

# Something for all in Washington's offbeat museums

Brush up on your Shakespeare, get a glimpse of Woodrow Wilson's home life after he left office, or turn the kids loose in a museum where almost anything goes.

These are some of the many options available to those who seek out the lesser-known attractions in Washington, D.C.

Many people feel that "all the world's a stage" on Capitol Hill, but the hard reality has the last say two blocks away at the Folger Shakespeare Library, where the inscription under a sculpture facing the Capitol reads, "Lord what foolies these mortals be!"

SHAKESPEARE'S characters come to life during performances on the stage of the Elizabethan-style theater inside the Folger. Changing exhibits that feature everything from rare books and manuscripts to costumes worn by famous Shakespearean actors fill the other public area of the building, a 30-foot-high oak-paneled Tudor Hall decked with heraldic banners.

Behind the scenes, scholars peruse the Folger's collection of 250,000 books and manuscripts in a reading room that resembles a setting in a Gothic novel. The 79 copies of the 1623 First Folio edition of "Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories & Tragedies" are the glory of the collection.

It's just a two-block walk from the quiet world of the scholar to the mystical world of spirit masks, fetishes and erotic headresses in the Museum of African Art.

Adults see shapes, forms and colors that influenced such contemporary artists as Picasso, Matisse and Medijani. Children take a different approach. "Mommy, I think I saw them in Star Wars," said a little girl after viewing two of the fanciful figures on display. At least 500 of the collection's 9,000 objects usually are on display in the three townhouses that compose the public section of the museum. Vividly portraying the social and religious heritage of Black Africa, the sculptures and carvings transmit messages that evoke strong emotions among many viewers.

"It makes me even happier to be alive and to be of African descent," one visitor said after seeing the collection.

FEW THINGS in town make kids happier than the Capital Children's Museum. Housed in an unlikely setting, a former convent near Union Station, the museum is a "hands-on" place that encourages youngsters to learn by doing.

Perhaps the most fun for small children is the "city room," where they can dress up in costumes and act out situations in urban life. "Get out of the way, or I'll leave you behind," commands the freckled 6-year-old behind the wheel of a mock-up Metro bus. Meanwhile, a little girl in a fireman's hat emerges from a subterranean tunnel lined with pipes and levels a fire hose at a group-up passerby. "Too had it doesn't work," she said wistfully.

But behind almost everything the kids do in the museum, there's a learning experience.

For instance, they can do bread jumps on a mat measured in meters, learn how to make tortillas in the Mexican exhibit or send a message on a teletype machine to a friend in another room.

The hush mantling the Phillips Collection — the first gallery of modern art in the United States — seems even more pronounced after the spontaneous uproar in the Children's Museum. The Phillips, at least on weekends, is the kind of retreat where a visitor can settle into an easy chair or sofa and read poetry, even doze off, surrounded by paintings that made art history.

Housed in a handsome three-story red brick mansion linked to a modern wing, the collection overflows with riches — masterpieces by Cezanne, Van Gogh, Degas, Bonnard, Monet, Hopper, Homer, Dove, Martin and O'Keeffe.

One work has come to symbolize the Phillips Collection more than any other, Pierre Auguste Renoir's "The Luncheon of the Boating Party," a warm, robust masterpiece that radiates an innocent joy of life from a bygone age. The painting and 74 others from the collection will begin an 18-month tour in June that will take them to museums in San Francisco, Dallas, Minneapolis and Atlanta.

THE CITY'S bygone years are elegantly represented in a number of historic houses, some seldom visited even by Washington residents. Near the

White House, the "Octagon" — it's actually a six-sided building — supposedly hosts a resident ghost. The guides who take visitors on tours of the place downplay the haunt and highlight the history and furnishings.

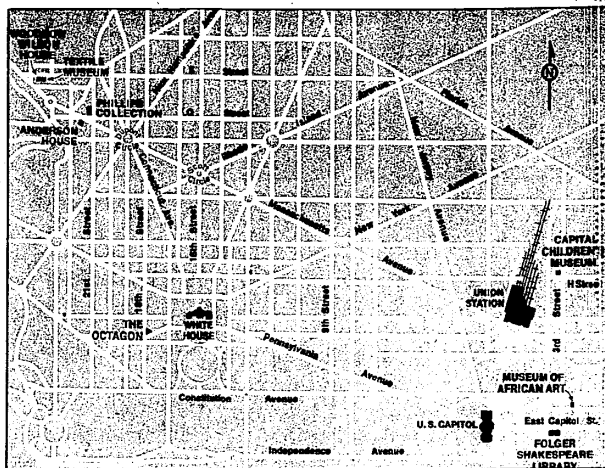
Completed in 1800 for Col. John Tayloe, a wealthy Virginia landowner, the odd-shaped brick house served for a time as President James Madison's presidential mansion after he was burned out of the President's House by the British during the War of 1812.

The Treaty of Ghent ending the war was signed by Madison in the Octagon, and the desk on which it was signed in 1815 still is there, as are many other furnishings from the period.

There's no better way to see how the elite lived in Washington a century later than to visit the Larz Anderson House, now owned and administered by the Society of the Cincinnati, whose members are male descendants of colonial officers who served in the Revolutionary War.

The 50-room mansion was finished in 1905 for the independently wealthy career diplomat Larz Anderson, and it appears pretty much as it did during its heyday.

With its chandeliered grand ballroom, sweeping marble staircases and antique tapestries, it's Washington's best try at recreating a scaled-down Versailles.



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