

# Artists on the Must-See Works at Their Favorite Museums

Contemporary painters and others share what they always revisit, from the Met to the Louvre.

By Julia Halperin April 17, 2026

BUFFALO

## Buffalo AKG Art Museum

### 'Convergence' (1952) by Jackson Pollock

"This is such a distinctly American painting [below]," says the artist Stanley Whitney, 79.

"Painters in America were trying to reinvent painting at the time, and you can't reinvent painting more than Pollock."



NEW YORK

## The Metropolitan Museum of Art

***Toluk* (women's valuable, late 19th-early 20th century) by a Belauan artist, Republic of Palau, Caroline Islands**

"This *toluk*," says the painter Jordan Casteel, 37, "made by a Belauan artist from polished and carved sea-turtle shells, is essentially money, part of a women-centered system of value used for owning, inheriting and exchange. I love thinking about women's authority being central here."

### **'The Harvesters' (1565) by Pieter Bruegel**

"My friend James Gibbs recommended I go to the Met just to enjoy this one painting," says the performance artist Ragnar Kjartansson, 50. "It's a trick of his. Just walk straight through all the glory, look at this work and go back in time. I stood there in front of the corn and the people taking a rest many hundreds of years ago and dreamed for half an hour. I really, really recommend this method."

### **Paintings by Édouard Manet (1832-83)**

"It's absurd to pick one thing, or even five, from the Met's vast and diverse holdings, but whatever else I'm there for, I always swing by the second-floor European painting galleries to check in with the collection of works by Édouard Manet," says the painter David Salle, 73. "These paintings are modern consciousness itself — societal, political, sexual, aesthetic, theatrical, *presentational* — compressed into a brushstroke."

### **'Sleepers' (1943) by Horace Pippin**

"The restrained and intimate nature of [the American painter] Pippin's works [below] is always so comforting," says Casteel. "With only three or four colors and a careful selection of brushstrokes, he brings me into the room to witness the warmth and care of the scene. I almost want to whisper [so as] not to wake them."



## PHILADELPHIA

### Philadelphia Museum of Art

#### **‘The Large Bathers’ (1900-06) by Paul Cézanne**

“If I could have any painting in the world, it would be this one [below],” says Whitney. “It reminds me of a Bud Powell record where he was playing an out-of-tune piano in Paris — everything is wrong, and everything is right. That’s how I feel about this painting: ‘If loving you is wrong, I don’t want to be right.’”



Philadelphia Museum of Art

## LONDON

### The National Gallery

#### **‘The Triumphs of Caesar’ (mid-1480s-1506) by Andrea Mantegna**

“These are enormous pictures, and overwhelming on every level,” says Salle. “They depict Caesar’s victorious armies returning to Rome laden with every imaginable spoil of war. The drawing, execution, color, control of lighting effects — the pictures are astonishingly *present*; it’s hard to believe they were painted at the end of the 15th century. And their scathing, unsparing depiction of the world of unfettered conquest, empire and plunder could hardly be more relevant today.”

#### **‘Bacchus and Ariadne’ (1520-23) by Titian**

“This [below] is a very important work for me,” says Whitney. “I wish I’d seen it when I was 18. It has so much information about painting — color, movement and structure.”



On loan from His Majesty the King, Royal Collection Trust © 2023 His Majesty King Charles III

LONDON

## Tate Modern

### 'The Supper' (1991) by Belkis Ayón

"[The Cuban artist] Ayón's printmaking is, without doubt, firmly ingrained in the DNA of my drawings," says the painter Toyin Ojih Odutola, 40. " 'The Supper' [below] is considered one of her most definitive works, marking her shift from color to black and white."



