



This dazzling Chihuly glass sculpture greets visitors to the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha.

COURTESY OF OMAHA CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU

FOR ART'S SAKE IN OMAHA

Get ready to be captivated by world-class exhibitions and diverse public art in this little slice of the Midwest.

By Erin Gifford

A dazzling 2,080-piece Chihuly glass sculpture graces the museum entry. A few steps inside, casually standing in fourth position, Degas' *Little Dancer, Fourteen Years Old* politely welcomes guests. Mere feet away, other Impressionist masterpieces by artistic greats such as Renoir, Monet and Pissarro adorn the walls. Surely, this is a museum in San Francisco or New York. Nope. This is the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska.

"Creativity lives and breathes in Omaha, and that's evident in the world-class artwork found in local museums and galleries across the city," says Tracie McPherson, a spokesperson for the Omaha Convention & Visitors Bureau.

More than 12,000 works of art are on display at the museum, opened in 1931 as a gift to Omaha by local philanthropist Sarah Joslyn. Housed in a 200,000-square-foot Art-Deco building made entirely of Georgia pink marble is an exceptional art collection featuring exquisite Medieval and Baroque masterpieces, modern and contemporary artworks, and pieces influenced by the American West. There is even a 1,000-seat concert hall. In 2013, the museum made admission free, welcoming everyone into its galleries.

Outside the museum, four galleries make up a sculpture garden that spans more than an

acre and presents historically relevant works of art, including *The Omaha Riverscape* created by sculptor Jesús Morales. This stone and granite installation incorporates a meandering 118-foot-long reflecting pool, forming a topographical map of the section of the Missouri River that flows along the east side of Nebraska, adjacent to Omaha.

Kids and adults alike are drawn to quirky, colorful sculptures in the Discovery Garden, a fixture at Joslyn since 2009. Whimsical sculptures with names such as *Pencil Bench* and *Folded Square Alphabet O* rivet guests as they stroll the manicured grounds. Artist George Sugarman's *Yellow Ascending* is a favorite among visitors. An abstract depiction of his love for movement, color and structure, it looks like leaves tossed into the air.

The Joslyn also appeals to young museum-goers with kid's programs, including museum stroller tours and family scavenger hunts through the galleries. "Joslyn is very kid-friendly," says Nancy Round, the museum's director of education and outreach. "Besides structured youth programs in the galleries and studios, the museum offers children and families a variety of low- and high-tech tools, such as iPad art apps and stop-motion animation stations, to engage in independent art exploration and hands-on learning."



Degas' *Little Dancer, Fourteen Years Old* on exhibit at the Joslyn Art Museum

PHOTO BY ERIN GIFFORD



A festive event at El Museo Latino

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A glass-blowing artist at work at Hot Shops Art Center in Omaha

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Two of 12 Tanukis sculptures at Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo

PHOTO BY ERIN GIFFORD

BRING THE KIDS

Art is also alive and well at Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo, which frequently ranks among the top-five zoos in the world by TripAdvisor. Here, a few dozen family-friendly works of art adorn the grounds; favorites among them are 12 Japanese raccoon dog sculptures called Tanukis. Created by world-renowned artist Jun Kaneko, these brightly colored ceramic Tanukis stand nearly seven-feet tall, capturing the attention of passers-by with lively patterns. The Tanukis complement other sculptures in the zoo's collection of animal art,

including the iconic *Lions Pride* bronze sculpture that greets visitors inside the main gate.

The most visited museum in Nebraska, the Omaha Children's Museum, which features hands-on art and science exhibits, is furthering a love of art and creative expression in children with the Art Smart Center. Opened in 2017, the museum's newest permanent exhibit invites children to freely create with light, paint, wood and sketch pencils. There is also a large face-painting station where kids can paint their own faces and put on a show on the small adjacent stage.

FROM LATINO TO LOCAL ART

Just south of downtown, El Museo Latino, founded in 1993 by Magdalena Garcia, fueled by her passion for the arts, is the Midwest's first Latino art and history museum and just one of 18 in the U.S. Housed in a reconstructed red brick school building from the 1930s, this museum showcases rotating exhibits that range from contemporary textile art to traditional masks worn during cultural festivals. Permanent exhibits include Mata Ortiz pottery and art objects created from yarn and glass beads by indigenous Huichol people of Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental mountains.

The museum achieved national recognition in 2001 when it received its first traveling collection from the Smithsonian: a photography exhibition titled *Americanos: Latino Life in the United States*. In 2016, an artist-in-residence program for local Latino artists began at the museum, helping further the creation and appreciation of Latino works of art.

Local artists also have a place of

their own to create and inspire other artists at the Hot Shops Art Center in downtown Omaha. Opened in 1999 inside an old Serta Mattress factory, the 92,000-square-foot center features glass-blowing, pottery-making, bronze-casting and blacksmithing studios. You'll also find 58 artist studios and 3 art galleries, all under one roof.

"Visitors on the hunt for unique souvenirs will find these local galleries are filled with limited-edition photography, original paintings, handcrafted sculptures, jewelry, ceramics and more," notes McPherson.

More than 80 Hot Shops artists encourage visitors to explore and ask questions, even as the artisans craft works of art. Pull up a chair to sit next to them as you create your own works, drawing inspiration from the artists. You can also sign up for a class or workshop on such crafts as glass bead-making, painting with oils, printmaking, photography and the ancient art of making chainmaille jewelry from small metal rings.



The mural *Fertile Ground* can be seen in Omaha's Old Market District.

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GOING PUBLIC

Public art is also big and diverse in Omaha. The self-guided Downtown Omaha Art Walk makes 22 stops for sculptures, statues and a massive 32,500-square-foot *Fertile Ground* mural in Omaha's Old Market District, which tells the story of Omaha from early settlement to present day. Completed in 2009 by renowned muralist Meg Saligman, it's the largest public art project in the history of Omaha.

Download the free Public Art Omaha

app to find nearby public art as you walk about town, and also learn more about works by simply snapping a photo of a mural or sculpture. The app matches the photo in its database and returns details, such as the artist, materials used and description of the artwork.

"Visitors can see amazing public art throughout the city," says McPherson. "With more than 350 public art displays and world-class museums, most of which are free and open to the public, art can be in found in every direction."