

# America Is Turning 250. These 13 Must-See Exhibitions Are Grappling With Its Legacy.

From politically charged installations to contemporary takes on America's founding ideals, these exhibitions prove the country's 250th anniversary is inspiring more than just history lessons.

**By Isabella Bernstein**

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In our nation's capital, the 250th anniversary of America as a nation is inspiring some pretty garish art and celebrations. But further afield, museums across the country are grappling with the political and aesthetic consequences of signing the Declaration of Independence all those years ago. In Arkansas, one museum draws upon the rich history of American folk art. In Virginia, another presents hundreds of hours of artifacts and interviews with immigrants across the decades. Philadelphia, the epicenter of the American Revolution, is committing especially hard to shows both historic and contemporary. Below, we've selected the 13 most exciting exhibitions responding to America's semiquincentennial.



Joyce Kozloff, *Sing-Along American History: War and Race*, 2004. Image courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

## “Common Sense” / “Donald Moffett: IMPEACH”

**Where:** Brooklyn Museum; New York, New York

**When:** Through Nov. 8 and April 11, 2027, respectively

**Why It's Worth a Look:** The museum's semiquincentennial programming includes two exhibitions: “Common Sense” and “Donald Moffett: IMPEACH.” The first pairs the political philosophy of Thomas Paine with nine contemporary artists—including [Hank Willis Thomas](#), [Kara Walker](#), and Paul Ramírez Jonas—who venture to, in Paine's words, “begin the world over again.”

**Know Before You Go:** The second exhibition by Donald Moffett—an immersive audio installation of the late Representative John Lewis's speech during Bill Clinton's impeachment hearings—is divorced from its context to present a rallying cry to unite a divided nation. The museum's season also features “free speech” pop ups, art history happy hours, and an installment from Keith Yamashita.

**Why It's Worth a Look:** Instead of simply reflecting on the past, the Chicago History Museum celebrates America's 250th anniversary by looking forward. With a new installation in the museum's lobby every quarter, the programming highlights local Chicago artists such as Barrett Keithley and Vida Sačić. The museum is also reopening its permanent "Facing Freedom" collection on July 4, which traces how Chicagoans have fought for freedom throughout history.

**Know Before You Go:** Each local artist's installment is a direct response to one of four foundational American texts: the Declaration of Independence, the Northwest Ordinance, the Constitution, or the Thirteenth Amendment.



Frank Romero, *Carro con Corazon (Rojo)*, 1987. Image courtesy of the Autry Museum of the American West.

## “Life, Liberty, and Los Angeles”

**Where:** Autry Museum of the American West; Los Angeles, California

**When:** Through Jan. 31, 2027

**Why It's Worth a Look:** Los Angeles has long been one of the cultural and artistic drivers of the country, and during the semiquicentennial, the Autry Museum is taking a moment to honor the city as a microcosm of the American project. LA is the center of the music and film industries and a hub for subcultures—from punk to lowriders to skateboarding. This exhibition explores it all against the background of LA's civic evolution.

**Know Before You Go:** A zoot suit, flyers from LA's housing debates, and pieces by Catherine Opie, Ed Ruscha, founder of the Chicano art movement Frank Romero, and more highlight the ingenuity and contradictions of Los Angeles creative and civic life.



Unknown artist, *Baltimore-Style Album Quilt*, 1845-50. Image courtesy of the American Folk Art Museum.

## “America 250: Common Threads”

**Where:** Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art; Bentonville, Arkansas

**When:** Through July 27

**Why It’s Worth a Look:** “America 250: Common Threads” begins with the birth of America and elaborates on the aesthetic depictions of nationhood. The exhibition extends into contemporary American paintings, and contemporary American attitudes, with work from Kay WalkingStick, Robert Colescott, and Howard Finster.

**Know Before You Go:** Organized in partnership with the American Folk Art Museum, this exhibition puts an

emphasis on quintessentially American craft, particularly quilts. The exhibition features live quilting, in which schoolchildren can work with squares designed by artist [Basil Kincaid](#).



Garrett Bradley, *America*, 2019. Image courtesy of the Barnes Foundation.