**Museo de Arte Moderno de México**

## **‘Canto Triste por Biafra’ (1969) by Gilberto Aceves Navarro**

“The three panels at the center form a cacophonous landscape of every conceivable violent mark in muddy black, orange, white and red,” says Ojih Odutola. “They’re sandwiched by two bright, canary yellow sides. Both margins depict the clearest figures in the painting, each holding a gun aimed at the destruction. [The painting (below) is about the Nigerian civil war, which lasted from 1967 to 1970.] I’m not going to tell you what to feel or how long to stay. For me, it was a solid 40 minutes. I chose to sit in gratitude with this sad song — one human stretching their arms from one continent, one country, one conflict in history to another.”



© Gilberto Aceves Navarro, Museo de Arte in Mexico/SOMAAP, Mexico City © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

PARIS

## **The Louvre**

### **Paintings by Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665)**

“It’s some of the most incredible painting — the detail, the storytelling, the narrative within the painting [below],” says the multidisciplinary artist Walid Raad, 58. “You get sucked into a universe. It’s hard to walk in and have so many of them [on display] because it’s like looking at 30 to 40 galaxies. You have to explore each one.”



Nicolas Poussin's 'Esther et Rebecca' (1648). © Grand Palais RMN (Musée du Louvre)/Tony Duane

LYON, FRANCE

## **Lugdunum-Musée et Théâtres Romains, France**

## **Roman dodecahedra (first-third century A.D.)**

“Archaeologists can’t seem to agree on the purpose of these ancient objects [below]: 12 [sides], punctured with circular openings of varying sizes,” says Ojih Odutola. “What was their function? The more you wonder, the more you want to hold one in your palm — to feel its balance — while imagining what ancestral impulse compelled its making.”



London Delfino

SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL

## **São Paulo Museum of Art**

### **‘Apparition of the Child Jesus to Saint Anthony of Padua’ (1627-30) by Francisco de Zurbarán**

“One of the highlights of Francisco de Zurbarán’s paintings [below] for me is the humility of the figures he depicts,” says the photographer Wolfgang Tillmans, 57. “They possess a touching realism and a deep spirituality, which, as in many of Caravaggio’s works, can verge on a certain eroticism. I’m struck by his remarkable attention to the weight and texture of cloth.”



Museo de Arte de São Paulo. Photo: João Maia

AMSTERDAM

## Rijksmuseum

### **‘Syndics of the Drapers’ Guild’ (1662) by Rembrandt van Rijn**

“I became aware of this image [below] through a cigar brand called Dutch Masters,” says the painter and conceptual artist Rashid Johnson, 48. “When I was like 15, I’d buy Dutch Masters cigars and we’d use them to roll blunts. So I was familiar with this image — not thinking of it in any way as historically significant. Coming across that painting in the Rijksmuseum, the high-low of it is just fascinating.”



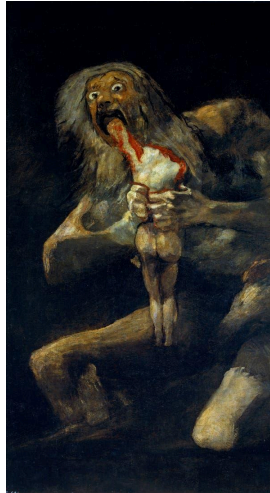
The Rijksmuseum

MADRID

## The Prado

### **‘Black Paintings’ (1820-23) by Francisco de Goya**

“The room of works by Francisco de Goya is probably my favorite painting room anywhere in the world,” says Johnson. “I’m obsessed with two in particular: ‘Duel With Clubs’ and ‘Saturn Devouring His Son’ [below]. Goya creates a set of transgressions that show something in his spirit that is complicated and almost hard to watch.”



© Photographic Archive Museo Nacional del Prado

### **‘Las Meninas’ (1656) by Diego Velázquez**

“‘Las Meninas’ is an endlessly renewable miracle,” says Salle. “On one of my visits, another viewer, apparently overwhelmed, fainted, landing in a heap on the floor. I’m surprised it doesn’t happen more often.”

