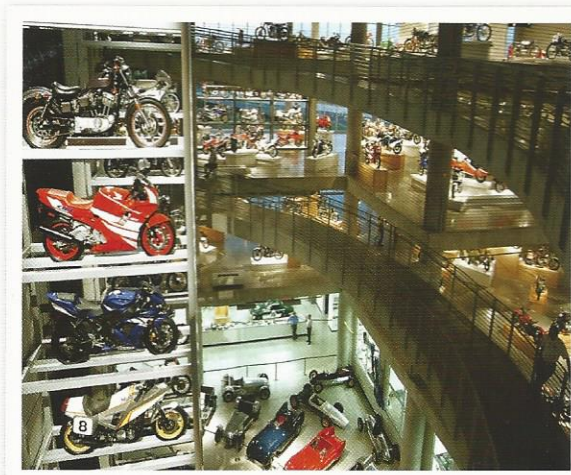
By the late 20th century, collectors were increasingly launching their showboats while they were still around to enjoy them—and see others enjoy them. Flinty billionaire J. Paul Getty opened the Getty Villa in Malibu in 1974. In 1985 advertising mogul Charles Saatchi opened a London gallery of contemporary art from his vast collection (which he has promised to give to Britain, converting it from private to public). Since 2006 François Pinault, head of luxury firm PPR, has displayed his first-rate trove in Venice’s Palazzo Grassi (and now also in the Punta della Dogana). And Los Angeles businessman Eli Broad, long a benefactor of that city’s museums, is currently building his own showplace in downtown L.A.

Whatever their motives—pride, passion, self-aggrandisement, philanthropy, tax relief—collectors are keener than ever to share their trophies with the public in settings they have created. Here are six captivating examples from around the world.

#### **Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome, Italy**

Even in the Eternal City, Galleria Doria Pamphilj stands out for its architectural grandeur, classic gardens and one of the world’s finest private collections of Old Masters. It began in 1647 with an abdication: Cardinal Camillo Pamphilj left the church to marry heiress Olimpia Aldobrandini. She came to the union with a raft of fine artworks and this palazzo on the via del Corso, both of which Camillo proceeded to expand. The collection of 700 paintings and sculptures includes masterpieces by Titian, Caravaggio, Raphael and Guercino. Highlights include two depictions of Camillo’s uncle, Pope Innocent X, placed together for comparison: a fine Bernini bust and the gallery’s most famous painting, a vivid Velázquez portrait of the pontiff.

The Aldobrandini Room brims with fine 17th-century landscape paintings by Claude Lorraine amid others, and the Gallery of Mirrors gives the one at Versailles a run for its money.



#### **Wheel Power**

The Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum is home to the world’s largest collection of motorcycles, nearly 1,300 bikes.

#### **Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum, Birmingham, Alabama, U.S.**

A compliment for any high-performance vehicle is that “it looks fast standing still.” That could be said of almost everything in this museum, which stands beside a sinuous racecourse in the rolling countryside east of the city. It houses the world’s largest motorcycle collection—nearly 1,300 bikes, about half of which are on display at any given time. “It’s a parking garage,” observes founder George Barber, referring to the utilitarian concrete-and-glass design as much as its function. “I don’t think museums should spend all their money on architectural monuments,” he says. “I wanted the building to be simple and rather crude, to contrast with the polish and refinement of the machines.”

The collection features bikes from 1902 to the present day, representing more than 200 manufacturers from 20 countries. It includes rip-roaring racing bikes but also standard street models, military bikes, dirt bikes and rarities. “What fascinates me is to see how different people solved the same design challenges in different ways,” says Barber. Almost all of Barber’s beautifully restored vehicles could be driven around his 2.38-mile, 17-turn track, but you’d have to work around a schedule that includes sports-car rallies, the Porsche Sport Driving School, a spring Honda Indy Grand Prix of Alabama race and the fall Barber Vintage Festival. Honouring tradition in a pastoral setting, the Barber complex has been dubbed the Augusta of motorsports, as hallowed in its field as the home of the Masters tournament is to golf. [www.barbermuseum.org](http://www.barbermuseum.org)

#### **Beyeler Foundation, Basel, Switzerland**

For more than half a century, savvy collectors trekked to the late Ernst Beyeler’s Basel gallery for its top-notch selection of modern art, the product of Beyeler’s keen eye and his friendships with numerous modern masters, among them Picasso, Dubuffet,

Just off it, four rooms, each devoted to works from one century, hold Art History 101 paintings such as Titian’s *Salomé With the Head of John the Baptist* and Caravaggio’s luminous *The Rest on the Flight Into Egypt*.