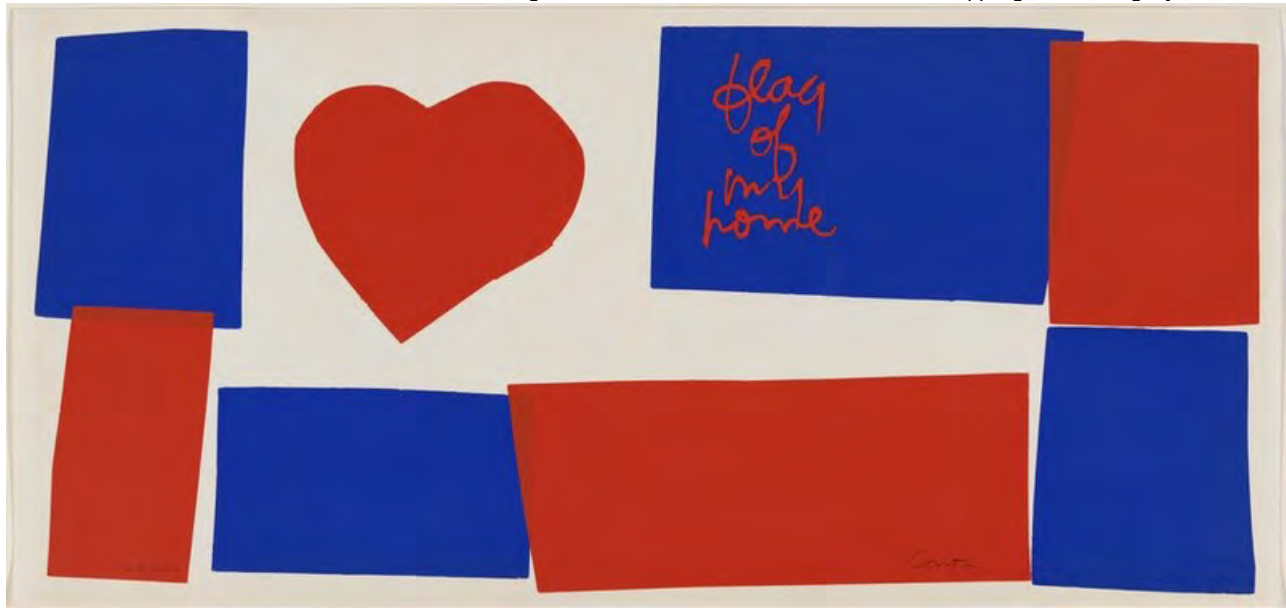
## “Freedom Dreams”

**Where:** [Barnes Foundation](#); Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**When:** Through Aug. 9

**Why It’s Worth a Look:** In the city that birthed American democracy, this group exhibition focuses on the lives of Black Americans through the work of pioneering video artists Arthur Jafa, Garrett Bradley, David Hartt, Ja’Tovia Gary, and [Tourmaline](#). Taking liberation as its subject, the show is a meditation on inherited memories and dreams of a more free future.

**Know Before You Go:** The exhibition is situated alongside Indigenous artist Sky Hopinka’s showing, “Red Metal Dust.” Taking its name from the Ho-Chunk term for copper, Hopinka presents the element not as a material for monuments but as something transient, blowing in the wind.



Corita Kent, *Flag of My Home*, 1976. Image courtesy of the National Gallery of Art.

## “American Icon: The US Flag in Art”

**Where:** National Gallery of Art; Washington, DC

**When:** Through Dec. 6

**Why It's Worth a Look:** What's in a flag? The classic star-spangled banner, much like the country itself, inspired and perturbed countless artists in the last 250 years. This exhibition of over 30 works in a variety of mediums traces the history of the American flag, and in turn, what it has and can stand for.

**Know Before You Go:** Although the exhibition includes some subversive depictions, including Faith Ringgold's 1967 painting *The Flag is Bleeding*, don't expect to see any [Dread Scott](#) or [Barbara Kruger](#). Instead, there will be plenty of Jasper Johns and James Rosenquist's moon-landing inspired *Mirrored Flag*, 1971.



James Peale, *George Washington*, 1782. Image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

**“Revolution!”**

**Where:** The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New York, New York

**When:** Through Sept. 7

**Why It's Worth a Look:** For its semiquincentennial installation, the Met recasts the story of the Revolutionary War by drawing upon its trove of historical artifacts. In addition to the usual suspects, the exhibition will also highlight revolutionary thinkers such as Wampanoag chief Metacomet and Black American poet Phillis Wheatley.

