

The Menil Collection



Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston

The Menil Collection consists of five buildings devoted to art connected by acres of greenspaces within a residential neighborhood. The main building showcases the permanent collection as well as changing exhibitions. These are complemented by single-artist installations at the Cy Twombly Gallery and Richmond Hall, and rotating exhibitions and installations at the Menil Drawing Institute and Byzantine Fresco Chapel. A philosophy as well as an aesthetic unites them all. With the aim of fostering direct, intimate encounters with art in the serene galleries, works are generously spaced and installed at eye level. There are no audio tours or wall text, and labels are spare. In addition to presenting visual art, the museum publishes books and hosts performances by musicians, poets, and dancers as well as lectures by artists, curators, and scholars. The museum never charges an admission fee and all public programs are free.



Dominique and John de Menil, 1967

The Menil Collection began with French philanthropists John and Dominique de Menil. Making their way to Houston during World War II, the couple quickly became key figures in the city’s developing cultural life. They began collecting art intensively in the 1940s, amassing significant holdings of paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, photographs, and rare books. Prior to John de Menil’s death in 1973, the couple had discussed the construction of a museum. Dominique de Menil, surviving her husband by a quarter of a century, pursued this goal. Since the Menil Collection opened in 1987, the institution has continued to collect and to evolve the campus.

Main Building

The 1987 building, which houses the majority of the collection, is the first U.S. museum designed by the Italian architect Renzo Piano. It realizes the founder’s vision of a space that seems “large on the inside but small on the outside.” The galleries are suffused with “living light,” natural illumination that varies with the weather, time of day, and season.

The main building opened to exhibit the art collection of John and Dominique de Menil, and the museum has continued to grow its holdings. Modern European art was always a core strength; the couple was especially attracted to the Surrealists and School of Paris painters. From the beginning the de Menils collected objects from classical Mediterranean civilizations, the Byzantine Empire, Africa, the Pacific Islands, and the Americas, and they saw profound formal and spiritual connections between modern works and the arts of ancient and indigenous cultures. By the 1960s they had gravitated toward the major American postwar movements of Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Minimalism.



Photo: Adam Neese

Cy Twombly Gallery



Photo: Richard Barnes



Photo: Don Glentzer

In the early 1990s, the Menil Collection approached Cy Twombly (1928–2011) about a single-artist installation. Taken with the idea, Twombly became intimately involved in both the building—the plan has its roots in a sketch he made—and the selection and placement of artworks. The design was realized by Renzo Piano, architect of the main Menil Collection building, and the Cy Twombly Gallery opened in 1995.

The proportions and color of the concrete blocks and the single stepped base on which they rest create a strong yet quiet exterior. Piano designed a system for filtering sunlight by ingeniously layering fixed and moving louvers, a steel canopy, a skylight, and sailcloth, all of which hover above the unpainted plaster walls to produce a Mediterranean glow.

Twombly is best known for his large-scale calligraphic paintings. Fascinated with writing, the artist found inspiration in ancient Mediterranean history and geography, Greek and Roman mythology, classical literature, and poetry. References to these abound in his work.

Menil Drawing Institute

Over the years, the Menil has assembled deep holdings of modern and contemporary drawings. Recognizing the opportunity such a collection presents, the museum established the Menil Drawing Institute, which began to organize exhibitions and scholarly projects in 2008. A decade later, the institute’s building opens its doors, making it the newest addition to the Menil campus. In addition to facilitating research by museum curators and visiting scholars and hosting a state-of-the-art conservation lab, it provides an intimate setting for the public to interact with the drawing collection and changing exhibitions.

The building was designed by the architectural firm Johnston Marklee, and it features a trio of spacious courtyards and an innovative use of natural light. An adjacent greenspace includes a new area for performances and events.



Georgia O’Keeffe, *From a River Trip*, 1962. Promised gift of Janie C. Lee. © Georgia O’Keeffe Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Photo: Paul Hester



Photo: Paul Hester



Back cover photo: Lynn Lane Smith

Dan Flavin Installation
at Richmond Hall



Photo: J. Griffiths Smith

The minimalist Dan Flavin (1933–1996) revolutionized art in the 1960s by using light from standard fluorescent tubes as a sculptural medium, creating experiences of great beauty with items available in any hardware store. In the 1990s, Flavin began to explore the idea of a permanent, site-specific installation at Richmond Hall, then an annex exhibition space.

The building was constructed in 1930 as a grocery store, and the artist chose few alterations to the original structure. He designed three distinct pieces for the site, one on the exterior and two inside, and the Dan Flavin Installation at Richmond Hall opened in 1998. In the summer of 2003, the Menil converted a storage room into an exhibition space to house four earlier Flavin works, the “*monuments*” for V. Tatlin, 1964–69, acquired by the Menil Foundation in 1970.



