


PRESSBOOK

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Best museum shows of 2017: Japanese pop, Gauguin and ancient artifacts top the list

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Steve Johnson

In a slow year, the Chicago museum scene is dynamic, intellectually invigorating and the source of endless potential hours of fact-based entertainment. 2017 was not a slow year.

Innovation and change were on the menu and in the galleries in a year that promised to bring in new museums, reshaped old favorites and offered up new models for what museum exhibitions can be. Let's review.

In superstar news, the Rolling Stones and "Jurassic World" starred in big standalone exhibitions, while [Chance the Rapper](#) joined the board of the DuSable Museum of African American History. But perhaps the most impressive superstar appearance was the brief turn by "Whistler's Mother" in a small exhibit at the Art Institute.

The American Writers Museum opened, impressively, in a modest space above Michigan Avenue. A Chicago blues museum was announced for a Loop location and a gospel music museum for Bronzeville. The Terra Foundation for American Art announced the massive Art Design Chicago yearlong exploration of the city's place in art and design for 2018.

The [MCA](#) granted free admission to teens and added nighttime hours Tuesdays and Fridays, while the Shedd Aquarium simplified its formerly chaotic list of admissions options, partly in hopes of reducing wait times to get in. The Art Institute began letting Chicago teens in for free in 2017.

More dramatically, the [Field Museum](#) said that next year it is going to kick superstar T. rex fossil Sue out of its main hall and into a bespoke space upstairs, while a cast of the recently discovered world's largest dinosaur, a titanosaur, will take her place as official greeter. Newberry Library, too, announced plans to remake itself to become more visitor friendly, albeit without dinosaur skeletons.

The Art Institute unveiled a sumptuous makeover of its galleries of medieval art and armor (see Top 10, below), and the University of Chicago's Smart Museum, under a vibrant new director, has already remounted its permanent collection. Another strong makeover is on display at the First Division Museum at Cantigny, in Wheaton.

But the biggest completed rehab came at the Museum of Contemporary Art, which celebrated its 50th anniversary by bidding, again, for modernity: A new restaurant, Marisol, in a redone first-floor public plaza space, is winning critical raves, while new lighted exterior signs announce the museum to nearby Michigan Avenue and soften an austere facade.

Austerity was not an issue in the galleries, where the exhibition cup ran over. Here are my Top 10 new or temporary Chicago museum exhibits of 2017:



“Takashi Murakami: The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg,” opening June 6, 2017, displays massive, and massively detailed, canvases and argues for a fuller interpretation of Murakami’s often overtly pop, commercial creations.

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1. “Takashi Murakami: The Octopus Eats Its Own Leg” at the MCA: This retrospective exhibition had pop sparkle, with the Japanese artist’s collaboration with Kanye West, and it had soul, too, as Murakami’s later works begin to grapple with his own mortality and the weight of Japanese nuclear history, in particular. With so many massive, and spectacularly colorful, canvases and adorned walls, it was a sensory delight, as well, and audiences responded. “Octopus” set an MCA attendance record, surpassing “David Bowie Is.”