**Know Before You Go:** The exhibit views the American fight for freedom—and those who were disregarded in this quest—through antique and contemporary prints and paintings, such as Titus Kaphar's *Billy Lee & Ona Judge Portraits in Tar*, 2016. And, on the Fourth of July, museum-goers can see composer David Lang's *the national anthems* performed in the Charles Engelhard Court.



Sughra Hussainy, *Invisible Enemy*, 2018. Image courtesy of the Virginia Museum of History & Culture.

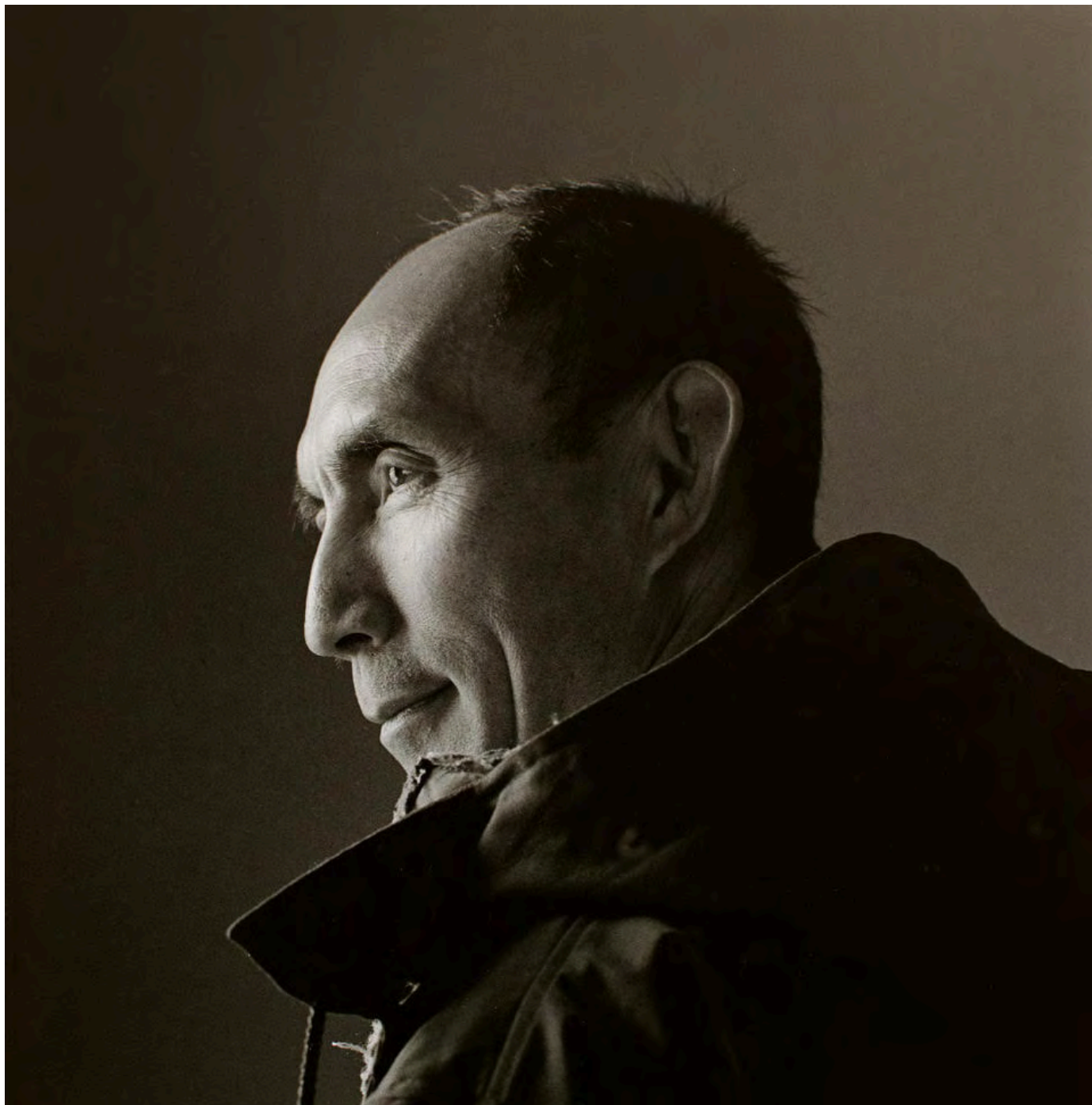
“We the People: The World in Our Commonwealth”

**Where:** Virginia Museum of History & Culture; Richmond, Virginia

**When:** Through Sept. 7

**Why It's Worth a Look:** This exhibition highlights 68 immigrants from 68 different countries and their personal journeys to and through American life. With a combination of immersive environments, antiques, personal photography, and multimedia activations, “We the People” pairs contemporary stories with historical accounts of what it means to seek refuge in the United States.

