

ON THE TOWN

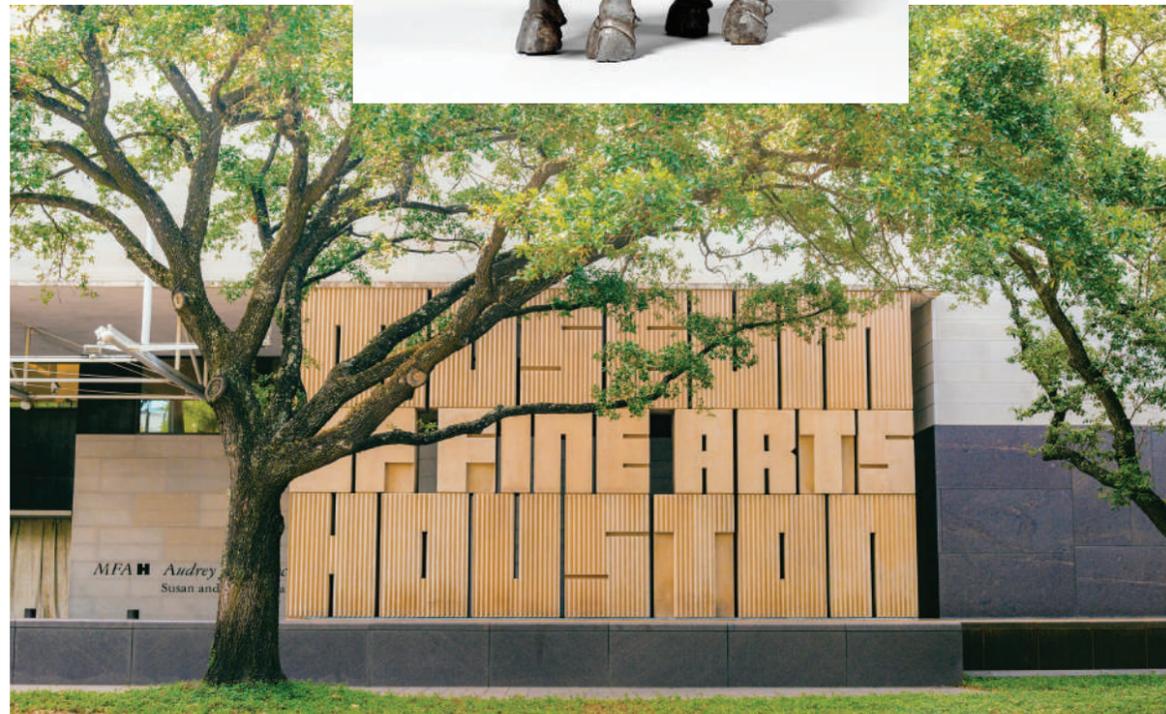
FALL'S FARTS

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AND CHRIS GRAY

WALK THROUGH THE DOORS OF ANY MUSEUM, and you're entering a veritable treasure trove of latent stories from far-off places just waiting to be explored. But with much of their prominent display space devoted to specifically curated exhibitions focusing on a particular time, place, or subject, few museums have the ability to show off all the wonders they possess.

What wonders, you ask? For just two examples, the actual Winnie-the-Pooh—yes, the real (stuffed) bear that helped inspire A.A. Milne's beloved stories—spent decades in the basement of the New York Public Library, while most of Georgia O'Keeffe's singularly evocative and influential paintings are in storage. In fact, most museums display only about 2 percent of the objects they have in their own vaults.

Houston's iconic institutions devoted to art, science, and history are no exception. And they boast some of the finest permanent collections around thanks to the city's ties to the global oil industry, with its cross-cultural reach and tradition of community investment. So we asked representatives of a few of the Bayou City's most fascinating repositories to offer us insights into some of their mainstay marvels, from the ancient to the interesting to the downright bizarre.



MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON COLLECTION

One of the 10 largest museums in the United States, and the largest in the region, the MFAH houses works spanning 6,000 years, six continents, and just about every historical period and artistic medium known to humankind. "Our primary responsibility is to educate the community," Museum Director Gary Tinterow said in 2012. "Not always just to hold up a mirror and show them what they already know, but to expose them to new ideas, new cultures, new works of art that sit them back on their heels, then make them think twice." —ES

1001 Bissonnet St. 713-639-7300. mfah.org



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1. OLDEST: Mountain Goat figurine

Among the oldest objects in the museum's collection, this piece of Persian metalwork dates back to 3000 BCE, during the Proto-Elamite period, the oldest known civilization in present-day Iran. Though there's no way to know whether this particular incense burner was used as a bit of decoration in some goat enthusiast's home or as part of a temple ritual, it's worth noting that these kinds of "silver figures were reserved for elite use," says Chelsea Dacus, assistant curator of the Glassell Collections.

2. RAREST: Chinese Export Punch Bowl

Considered among the upper echelon in the hierarchy of ceramics, export Chinese porcelain was an in-demand trade beginning in the 18th century—so much so that when the fledgling United States began trading with Asian cultures, porcelain was part of the first cargo to arrive here.

Still, it's extremely rare to find motifs depicting specific American places or events in such artworks. The piece is credited as a gift from Ima Hogg, Houston's original ceramics enthusiast but the former governor's daughter—who collected porcelain and other objects with an almost *Citizen Kane*-ish zeal back at her zenith of collecting in the mid-20th century—actually wasn't the one to track this gilded punch bowl down. It was simply purchased by the museum in 2018. Still, Hogg would likely have enjoyed having the bowl, which features grisaille renderings of both the Center Square Waterworks, a 19th-century Philadelphia architectural emblem, and U.S. naval victories from the War of 1812. And she at least gets credit for the piece, since it is now a part of the massive Bayou Bend Collection & Gardens that was donated to the MFAH by Hogg herself.

3. BEST STORY: Pablo Picasso's

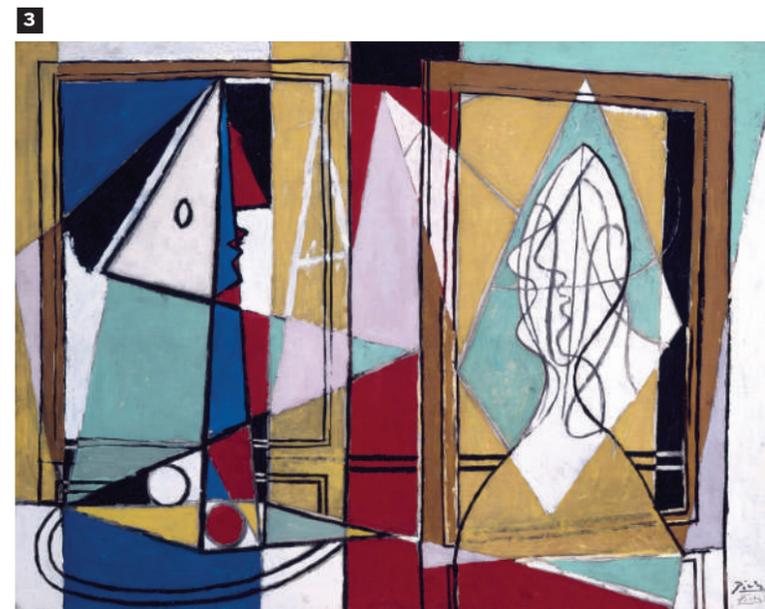
Two Women in Front of a Window

While this 1927 painting forms the bridge between the Spanish painter's explorations in cubism and surrealism, a watershed moment in art history, the painting even arrived here in a style of its own. Most art is shipped, but when art enthusiast Caroline Wiess Law, the daughter of one of the founders of Humble Oil, bought this piece, the New York gallerist who sold it to her rented a Thunderbird convertible and personally drove it down.

4. WEIRDEST: Terror

Stemming from one of the most bizarre image series of the 19th century, this photographic plate was actually part of French neurologist Duchenne de Boulogne's 1862 monograph on the way facial muscles create various expressions. Duchenne induced different facial expressions by administering electric shocks to his subjects, an experiment that was permanently captured by photographer Adrien Tournachon.

While Duchenne's scientific paper described *Terror's* expression as one that "shows a dreadful mixture of horror and fear," his model suffered no pain during the experiment thanks to an underlying anesthetic condition. Yay?



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MUSEUM: VISIT HOUSTON

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON



→ THE MENIL COLLECTION

A Montrose treasure, the once-private art collection of philanthropic power couple John and Dominique de Menil has been enthralling Houstonians since it opened to the public in the late '80s. While works range from Byzantine religious icons to African ceremonial masks to works by European and American painters like René Magritte and Andy Warhol, the museum makes no attempt to “systematically collect all of history and visual arts.”

