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Bay Area museums: Here's what's reopening, and what you'll see

New rules and some exciting exhibits await visitors



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Bay Area museums are cautiously reopening after months of on-again, off-again activity in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of March, at least seven major museums should be welcoming visitors again, although days and hours will be limited and masks remain essential.



The de Young Museum's sculpture garden is open again, along with the extended Frida Kahlo exhibit. The Asian Art Museum's jade collection is dazzling once more. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's "living wall" of greenery is a literal breath of fresh air.

Those three were the first to reopen, followed by the San Jose Museum of Art March 12. The Walt Disney Family Museum and San Francisco Art Institute's galleries are scheduled to open March 19. San Jose's Institute of Contemporary Art will follow March 26.

So is the museum world getting back to normal? Not exactly. The past year isn't vanishing; safety precautions remain and artists in newly open exhibits are confronting every aspect of 2020.

SFMOMA brings Bay Area artists to the forefront in the exhibit "Close to Home: Creativity in Crisis." It includes James Gouldthorpe's snapshot-like paintings, "Covid Artifacts."

The San Francisco Art Institute will mark its 150th anniversary with a show titled "A Spirit of Disruption."

The Asian Art Museum offers a montage of more than 50 short videos, adding up to six hours, on "After Hope: Videos of Resistance."

"This has been a period of profound reflection for all of us," said Thomas Campbell, director of San Francisco's Fine Arts Museums, which include the de Young and the still-closed Legion of Honor. "As an institution, we have thought about how we could better serve our community — everybody in our community," he said in a telephone interview.

Much of the reflection has been about race and equity. Campbell said the museums' past presentations may have included racist stereotypes that the staff wasn't aware of. The response includes tackling what might seem mundane.

"There is quite a bit of rewriting gallery labels," he said.

So far, attendance is limited, but Campbell said he was gratified to see museum visitors "grinning from ear to ear" as they returned. "People are longing to get out again. They've missed the physical sense of being here, being with real art. People are just mentally fatigued by the digital world."

Visiting the first museums to reopen gives a sense of what's new as well as what's familiar.



The de Young is offering the touring exhibit “Calder-Picasso,” which finds parallels among the modernist achievements of Alexander Calder and Pablo Picasso. It's a refreshing look at Calder's varied artwork, beyond the mobiles he invented. There's an array of his “drawings in space,” beginning in the 1920s with wire circus figures and such celebrities as performer Josephine Baker.

Anyone visiting the de Young's “Calder-Picasso” show (or the Frida Kahlo tribute, which requires a separate ticket) also has access to the de Young's vast and varied permanent collection. It ranges from masks and shrines from the Congo and New Guinea to ethereal paintings of Marin County in the 19th century by William Keith.

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, as expected, digs deepest into social, political and racial issues for its opening shows. It has commissioned Bay Area artists to create new murals for the building's vast interior walls, including Liz Hernandez's “A Spell for the Healing of Our Future.”

The group shows “Bay Area Walls” and “Creativity in Crisis” include up-to-the-minute photographs, such as Adrian L. Burrell's East Bay-based series, “It's After the End of the World, Don't You Know That Yet?” Erina Alejo focuses on a stretch of San Francisco's Mission Street, exploring, among other themes, “anti-displacement resistance.”

The newly reopened Asian Art Museum features some large installations, including this 30-foot-long scroll by Indian artist Jayashree Chakravarty. (Asian Art Museum)

The Asian Art Museum has filled two of its ground-floor galleries not with traditional Asian artifacts, but massive installations by three living artists. A standout is a 30-foot-long scroll, a layered imaginary map by Jayashree Chakravarty, who is based in Kolkata, India.



Elsewhere in the museum, galleries offer everything from elaborately engraved swords to a Japanese teahouse.

Visiting museums as they reopen will be a different experience: fewer people, sometimes fewer displays, and arrow graphics on the floor marking one-way paths. Exhibit captions can be accessed on phones. At the Asian Art Museum, rubber-tipped styluses are handed out to operate touch-screens.

There are hand sanitizing stations at entrances and throughout galleries, and signs to encourage social distancing. The advice goes as far as the men's rest room in one museum, where the posted notice says: "Use alternate urinals."

Here is a selection of museums (and featured exhibits) that are now open, scheduled to open, or still uncertain.

De Young Museum, San Francisco: Now open, Tuesday-Sunday. "Calder-Picasso" through May 23. "Frida Kahlo: Appearances Can Be Deceiving," through May 2; deyoung.famsf.org. (A digital tour of the Kahlo show has already been downloaded more than 100,000 times.)

S.F. Museum of Modern Art: Now open, Thursday-Monday. "Close to Home: Creativity in Crisis," through Sept. 5. "Bay Area Walls," ongoing; sfmoma.org.

Asian Art Museum, San Francisco: Now open, Thursday-Monday. Contemporary special exhibits continue, including Marin-based Zheng Chongbin's massive video and projection installation; asianart.org.

San Jose Museum of Art: Now open, Friday-Sunday. "Barring Freedom," on racism and the criminal justice system, through April 25. "South East North West: New Works from the Collection," through Sept. 19; sjmusart.org.



Walt Disney Family Museum, San Francisco: Special exhibit, "The Walt Disney Studio and World War II" opens March 19, Thursday-Sunday. Main museum collection is expected to open in April; waltdisney.org.

San Francisco Art Institute: Opens March 19, Tuesday-Saturday. "A Spirit of Disruption," works by more than 30 alumni and faculty since the 1960s, including Jay DeFeo and Mildred Howard, through July 3; sfai.edu.

Institute of Contemporary Art, San Jose: Opens March 26, Friday-Sunday. Jamaican-born artist Ebony G. Patterson's installation, "when the cuts erupt ... the garden rings ... and the warning is a wailing," through Sept. 5; icasanjose.org.

Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco: Opens April 17, Thursday-Sunday. "Levi Strauss: A History of American Style," through Aug. 8. "Threads of Jewish Life: Ritual and Other Textiles from the San Francisco Bay Area," through June 27. "Predicting the Past: Zohar Studios, the Lost Years," through June 27. "GOLEM: A Call to Action," ongoing digital work; thecjm.org.

Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive: Opening possible in late April or May. "Rosie Lee Tompkins: A Retrospective," a major exhibition of work by the East Bay African American quilt designer. The Pacific Film Archive considerable array of film screenings continues online; bampfa.org.

Legion of Honor, San Francisco: Opening expected in April. "Last Supper in Pompeii: From the Table to the Grave," dates to be determined. "Wangechi Mutu: I Am Speaking, Are You Listening?" May 1-Nov. 7; legionofhonor.famsf.org.

Oakland Museum: Opening in "spring or summer," according to a museum spokesperson. It will be coordinated with completion of a major rehab project for museum gardens and entrances. Coming exhibits: "Mothership: Voyage into Afrofuturism," "Hella Feminist: An Exhibition," "Edith Heath: A Life in Clay"; museumca.org.

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