### **‘The Third of May 1808’ (1814) by Francisco de Goya**

“What a great protest painting,” says Whitney. “It has so much humanity. It’s still a powerful statement, and it was painted in 1814.”

JOS, NIGERIA

## **Museum of Traditional Nigerian Architecture**

### **Earthenware buildings (1970s-80s)**

“The history of earthenware architecture is plentiful throughout West Africa,” says Ojih Odutola. “As we roamed about these reconstructions of ancient monuments [below], my uncle Ade explained how they were our ancestors’ skyscrapers — and still held their technological ingenuity. If you find yourself within and among these structures, sharpen your senses. Treasure their divinity.”



Museum of Traditional Nigerian Architecture

ODAWARA, JAPAN

## Enoura Observatory

### **‘The Tree of Life’ (2017) by Hiroshi Sugimoto**

“On a hillside overlooking Sagami Bay, [the photographer and architect] Sugimoto designed the Enoura Observatory [below] around astronomical alignments, including galleries that frame the sun at solstices,” says the conceptual artist Anicka Yi, 54. “During my 2025 visit, the ‘Tree of Life’ marble relief, atop a narrow passageway leading to the Winter Solstice Light-Worship Tunnel, had a potent impact.”



Marble relief © Osawara Art Foundation

NAOSHIMA, JAPAN

## Benesse House Museum

### **‘One Hundred Live and Die’ (1984) by Bruce Nauman**

“This work [below] has everything — life, death, banality, fear, hope, evil, joy — separately and then, quite suddenly, all together, filling the gallery with a shock blast of light,” says the sculptor Do Ho Suh, 63.



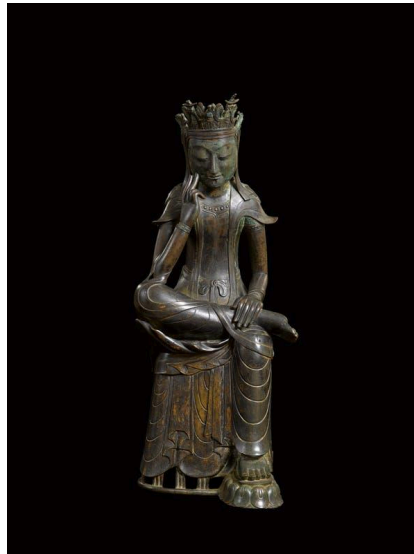
Bruce Nauman/Art Rights Society (ARS), New York, Beware House, Photo: Orsola Nobaldia

## SEOUL

# National Museum of Korea

## ‘The Pensive Bodhisattva’ (late sixth-early seventh century)

“These sculptures [below] are so utterly beautiful in their quiet clarity,” says Suh. “They remind me that life is both very complex and very simple.”



Collection of the National Museum of Korea

## DOHA, QATAR

# Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art

## Paintings by Shakir Hassan Al Said (1925-2004)

“He was an Iraqi artist who was hosted in Doha [Qatar] by a member of the royal family during the first gulf war,” says Raad. “He would literally cut the canvas and paint these cuts. It meant to go beyond the surface to this non-retinal, spiritual dimension. The wall, the texture of the paint, the shadow — all are within the world of the painting itself.”

FLORENCE, ITALY

## The Uffizi

### The paintings of Sandro Botticelli (circa 1445-1510)

“I once went to Florence and visited a nun — a friend of my mother’s,” says Kjartansson. “The nun heard we were going to the Uffizi. She talked of going through all the beautiful paintings of the Virgin and Child. But then she told of the shock of going into the disgusting halls where the corrupt and sinful paintings of Botticelli [below] hang. This perspective totally changed my vision of Botticelli. It made me understand the conditions these paintings were created under, and the power and atomic sensuality of them. They’ve become such a cozy cliché on stationery and handkerchiefs that I didn’t understand them until the sister opened my eyes.”



Sandro Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" (1484-1486). Digital image © iStock.com by Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.

These interviews have been edited and condensed.