**Know Before You Go:** The exhibition has been five years in the making and contains extensive interviews with its participants for visitors to weave through during their time at the museum.



Portrait of Ed Young by Sean Kernan. Image courtesy of the Museum of Chinese in America.

**“Ed Young’s Bright Worlds” / “Luminaries for America250”**

**Where:** Museum of Chinese in America; New York, New York

**When:** Through Sept. 13

**Why It's Worth a Look:** For the anniversary, MOCA is celebrating Chinese-American pioneers across history. This summer, it mounts a retrospective of the late Chinese-American children's book writer and illustrator Ed Young, who crafted imaginative picture books that introduced American audiences to Chinese folktales.

**Know Before You Go:** Young's towering works include *Lon Po Po*, his retelling of *Little Red Riding Hood*, which won him a Caldecott Medal, and his personal memoir, *The House Baba Built*, about his childhood in Japan-occupied Shanghai.



Unidentified artist ("J.G."), *The Mammoth Tree Grove, Calaveras County, California*, published by A. J. Campbell, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1860. Image courtesy of the Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Garden.

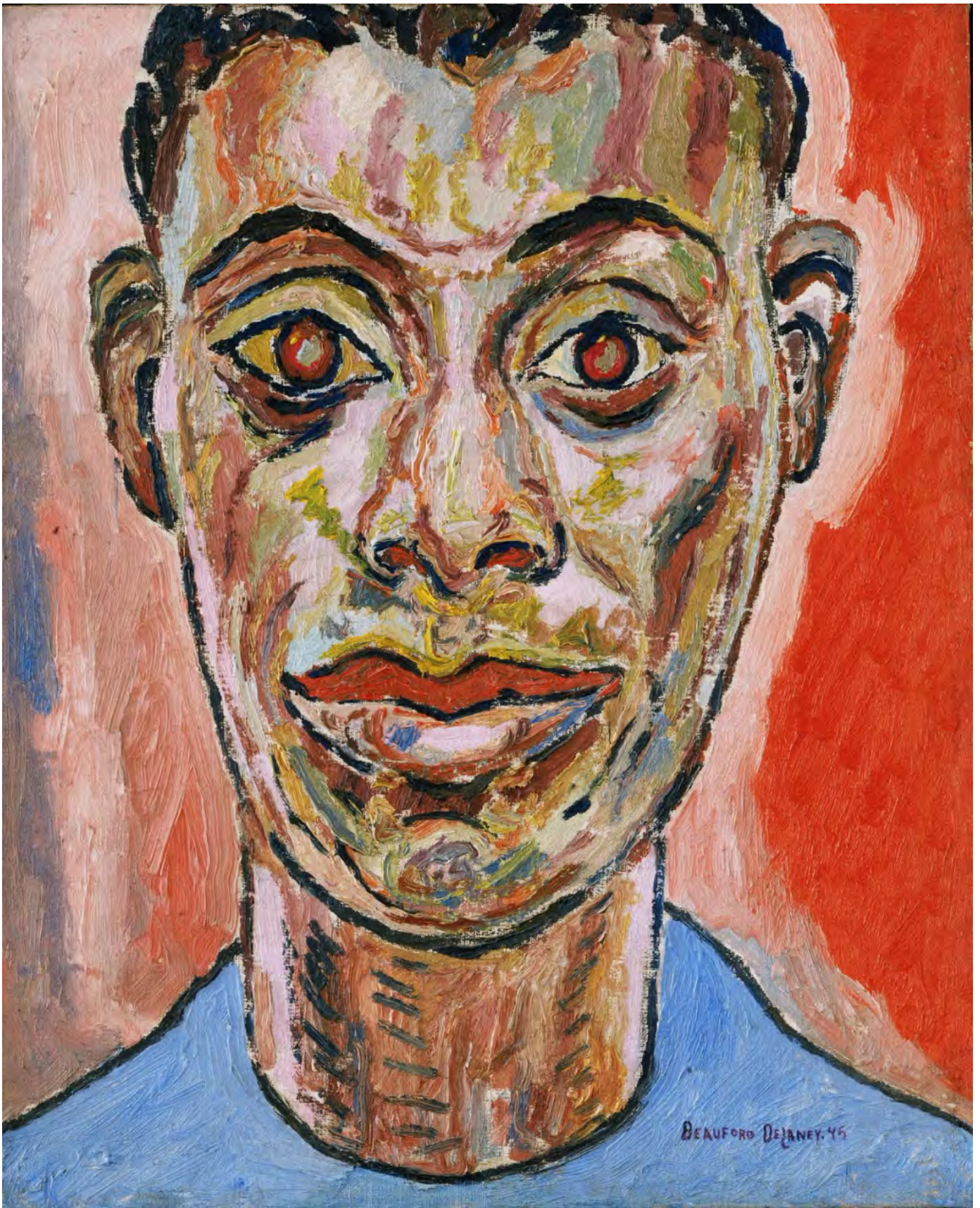
## "This Land Is ..."

