



Those who think museums are stuffy, stodgy or downright dull perhaps haven't visited the right ones. Consider paying a call on these offbeat and just plain quirky establishments that demonstrate museums can be flat-out fun.



Cats, carousels and neon café signs are among the collections you'll find in the region's quirky museums.



Feline Historical Museum
Alliance, Ohio

Cat lovers will be in seventh heaven at the Feline Historical Museum, housed in the headquarters of the Cat Fanciers' Association. Among the thousands of artifacts on display are cat figurines, ceramics, jewelry, cookie jars, teapots and an entire room of cat dolls in fanciful costumes. The artwork adorning the walls ranges from a Chinese scroll depicting 100 cats to a painting portraying Jesse James and his gang as felines. A highlight of the collection is a huge cat house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright that resembles a red spaceship sitting on a pedestal. The museum's restroom is even equipped with "Right Meow" hand soap. felinehistoricalfoundation.org

American Sign Museum
Cincinnati, Ohio

The American Sign Museum covers a century of sign history from the late 1800s to the 1980s by exhibiting all

manner of early signs that used lightbulbs, fluorescent plastics, gold leaf on glass and so on. But the real showstopper is the cavalcade of neon signs, such as an early one from McDonald's touting burgers with a 15-cent price tag as well as a tiki-style bowling alley sign. Novelties include an early Big Boy statue; a huge, spinning Sputnik satellite-like sign that once promoted a strip mall near Disneyland; and a twirling blue windmill advertising a bakery. Want to make your own neon sign? Sign up for an on-site workshop. americansignmuseum.org

Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum
Columbus, Ohio

Look, there's Lucy pulling the football away from Charlie Brown! And there's Calvin and Hobbes lolling in each other's arms—or paws as the case may be. Welcome to the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum, the world's largest repository of cartoon art, with a whopping 300,000 original cartoons, 2.5 million comic strip clippings, 45,000 books and 67,000 serials and comic books. The museum's galleries on the campus

of Ohio State University show both selections from the permanent collection as well as themed special exhibitions. Want to see the funny books of your childhood? Go to the reading room, locate them online, place an order, and they'll be brought out for your on-site perusal. cartoons.osu.edu

The Ernest Warther Museum & Gardens
Dover, Ohio

The life's work of the late Ernest "Mooney" Warther, known as The World's Master Carver, takes center stage at The Ernest Warther Museum & Gardens. Among the masterpieces are 64 working representations of steam locomotives fashioned from walnut, ebony and ivory. With up to 7,500 separate hand-carved pieces in each train, the level of detail is remarkable. The Lincoln Funeral Train is one of the finest examples. Not only can the coffin be seen inside the train, but there's also a nearly microscopic key hanging outside the car that will actually lock and unlock the tiny door to the carriage. thewarthermuseum.com

Mazza Museum
Findlay, Ohio

A visit to the Mazza Museum on the campus of the University of Findlay is a trip down memory lane. Home to the world's largest collection of original artwork by children's book illustrators, the Mazza hangs an ever-changing array of the often-sizeable works in its six galleries. The art of nearly 700 artists is displayed, including H.A. Rey's *Curious George*, Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, Robert McCloskey's *Make Way for Ducklings* and Dr. Seuss' beloved *The Cat in the Hat*. mazzamuseum.org

Castle Noel
Medina, Ohio

It's Christmas year-round at Castle Noel. Within this eclectic collection are the world's largest collection of Hollywood holiday movie costumes, including Will Ferrell's *Elf* outfit, and props, such as the neon-pink bedroom set of Cindy Lou Who from *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Also

on exhibit are holiday window displays that once graced New York City department stores such as Lord & Taylor and Bloomingdale's. A collection of thousands of toys from the 1950s through 1980s will surely elicit a response of "I had that one!" The grand finale: you get to ride down the same sliding board that Ralphie was pushed down by the Angry Elves in *A Christmas Story*. castlenoel.com



Do you feel eyes watching you? Nearly 1,000 ventriloquist dummies are exhibited at the Vent Haven Museum in Kentucky.

Merry-Go-Round Museum

Sandusky, Ohio

Ride a painted pony! Time-travel to the golden age of American carousels at the Merry-Go-Round Museum, where the dozens of antique carousel figures on display include not only standing and jumping horses but also tigers, sea monsters and wolves chasing reindeer. At an on-site woodcarving shop, artisans create and restore carousel animals using historically accurate techniques. Smack-dab in the middle of the museum is a restored 1939 carousel upon which visitors can take a spin on painted ponies or atop an ostrich, eagle, zebra, dog or pig, all to the oompah-pah accompaniment of an antique band organ. merrygoroundmuseum.org

French Lick West Baden Museum

French Lick, Indiana

Yes, that giant statue in the front window of the French Lick West Baden Museum does, indeed, resemble the common depiction of Satan, complete with horns and a pointy tail. Actually, the statue represents Pluto, god of the underworld, the mascot of the hot springs that have been drawing thousands of visitors to the elegant spas in the twin towns of French Lick and West Baden, Indiana, since the mid-19th century. Other offbeat displays at the museum include an exhibit honoring NBA star and local legend Larry Bird, the self-proclaimed "Hick from French Lick." But the biggest draw is the world's largest circus diorama, taking up

1,200 square feet and encompassing 150,000 exquisitely detailed figurines. Those little droppings at the feet of the elephants? They're exactly what you think they are. flwbmuseum.com



The original statue of Pluto, emblem of French Lick Springs Hotel's mineral water, can be seen at the French Lick West Baden Museum.

Vent Haven Museum

Fort Mitchell, Kentucky

Imagine a whole wall of ventriloquists' dummies seated bleacher-style as if they were watching a baseball game. That's just one of the surreal images presented at the Vent Haven Museum, the world's only museum devoted to ventriloquism. Among the nearly 1,000 dummies are Wayland Flowers' Madame, Shari Lewis' Lamb Chop and a replica of Edgar Bergen's Charlie McCarthy (the original is in the Smithsonian). There's also a lineup of ventriloquist puppets that resemble former presidents as well as more whimsical dummies, including a three-eyed space lady, a trash can, and a Frankenstein monster with removable hands and a scalp that unlocks and opens. venthaven.org

Mothman Museum

Point Pleasant, West Virginia

Between November 1966 and November 1967, approximately 100 people in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, claimed to have seen a seven-foot-tall creature resembling a man with wings spanning 10 feet and hypnotic bug-like red eyes. The creature, dubbed "the Mothman," is commemorated with a 12-foot-tall stainless steel statue downtown, adjacent to the world's only Mothman Museum. Here, you'll see transcripts of eyewitness descriptions, news clippings of the era, and props from the 2002 film *The Mothman Prophecies*, starring Richard Gere and Laura Linney. Space alien? A supernatural manifestation? A large bird? Whatever it was, the Mothman still draws thousands each year to Point Pleasant. mothmanmuseum.com



The Mothman statue in Point Pleasant, West Virginia