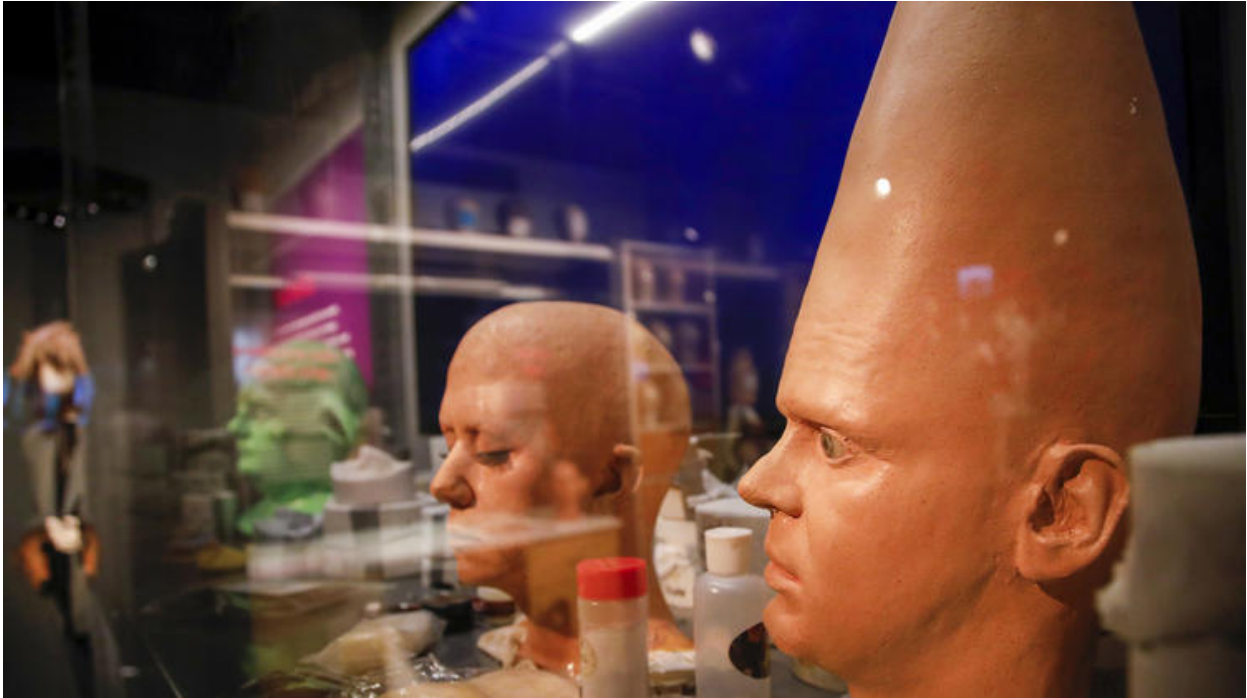


"Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist" opens to the public June 25 at the Art Institute of Chicago. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

2. "Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist" at the Art Institute: The Michigan Avenue museum found a new angle of approach on the French post-impressionist Paul Gauguin, and it dazzled. The multimedia exhibition looked at the entirety of Gauguin's artistic output, not just the well-known Tahitian paintings. And what it showed, in deliberately crude ceramic work and compelling wood pieces, was a relentless quest for a new aesthetic. The show set the craftwork alongside the paintings and the life story, one of a restless, cantankerous spirit whose self-exile to the South Pacific was of a piece with his refusal to prettify his pottery.



3. “Ancient Mediterranean Cultures in Contact” through April 29 at the Field Museum: It might sound like another tasteful display of ancient artifacts at the lakefront natural history temple, but “Ancient Mediterranean” is an uncommonly modern museum exhibition, one that finds a place for a child’s wool and linen tunic, a kind of shirt, from the first millennium A.D. and for a child’s life jacket, a device found empty on a Greek island beach two years ago amid the current global refugee crisis. The design is fresh and lively, in service to a lively point: Cultures influenced each other to a massive degree even in the ancient world, when coming together required much more effort, and they still do now.



“Saturday Night Live: The Experience,” at the Museum of Broadcast Communications, is not afraid to deliver surprising technical information along with the expected assemblage of clips and costumes from NBC’s comic warhorse. (Jose M. Osorio / Chicago Tribune)

4. “Saturday Night Live: The Exhibition,” ongoing at the Museum of Broadcast Communications: What with President Donald Trump bringing the nation together in a new thirst for satire, “SNL” is enjoying a moment, and the sleepy MBC on State Street is hoping this traveling exhibition will put it in an unaccustomed spotlight, as well. Developed with the cooperation of executive producer Lorne Michaels and his team and originally mounted in New York, the exhibit merits the attention. Designed to take visitors through a week in the life of the late-night comedy warhorse, it both teaches you something new about how “SNL” comes together and comforts you with an abundance of iconic costumes and no shortage of video to provoke laughter and nostalgia.



Bill Graham's son talks about his dad's life and work as a concert promoter.

5. “Bill Graham and the Rock and Roll Revolution” through Jan. 7 at the Illinois Holocaust Museum: It wasn't the bigger of the two exhibitions devoted to the classic rock era to visit the city this year, but the Graham show is the better of them. While “Rolling Stones: Exhibitionism,” the mega-show that was out on Navy Pier, had many fine moments, it ultimately felt a little bloated, like a latter-day Stones album. The Holocaust museum exhibit about uber-promoter Graham, on the other hand, offers a tight focus on how a Holocaust survivor grew to be a master showman and leading cultural figure in his adopted country. With the vital amenity of listening stations throughout, it tells the story, first, of the seminal San Francisco rock scene, where Graham cut his teeth, and then of the era of massive global benefit concerts. It's got great artifacts, compelling personal anecdotes, and it culminates in the promoter's tragic, but very rock-and-roll, death.