Photo: Hickey, Robertson, Houston

Byzantine
Fresco Chapel



Photo: Paul Warchol

In the 1980s, two thirteenth-century frescoes that had been stolen from a church in Lysi, Cyprus, and broken into fragments were put up for sale. After establishing that the Holy Archbishopric of Cyprus was the rightful owner, the Menil Foundation purchased the frescoes on the church’s behalf and financed their restoration. In return, the Archbishopric agreed to an extended loan, and in 1997 the Byzantine Fresco Chapel, designed by the architect Francois de Menil, opened. The frescoes returned to Cyprus in 2012. The chapel has since housed long-term art installations. It will be closed temporarily beginning in October 2018.



Photo: David A. Brown

Outdoor Sculpture & Greenspaces

The neighborhood of the Menil Collection is punctuated by major works of outdoor sculpture. Jim Love’s *Jack*, 1971, welcomes visitors as they enter from the Alabama Street parking lot and walk between the Menil Collection Bookstore and Bistro Menil. Works by Michael Heizer, Mark di Suvero, and others are scattered throughout. The outdoor expanse includes Menil Park, along Mulberry Street; McGovern Green, in front of the Cy Twombly Gallery; and a new greenspace across from the entrance to the Menil Drawing Institute. All are open to the public from dawn to dusk. Please see menil.org/visit/menil-park-policy for regulations governing their use.

Menil
Collection
Bookstore

The Menil Collection Bookstore features books the museum publishes on exhibitions, the collection, and special projects, as well as an array of titles on contemporary art, architecture, and design. The Bookstore also has a children’s book and toy section, a carefully chosen array of gifts, and select offerings of jewelry and artwork by Texas-based artists.

Library

The Menil Library is open to researchers by appointment. Email library@menil.org for more information.

Bistro Menil

Bistro Menil serves European-inspired American fare ranging from light appetizers to full entrees, craft beers, and wines served by the glass or bottle.

Continue the Experience

Discover upcoming exhibitions and events and learn more about the museum’s history, mission, and collection at menil.org, where you will also find online publications.

View conversations with artists and a wide selection of public programs on the Menil YouTube channel: youtube.com/user/themenilcollection.

Connect with the Menil on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram @menilcollection

Membership

Menil members are a group of dedicated art-lovers who provide critical support for the museum’s exhibitions and programs. In appreciation, they enjoy behind-the-scenes access, special programs, a discount at the Menil Bookstore, and reciprocal membership benefits at over 900 museums, among other advantages.

3 Easy Ways to Join

Onsite at the museum reception desks and the Menil Collection Bookstore
Online at menil.org
By phone at 713-525-9435

Support

The Menil Collection is a not-for-profit, public organization that relies on donations to keep the permanent collection, special exhibitions, and public programs free of charge. Please consider making a gift online at menil.org, or by check sent to 1515 Branard Street, Houston, Texas 77006.

Hours & Locations

Museum Buildings

Wed.–Sun., 11 a.m.–7 p.m.

Main Building

1533 Sul Ross Street
Houston, Texas 77006

Cy Twombly Gallery

1501 Branard Street

Menil Drawing Institute

1412 West Main Street

Dan Flavin Installation
at Richmond Hall

1500 Richmond Avenue

Byzantine Fresco Chapel

4011 Yupon Street at Branard Street

Free Parking

Parking lots are located at 1515 West Alabama Street and adjacent to Richmond Hall and the Byzantine Fresco Chapel. Additional free parking is available on Sul Ross, Branard, and West Main Streets.

In the Parks &
Greenspaces

Please do not climb on the sculptures.

Dogs must remain leashed.

Picnic-style gatherings of fewer than 40 people are welcome; written permission is required for any activity that impacts the open and free use of the greenspaces by the general public. Occasionally, greenspaces may be reserved for the museum’s public programming.

Glass containers, amplified music, alcoholic beverages, open fires, and smoking are prohibited. Please see menil.org/visit/menil-park-policy for a complete list of regulations and prohibited items.

Menil Collection Bookstore

1520 Sul Ross Street
Wed.–Sun., 11 a.m.–7 p.m.
713-535-3180
Facebook and Instagram
@MenilBookstore

Bistro Menil

1513 West Alabama Street
Wed., Thur., Sun., 10 a.m.–9 p.m.
Fri. + Sat., 10 a.m.–10 p.m.
713-904-3537, bistromenil.com

Parks

Dawn to dusk, daily

Inside the Buildings

Please refrain from touching the artworks and observe the barriers on the floor.

No food or drinks are permitted.

Backpacks must be worn on one shoulder.

In order to preserve the contemplative atmosphere and facilitate intimate encounters with works of art, photography is not permitted inside Menil galleries. Non-commercial photography of the exteriors, foyers, and hallways is allowed.

Free Admission, Always

Call 713-525-9400 or
email info@menil.org
for additional information.

Cover photo: J. Griffiths Smith

THE MENIL
COLLECTION

Visitor Guide