And the canopied Throne Room? Prince Jonathan Pamphilj, whose family still lives in the palace and who advised on its refurbishment in 1996 (that’s his voice on the audio guide), explains, “When the pope came to visit he would immediately be shown to a room where he would receive you—you couldn’t receive him.” [www.dopart.it/roma](http://www.dopart.it/roma)

## At the Prasart Museum, lush tropical foliage, murmuring fountains and artefacts from prehistoric to recent times punctuate graceful shrines.

Bacon, Giacometti and Rothko. The same factors influenced the personal collection he and his wife, Hildy, assembled. While it includes early modernists such as Cézanne and Matisse, the emphasis is on such 20th-century touchstones as Miró, Klee, Mondrian, Léger, Rauschenberg, Lichtenstein and especially Picasso, who gave Beyeler rare access to his works. The collection is exquisitely housed in an airy, stone-clad pavilion in the Basel suburb of Riehen. This compact masterpiece by architect Renzo Piano shows why he's the go-to museum designer of our time. Floor-to-ceiling windows open the galleries to the surrounding park and reflecting ponds.

The more than 200 paintings and objects include African, Oceanic and Alaskan sculptures that resonate strongly here, given how much modern art was influenced by non-Western cultures. Among the highlights: seminal Cubist works and portraits of Dora Maar by Picasso; a pioneering 1910 abstract painting by Wassily Kandinsky; illuminating selections by Dubuffet, Léger, Giacometti and Francis Bacon; and in the park, sculptures by Alexander Calder and Ellsworth Kelly. [www.fondationbeyeler.ch](http://www.fondationbeyeler.ch)

### Prasart Museum, Bangkok, Thailand

You'll need to make an appointment and hire a driver to reach this secluded oasis on the outskirts of Bangkok, an open-air museum of traditional Southeast Asian and Chinese architecture. Real-estate magnate Prasart Vongsakul created it to preserve and share buildings that otherwise would have been devoured by urban development. Lush tropical foliage, murmuring fountains and artefacts from prehistoric to recent times punctuate graceful shrines. Antique porcelains, Buddhas and other statuary adorn the structures. After an hour-long guided tour, you're free to explore the grounds on your own. Admire the vibrant pop of vermilion walls against jungle greenery. Step over doorways raised to keep out evil spirits. Marvel at trees trained into gnarled fantasies by a platoon of gardeners. Among them is Mr. Prasart himself, who is the self-described "head gardener." 66 2/379-3601

### Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany

This museum has the good fortune of a partnership with a design company: Vitra, which makes contemporary office and home



#### Fine Lines

The Vitra Design Museum, Frank Gehry's first European commission, showcases his dynamic asymmetry.

furnishings at a factory next to the museum. Founded in 1989 by CEO Rolf Fehlbaum, the museum was Frank Gehry's first European commission, one in which he ramped up the dynamic asymmetry that has become his trademark.

The museum draws from Vitra's extensive collection of furniture, lighting and other objects from the early 19th century to the present. Each year the museum mounts two or three exhibitions illuminating specific themes or designers. The subjects range widely, from the likes of Le Corbusier and Isamu Noguchi

to design in Berlin, design for children, architectural photography and Arab dwellings. The entire Vitra site is a kind of contemporary design museum, with an unequalled collection of buildings by renowned architects, among them Tadao Ando, Zaha Hadid, Jean Prouvé, Herzog & de Meuron and Álvaro Siza. There's even a Jasper Morrison bus stop. [www.design-museum.de](http://www.design-museum.de)

### Rubell Family Collection, Miami, Florida, U.S.

A former Drug Enforcement Agency warehouse in Miami has since 1993 contained one of the world's largest private contemporary art collections. Mera and Don Rubell started collecting in the 1960s and now have more than 5,000 works by such artists as Jeff Koons, Cindy Sherman, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Damien Hirst, Paul McCarthy, Keith Haring and Kara Walker. The Rubells are a familiar sight at far-flung galleries and art fairs, including Art Basel Miami, which they helped start, often searching for works to enhance the thematic shows they present in the 45,000-square-foot (4,180-square-metre) space.

The Rubells love to present eclectic selections, such as the current show, "American Exuberance," and champion emerging artists. The couple take full advantage of the freedom afforded private collections. Through their Contemporary Arts Foundation, they've donated more than 1,000 works around the U.S. and sponsor educational programs for public school students. Recently they've branched out to gritty southwest Washington, DC, investing in an abandoned junior high school they intend to turn into a mixed-use complex with a museum. As Mera told *The Washington Post*, "You go where others won't, or it's not an adventure." [www.rfc.museum](http://www.rfc.museum) **4MORE** go to [FourSeasonsMagazine.com/issueone2012](http://FourSeasonsMagazine.com/issueone2012) to see photos of each of these private museums.

Jeff Book covers design and travel for *Elle Décor* and *Smithsonian*.