**Where:** The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens; San Marino, California

**When:** Through Jan.11, 2027

**Why It's Worth a Look:** Nodding to Woody Guthrie's iconic song, this exhibition traces the geographical—and cultural—landscape of America since its inception. Beginning with two annotated printings of the Declaration of Independence from 1776, the show presents manuscripts from American literary giants Octavia E. Butler and Walt Whitman, early Native American treaties, and more.

**Know Before You Go:** The exhibition also presents contemporary perspectives from Tongva artist Mercedes Dorame and Chicana photographer Laura Aguilar alongside its historical documentation of America's history from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific Highway.



Beauford Delaney, *Portrait of James Baldwin*, 1945. © Estate of Beauford Delaney by permission of Derek L. Spratley, Esquire, Court Appointed Administrator. Image courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC.

## “A Nation of Artists”

**Where:** Philadelphia Museum of Art and Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**When:** At the PMA through July 5, 2027 and at the PAFA through Sept. 5, 2027

**Why It's Worth a Look:** As the birthplace of the Declaration of Independence, Philadelphia art institutions are notably going all out this year. With more than 1,000 works across the two museums, "A Nation of Artists" is the most expansive presentation of American art to grace Philadelphia. At its heart is a survey of American art, from the portraiture of Charles Willson Peale to the Impressionism of Mary Cassatt to the vibrant abstractions of Mark Rothko and the realism of Thomas Eakins.

**Know Before You Go:** Design lovers make note: The installation is especially noteworthy for its expansive collection of furniture, ceramics, and decorative arts throughout the centuries.



George Longfish, *Take Two Aspirins and Call Me In The Morning, You Are On Target*, 1984. Photography by Cleber Bonato. Image courtesy of the Fine Arts Collection, Jan Shrem, and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, University of California, Davis. © George Longfish.

## “An Indigenous Present”

**Where:** Frist Art Museum; Nashville, Tennessee

**When:** Through Sept. 27

**Why It's Worth a Look:** This group show surveys over a century of Indigenous art, including work from Raven Chacon, Sky Hopinka, Teresa Baker, and more. The show, which builds on curator Jenelle Porter and artist Jeffrey Gibson's publication of the same name, presents a reflection on America in 2026 outside of traditional settler narratives.

**Know Before You Go:** The traveling exhibition has seen both American coasts and will travel to the Frye Art

Museum in Seattle next. The accompanying book expands its breadth even further, featuring over 60 Indigenous artists both historic and contemporary.



Maker unknown, 1917. Image courtesy of the Chicago History Museum.

## “Us at 250: Civic Action in Chicago”

**Where:** Chicago History Museum; Chicago, Illinois

**When:** Through 2026



Xavier Tavera, *Domadora de Caballos (Woman on White Horse [detail])*, 2010. © Xavier Tavera. Image courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

## “Containing Multitudes”

**Where:** Minneapolis Institute of Art; Minneapolis, Minnesota

**When:** Through Aug. 2

**Why It’s Worth a Look:** Photography has played an integral role in American nation-making, going all the way back to the Depression when government agencies commissioned photographers like Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams to capture American life. Inspired by Walt Whitman’s verse in *Song of Myself*, this collection of work builds into that tradition.

**Know Before You Go:** This photography exhibition explores the diversity of the American eye through almost 100 works from pioneering auteurs such as Robert Frank and Walker Evans, alongside contemporary practitioners like Dawoud Bey and Carrie Mae Weems.

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