

The museum mile

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On display ... the Getty Centre. *Photo: AFP*

There are places in LA where it's OK to be of great age, writes Caroline Gladstone.

THINK of Los Angeles and you think of the movies - the Oscars, the stars, the wannabes.

I wasn't expecting to come face to face with van Gogh's famous *Irises*, the masterpiece Alan Bond paid \$US53.9 million for in 1987, the highest price paid for a painting at the time. But here it is in the Getty Centre in Los Angeles.

Bond, who didn't have the money to pay for it and borrowed most of the funds from auction house Sotheby's, resold it to the Getty Trust in 1990. It is part of the centre's rich collection of European and American art dating from mediaeval times to the 20th century.

I am on a whirlwind tour of LA's art and culture scene and am surprised by the treasures the city holds. Some of the world's most famous paintings are here.

Across the city in Pasadena, the superb small Norton Simon Museum has another van Gogh - the iconic *Mulberry Tree*, painted in 1889, along with a 17th-century Rembrandt self-portrait and Raphael's 16th-century *Madonna and Child with Book*.

In the Huntington Library, Art Galleries and Botanical Gardens in nearby San Marino are two of the most famous portraits of Britain's Golden Age of the 18th century; a time when artists were capturing the noble classes in all their glory. Thomas Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* and Sir Thomas Lawrence's *Pinkie* are the most celebrated works in a large collection.

And there are many more masterpieces, as well as modern works by leading and emerging living artists.

The reason: Los Angeles was and still is the home of rich art collectors: oil magnates such as Jean Paul Getty and Armand Hammer, railroad developer Henry Huntington and real estate tycoon Eli Broad, who lives in Malibu and is worth \$US5.2 billion (\$5.1 billion).

The J.Paul Getty Museum (which includes the off-site Getty Centre and Getty Villa) is the most richly endowed museum in the world. That legacy, about \$US6.8 billion, is used to fund the organisation's research and acquisitions.

Standing on the Getty Centre terrace, I see across to the Hollywood sign. I know there's a brasher side to LA crammed with neon and tourists but for now I am immersed in the fine arts.

My first stop is the Getty Villa, which reopened in 2006 after a nine-year, \$US275 million renovation. This elaborate venue - the only reconstruction of a Roman patrician country home in the world - was built specifically to contain the billionaire's vast collection of antiquities. It is designed after the Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum, near Pompeii, destroyed when Mount Vesuvius erupted in AD79.

It is organised in themes, including gods and goddesses and mythological heroes, to give the novice a better understanding of the 1200 works on display - all from the Greek, Roman and Etruscan empires. A 12-minute film gives a heads-up of the highlights.

I head to the Temple of Hercules and its iconic statue known as the Lansdowne Herakles (Herakles is Greek for Hercules). Unearthed in Tivoli, Rome, in 1790, under the villa of the emperor Hadrian, it was Getty's prized possession and inspired him to build the villa.

Like the famous Getty family, the Getty Villa has had its share of controversy. I am shown a rare Greek bronze statue titled The Victorious Youth. It's rare because the Greeks didn't often work in bronze. It dates from between 300BC and 100BC and was fished out of the sea off Italy in 1964. Though the Getty Trust bought it in 1977, the Italian government says it is stolen and has filed a suit to get it back. The Getty rejects the claim.

The most beautiful section of the villa is the Outer Peristyle, a courtyard with an oblong pool flanked by colonnaded walkways and dotted with replica statues. The villa's closure for renovation in 1997 was perfectly timed to coincide with the opening of the Getty Centre. No expense has been spared there either; the amazingly white travertine building cost \$US2.8 billion and sprawls over some 300 hectares of hills.

From there I head down to Wilshire Boulevard to visit the Hammer Museum, one of several galleries on this main artery dubbed "the museum mile". It showcases emerging artists from LA and around the world.

My next stop is the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, or LACMA. This encyclopaedic institution, with a permanent collection of more than 100,000 objects, has just had a makeover with new exhibition halls designed by renowned Genoese architect Renzo Piano.

While there are Picassos, Rembrandts and paintings by Degas and Pissarro, I skip over to the works of Jeff Koons, the artist responsible for the Puppy sculpture that appeared around the world and graced Sydney's harbour shoreline in 1995. LACMA contains his blue Balloon Dog and one of the controversial series of three sculptures of Michael Jackson and Bubbles, one of which changed hands for \$US5.6 million.

Outside in nearby Hancock Park, I am drawn to a strange, bubbling, black morass enclosed in a wire cage. This is the prehistoric La Brea Tar Pits, one of the most famous fossil sites in the world. More than 1 million bones of mammals have been gouged from the tar since 1906 and are on display in the adjacent Page Museum. These antiquities, dating from the Ice Age of 40,000 years ago, have been found right in the heart of Tinseltown.

The writer travelled courtesy of Air New Zealand and the Los Angeles Convention and Visitors' Bureau.

Trip notes

Getting there

Air New Zealand flies daily to LA, airnewzealand.com.au.

Touring there

[Quick Culture has tailor-made art tours. quickculture.com.](http://quickculture.com)

Staying there

The Custom Hotel, is near Los Angeles Airport. Double rooms from \$US89 (\$88) a night. jdvhoteles.com.

See+do

Getty Centre, 1200 Getty Centre Drive, Los Angeles. Admission free. getty.edu.

Getty Villa, 17985 Pacific Coast Highway, Pacific Palisades (near Malibu). Admission free. Bookings essential. +1 310 440 7300, getty.edu.

Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles. Admission \$US10, free on Thursdays. hammer.ucla.edu.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Boulevard. Admission \$US15. lacma.org.

Page Museum at the Le Brea Tar Pits, 5801 Wilshire Boulevard. Admission \$US7. tarpits.org.

Norton Simon Museum, 411 West Colorado Boulevard, Pasadena. Admission \$US10. nortonsimon.org.

Huntington Library, 1151 Oxford Road, San Marino. Admission \$US15, www.huntington.org.

More information

discoverlosangeles.com.

- Sun-Herald