



THE GREAT SMALL MUSEUMS OF EUROPE

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INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1

LONDON: SIR JOHN SOANE'S MUSEUM

Chapter 2

PARIS: THE MUSÉE JACQUEMART-ANDRÉ

Chapter 3

MADRID: CONVENT OF THE ROYAL BAREFOOT NUNS AND THE CASA SOROLLA

Chapter 4

PRAGUE: THE MUSEUM OF CZECH CUBISM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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FOOTNOTES

INTRODUCTION

What is it about small, quirky museums in Europe? Why do they inspire such fascination? Perhaps it's their ancient pedigree. Their spirit can be traced back to antiquity, when Greco-Roman temples would display both wondrous artworks and pagan relics – the spear of Achilles, Helen of Troy's sandal, or "giants' bones" (usually petrified dinosaur remains). Medieval cathedrals carried on the tradition with a Christian bent: tortoise shells or "griffin's eggs" (actually those of ostriches) might be placed alongside sacred vials of saint's blood. Then, in the Renaissance, Italian princes like the Medicis began gathering their Cabinets of Curiosities, riotously eclectic displays that could include any creation of man or nature: Egyptian mummies, pearls, classical sculptures, flint arrowheads, insects, giant seashells or "unicorn horns" (usually from [narwhals](#)). The Italian collecting mania spread across Europe, so that by the end of seventeenth hundreds, there were thousands of private galleries in the homes of affluent merchants, doctors, and lawyers - and on their Grand Tours of the continent, an erudite traveler would happily drift across Europe from one marvelous living room to the next surveying beautiful and mystifying *objets*. (It was around this time that the word "museum" began to gain currency, invoking the classical Greek Museion or "House of the Muses" in Alexandria - although the original Museion was more like an ancient think-tank, where learned men gathered to discuss and dispute rather than to view exhibits).

In the mid-1800s, state-funded institutions like the Louvre in Paris, the British Museum in London, and Madrid's Prado began to acquire the majority of private collections, which had been inherited by family members who lacked either the finances or the enthusiasm to maintain them. These sprawling national museums were housed in imposing neo-Classical buildings and became devoted to the orderly, scientific classification of exhibits we know today. And yet, despite the large museums' financial advantages, the older tradition of the small, esoteric museum has held on tenaciously. In fact, Europe is still riddled with them, and they induce a devotion, even a passion, amongst aficionados that the grandiose museums can never quite equal.

These small collections are often still housed in their owners' original homes and reflect their personalities. Many boast collections that would have pride of place in larger institutions, but the domestic setting allows a unique sense of intimacy. And despite their idiosyncrasies, these compact museums often hold the key to a city, providing a rare entrée into its history and character. In fact, after visiting a series of homes to gape at marvelous and half-secret displays, the whole of Europe begins to feel once again like a provocative and enlightening Cabinet of Curiosities.