6. “Then They Came for Me” at the Alphawood Gallery: Great exhibitions don't have to originate from big museums or established galleries. This one, at the apparently temporary Alphawood in Lincoln Park, derived from “Un-American,” a book studying the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II by Chicago photo historians Richard Cahan and Michael Williams. Their photo-based exhibition took full advantage of the fact that great photographers shot the internment: They included Dorothea Lange, hired by the U.S. government, and Ansel Adams because he was a friend of one camp's warden. Using massive reproductions of their imagery and a thoughtful selection of personal mementos,

the exhibition told a harrowing story of a nation turning against its own ideals. The show goes up in New York in January, and Alphawood Exhibitions says it hopes to remount it here “in the coming months.”



A look at the Deering Family Galleries of Medieval and Renaissance Art, Arms, and Armor at Chicago's Art Institute.

7. “The Deering Family Galleries of Medieval and Renaissance Art, Arms, and Armor,” ongoing at the Art Institute: AKA, the “Game of Thrones” rooms. Longtime AIC visitors recall the visceral delight it used to be to see the museum’s armor on display in its central hall gallery, a hint of bloodlust on the way to more refined pursuits. In May, after a long and thoughtful rehab, the armor collection opened in a new home, in the context of religious and secular art and craft of the medieval era. These galleries will make visitors used to zipping past old religious art stop and take notice. They do so with lots of swords and pikes, yes, and even a pair of knights mounted on horseback. But this suite of rooms also displays a superb selection of artworks in warm, inviting settings; religious frescoes never seemed so fresh. Bonus points if you can find the immodestly priapic Jesus.

8. “Donald J. Trump Twitter Presidential Library” at Union Station: It was only up for a long weekend and as a sort of adjunct to the “Daily Show’s” week of telecasts from Chicago. But the Comedy Central show’s examination of the 45th president’s Twitter output left an outsized impression. It showed that the conventions of museum presentation can be used to deliver something both hilarious and thoughtful; it reminded me of how rarely museums employ one of the most potent arrows in the human communications quiver, humor. The exhibit aimed for satire and struck its target, which means that it made a very real, not-at-all-funny point about the fellow in the Oval Office. There was fake reverence poking fun at museums in the presentation, but the news this exhibition delivered was not in the least bit fake.

9. “We Are Here,” through Jan. 28 and April 1 at the MCA: The MCA’s big 50th anniversary retrospective show is delivered in three parts, one on the entry floor (which will stay up longer) and two upstairs, on 4. As befits a look back, they bring out the big guns from the museum’s collection, but they do so with intelligence and playfulness. Even while you’re taking in the Warhols, the Kerry James Marshall and Murakami’s “Octopus Eyes” wallpaper, to name just a very few of the very big names you’ll spot, the curators are challenging you to see the correspondences they see between the works. While touring you through recent decades in art history, these galleries present themselves as a delightful sort of puzzle.

10. “Operation Finale: The Capture and Trial of Adolf Eichmann” at the Illinois Holocaust Museum: There’s a skill to spotting worthwhile traveling exhibitions, and clearly the Skokie museum displayed it this year. Playing out like a spy novel in three dimensions, this story of Nazi-era intrigue told a story, beginning, middle and end, one fraught with global significance. Along the way, visitors encountered actual false passports and surveillance photographs used to identify the notorious Nazi war criminal in hiding in Argentina in 1960 and bring him back to justice in Israel. It culminated in his trial, including the famous glass booth in which Eichmann sat, expressionless, as Holocaust survivors recounted the horrors for which he was responsible.

The next 10: “Specimens: Unlocking the Secrets of Life,” through Jan. 7 at the Field Museum. “Revoliutsiia! Demonstratsiia! Soviet Art Put to the Test,” through Jan. 15 at the Art Institute. “Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died” at Elmhurst History Museum. Henry Darger exhibitions at Intuit. “The Rolling Stones: Exhibitionism” at Navy Pier. “Jurassic World: The Exhibition,” through Jan. 7 at the Field Museum. “Turn Back the Clock,” continuing at the Museum of Science and Industry. “L’Affichomania: The Passion for French Posters, through Jan. 7 at the Driehaus Museum. “Chasing Eclipses” at the Adler Planetarium. “A Nation of Writers” permanent exhibit at the American Writers Museum.

Shows I haven’t yet seen that sound promising: “William Blake and the Age of Aquarius” at the Block Museum of Art; “Take a Stand Center” at the Illinois Holocaust Museum; “The Book of the Dead: Becoming God in Ancient Egypt” at the Oriental Institute Museum.

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