Instead it focuses on the movements that spoke most deeply to its original collectors, says Senior Curator Michelle White: “It’s not a comprehensive collection, but a collection of great depth in particular areas.” —ES

1533 Sul Ross St. 713-525-9400. menil.org



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1. OLDEST: Engraved bone fragment

Dating back to the Late Stone Age in Western Europe, somewhere between 15,000 and 9,000 BCE, this engraved bone fragment isn't just any old example of ancient art; whoever crafted it millennia ago managed to depict reindeer in profile with a finesse for depth and layering. This little shard, one of three in the Menil's extensive collection, was likely carved around the same time that our ancestors were painting the walls of the Lascaux Caves in southwestern France “at the advent of artistic expression, in a period where we're still talking about really early homo sapiens,” says Paul Davis, curator of collections.

2. RAREST: Tubuai Islands column drum

One of less than 20 remaining examples of column drums from the Tubuai Islands in French Polynesia, the Menil's instrument marries the artistic disciplines of carving and matmaking in an item that is as exquisite today as it was when it was first assembled in the early 19th century. “The head of



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COLLECTION ITEMS: THE MENIL COLLECTION, HOUSTON
EXTERIOR: J. GRIFFIS SMITH/TXDOT

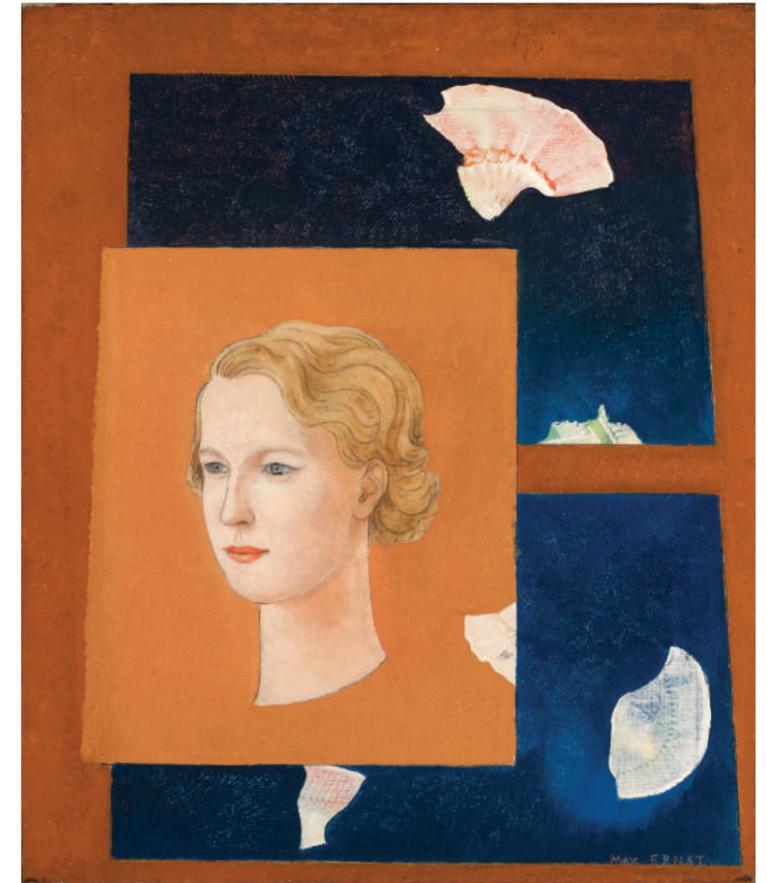
the drum is the stretched skin of a shark,” says Davis. “Ours is one of the very few with an intact sharkskin head.”

NYC's Metropolitan Museum of Art also owns one of these drums, but theirs doesn't include the intricate woven sleeve of pandanus and coconut fibers (which was used to tune the sharkskin head of the instrument) that the Menil's still has, making the Bayou City-based item even more rare.

3. BEST STORY: Dominique de Menil portrait

While living in Paris during the early 1930s, almost a decade before they became the prolific art collectors, the de Menils commissioned a portrait of Dominique from then-little-known painter Max Ernst. They expected a traditional portrait, but Ernst, a surrealist pioneer, painted a floating head along with a few of his signature seashells.

