D.C.'s 20 most underrated museums and galleries, mapped

Skip the National Mall and head to these lesser-known locations instead

By Michelle Goldchain | @goldchainam | Updated Jun 14, 2019, 12:00pm EDT

If you want to skip the National Mall and journey to the hidden gems in Washington, D.C., we’ve got a map for you.

From the National Building Museum to the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site, these are the most underrated museums and galleries in the city. They range in focus from contemporary art and social issues to architecture and spy history.

Tell us about your favorite D.C. museums and exhibits in the comments.
1. African American Civil War Museum

1925 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, DC 20001

202-667-2667
Visit Website

More than 200,000 African-American soldiers and sailors fought in the Civil War. At the African American Civil War Museum, these individuals are remembered through photography, newspaper articles, replicas of uniforms, and a memorial.
2. National Arboretum

Arboretum
Washington, DC 20002
202-245-4523
Visit Website

Take a walk on the wild side by stepping away from city life and journeying through one of the District's most beautiful gardens. As a "living museum," the National Arboretum features more than just trees and flowers. It also offers a look at the original columns of the old East Portico of the U.S. Capitol.

3. Dumbarton Oaks Museum

1703 32nd St NW
Washington, DC 20007
202-339-6400
Visit Website
This 1801 Federal-style estate in Georgetown serves as a house museum. It boasts Byzantine and pre-Columbian collections, and features a variety of tapestries, furniture, and artwork. It also supports scholarly research.

4. IA&A at Hillyer

9 Hillyer Ct NW
Washington, DC 20008

202-338-0325
Visit Website

This cozy Dupont Circle art gallery is hidden in an alley behind The Phillips Collection. Composed of three separate rooms and run by International Arts & Artists, a nonprofit, it offers contemporary artwork and events. The gallery seeks to highlight local, regional, and international artists and is open daily.
5. The Phillips Collection

1600 21st St NW
Washington, DC 20009

202-387-2151
Visit Website

Just a couple blocks from the Dupont Circle Metro station is the nation's first museum of modern art. Some of the roughly 3,000 works in its collection are by well-known artists such as Renoir, Vincent van Gogh, and Matisse.
6. The Mansion on O Street

2020 O St NW
Washington, DC 20036

202-496-2020
Visit Website

The Mansion on O Street is a sight to be seen. Throughout the three connected Dupont Circle rowhouses comprising the mansion, there are themed rooms, all sorts of artwork, secret doors, and even guitars signed by stars like Eric Clapton.
7. Mary McLeod Bethune Council House

1318 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, DC 20005

202-673-2402
Visit Website

This Logan Circle house hosted the first headquarters of the National Council of Negro Women, an organization that works to reduce racial, class, and gender discrimination. The building also served as the last home of Mary McLeod Bethune, an education advocate who became the highest-ranking African-American woman in the federal government in 1935.
Did somebody say “Oktoberfest”? Referred to as the Brewmaster’s Castle, the Heurich House in Dupont Circle is known for beer-focused events throughout the year. Every Thursday, it hosts a live "HOME/BREWED" exhibit in the site’s private backyard.

9. Old Stone House

Behold, the oldest unchanged building in the nation’s capital, dating to before the Revolutionary War. When it was originally built, it was both a home and a shop for cabinetmaker Christopher Layman. The house reopened as a museum in 1960, offering visitors a glimpse at pre-Revolutionary architecture and furnishings. The museum is free.
10. National Geographic Museum

1145 17th St NW
Washington, DC 20036
202-857-7700
Visit Website

For those who love animals, traveling, and photography, the National Geographic Museum should be on your list. While it's fairly small, it's a good place to learn about dinosaurs, the ocean, and cultures around the world.
Since 1987, this museum has celebrated women who have influenced the art world. From Frida Kahlo to Mary Cassatt, the National Museum of Women in the Arts ensures that women artists are never forgotten or under-acknowledged. The museum's collection has more than 4,500 pieces of art.
12. Smithsonian National Postal Museum

2 Massachusetts Ave NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
202-633-5555  
Visit Website

Across from Union Station, this museum first opened in 1993 and once housed D.C. ’s main post office. Visitors can learn about the history of the U.S. Postal Service, the Pony Express, and Owney, the first unofficial postal mascot. Admission is free.

13. National Building Museum

401 F St NW  
Washington, DC 20001  
202-272-2448  
Visit Website

The National Building Museum highlights innovation in architecture and design. Exhibitions have included large-scale photos of D.C. landmarks and urban planning for natural disasters. The museum also hosts expansive interactive exhibitions each summer: among the, a ball pit, a maze, and a fun house.
If you love movies from the “James Bond” or “Bourne” series, the International Spy Museum should be your next stop. Opened in a new building in 2019, the Spy Museum allows guests to decrypt secret audio conversations, interrogate suspected agents, and go on your own undercover mission.
15. Octagon Museum

1799 New York Ave NW
Washington, DC 20006

202-626-7439
Visit Website

In Foggy Bottom, you can find this architecture and design museum. The house was built between 1798 and 1800 by the architect of the U.S. Capitol, Dr. William Thornton. It now serves as the home of the American Institute of Architects and showcases architects who have had some of the longest-lasting influence.
16. Anacostia Community Museum

1901 Fort Pl SE
Washington, DC 20020
202-633-4820
Visit Website

Visitors to the Anacostia Community Museum can learn about a wide array of social issues in urban communities. Exhibitions have centered on the popularity of African-American baseball teams during segregation, the original Native American population in D.C., and the Civil War’s effects on the District. The museum is closed for renovations until fall 2019.
17. Belmont-Paul Women's Equality National Monument

144 Constitution Ave NE
Washington, DC 20002

202-543-2240
Visit Website

This easy-to-miss gem is located in a 200-year-old house near the Supreme Court and the Library of Congress. Dedicated to women's suffrage, the museum focuses mainly on the early 1900s. One high point is its collection of political cartoons by artist and suffragist Nina Allender. The property serves as the headquarters of the National Woman's Party also.
18. Frederick Douglass National Historic Site

From 1877 to 1895, abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass lived in this single-family home, otherwise known as Cedar Hill. It was established as a National Historic Site in 1988 and educates visitors about Douglass’s life and vision. Situated on a hill, the site also offers one of the best views of Washington, D.C.

19. U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

Since its dedication in 1993, the Holocaust Memorial Museum’s mission has been to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human
Since its dedication in 1993, the Holocaust Museum's mission has been to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity. More than 40 million total visitors have visited. The museum additionally provides online information and resources in more than a dozen languages.

20. Culture House DC

700 Delaware Ave SW
Washington, DC 20024

202-554-0103
Visit Website

Inside this early 1900s Victorian church, guests can find large-scale murals and dynamic contemporary art. The venue is located in Southwest and offers a unique space for private events. It was formerly known as Blind Whino.