Dominique hated the piece, so much so that the Schlumberger heiress “forgot” to pick it up from the framers and kept it wrapped in butcher paper when she finally did retrieve it, says Davis. It wasn't until after World War II that she came to cherish her portrait, eventually unwrapping it. The de Menils would go on to maintain a long friendship with Ernst, hosting his first U.S. solo exhibition.



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4. WEIRDEST: Robert Gober's Untitled 2005

Made of beeswax and human hair, Gober's mullet-topped block of swiss cheese is as hyperrealistic as it is creepy. Its long mane of thinning locks lends the sculpture an anthropomorphic feel, says White, reminiscent of a small critter you'd cross the street to avoid. “It's funny and horrifying, funny and grotesque,” she says. “And I think that's precisely what the artist's intention is.” Before you ask, we already did: the Menil doesn't know whose hair Gober used in his sculpture.



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➔ **HOUSTON MUSEUM OF NATURAL SCIENCE**

From fossils dating back to the dawn of time to artifacts of ancient cultures, glittering gemstones, and cabinets full of curiosities, you never know what you're going to find when you step inside the Houston Museum of Natural Science.

More than a century old, this Bayou City institution boasts 2.5 million items and specimens in its vast permanent collection, with the best of them displayed at its facility on the northern edge of Hermann Park. "It mirrors the inquisitiveness of our community," says Lisa Rebori, vice president of collections. —ES

555 Hermann Park Dr. 713-639-4629. hmns.org



MIKE RATHKE/HOUSTON MUSEUM OF NATURAL SCIENCE



1. OLDEST: Strelley Pool Stromatolite sample

When people think old creatures, their minds often head straight to dinosaurs, but there are whole eras of terrestrial history that are far older. Consider, if you will, stromatolites: layered mounds of rock formed by ancient marine bacteria.

HMNS's sample from Australia's Strelley Pool Stromatolite is estimated to be around 3.5 billion years old, and this rock slice, with its wavy earth-toned arches of color, is strikingly beautiful. "What you see is lots of layers," says David Temple, associate curator of paleontology. "That's what makes them pretty."

2. RAREST: Siren of Serendip blue sapphire

Named in homage to the sirens of Greek mythology and the serendipity the museum felt at acquiring such a gorgeous specimen, HMNS's giant blue sapphire is one of the largest in the world. "It's rarest because of the overall quality, size, and consistency of the gemstone," says Rebori.

Discovered about a century ago in Sri Lanka, the gem, which is encased in a diamond-studded white gold and platinum necklace forged by master jeweler Ingo Henn, weighs a whopping 422.66 carats (for comparison, the Smithsonian's famed Hope Diamond weighs 45.52 carats). Luckily, this deep-sea-hued beauty isn't cursed—that we know of.

3. BEST STORY: Dipsy, the *Diplodocus hayii*

A beloved staple of the museum, Dipsy became Houston's first dinosaur skeleton when it was unveiled in 1975, and it came a long way to get here. After being discovered by fossil hunter William Utterback in Wyoming around the turn of the 20th century, it sat in packing crates for decades at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh before

making its way to Cleveland and finally to its permanent home in the Bayou City.

"At the time, the founders didn't even think of a paleo hall," says Temple. "They just knew if you were going to be a museum, you had to have a dinosaur." As it happened, they lucked into a pretty cool one: Dipsy is actually a holotype, the fossil scientists use as a model when they formally describe a species, making it something of a celebrity in the dino kingdom.

4. WEIRDEST: Baboon coffin

Most people know that ancient Egyptians used to mummify their dead, but did you know they also mummified their pets? Fido and friends were preserved using the same techniques employed for their human counterparts and placed in small, animal-shaped coffins, like the HMNS's baboon coffin.

Since animals often symbolized different Egyptian gods (baboons were one of the manifestations of Thoth, god of wisdom, magic, and the moon), a coffin's design is focused more on a particular deity being honored or beseeched than on what's inside, says Tom Hardwick, HMNS's consulting curator of Egyptology. "Whoever donated this to Thoth," he says, "was asking a big favor."

The museum doesn't yet know what was buried inside this 2,000-year-old baboon coffin, he adds, but staffers have been working with scientists in Cairo for more than half a year and hope to solve that mystery soon.

