

# Small Museums

Who says bigger is better? These spots corner the micro market **BY SARA WILSON**

**GLOW ON:**

A diver resurfaces at the Museum of Neon Art

**W**E'RE ALL FOR MASSIVE CULTURAL repositories, but, let's face it, the scale can be daunting. Each of these smaller collections has a distinct focus that it brings to life creatively and thoughtfully. The result for museum goers: more manageable visits and fatter wallets (some of these institutions are free).

## Culver City Combo

The **WENDE MUSEUM** (5741 Buckingham Pkwy., Ste. E, Culver City, 310-216-1600 or wendemuseum.org) holds thousands of relics from Cold War-era Eastern Europe, including an original section of the Berlin Wall painted by artist Thierry Noir. The **CENTER FOR LAND USE INTERPRETATION** (9331 Venice Blvd., Culver City, 310-839-5722 or clui.org) views the landscape as culture through compelling exhibits on mundane subjects (parking lots, oil refineries). Improbability is the point at the **MUSEUM OF JURASSIC TECHNOLOGY** (9341 Venice Blvd., Culver City, 310-836-6131 or mjt.org). A dimly lit warren contains an unlikely mix (dioramas of trailer parks, microscopic art made from butterfly wings) accompanied by cryptic descriptions. The effect is eerie but disarming.

## Bright Idea

The hiss of transformers greets visitors at the **MUSEUM OF NEON ART** (136 W. 4th St., downtown, 213-489-9918 or neonmona.org), which showcases dazzling arrays of incandescent lights and sculptures created from LEDs and fiber optics alongside information about the history and science of the medium. Vintage American signs from the 1920s through the '70s are the centerpiece (the first commercial neon sign in the United States debuted in Los Angeles).

## Urban Legends

At the **CHINESE AMERICAN MUSEUM** (425 N. Los Angeles St., downtown, 213-485-8567 or camla.org), the Chinese experience in California unfolds on the site of the city's original Chinatown, a quiet lane just steps from the bustle of Olvera Street. Time lines chronicle Chinese immigration from its first wave in the mid-1800s through the influx that defined L.A.'s Chinese history at the turn of the century. A surprising fact: Of the 20,000 Chinese who entered the country in 1852, only 17 were women. Temporary exhibitions explore present-day Chinese American life; a recent show was dedicated to filmmaker Arthur Dong's movie paraphernalia. >>

PHOTO: LARRY LYTLE; SIGN FROM VIRGINIA COURT HOTEL, MERIDIAN, MISSISSIPPI, 1948; ON LOAN TO MONA FROM THE PRITZKER COLLECTION

  
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## Jail Time

The **POLICE HISTORICAL SOCIETY** (6045 York Blvd., Highland Park, 323-344-9445 or [laphs.com](http://laphs.com)) wouldn't win any awards for slick presentation. What it lacks in polish, however, it makes up for with an impressive stash of artifacts from the LAPD archives. A handwritten letter by 19-year-old William Edward Hickman acknowledges his infamous kidnapping and murder of a 12-year-old girl in 1927. An exhibit of the 1997 North Hollywood Bank of America robbery (turned shootout) is a vivid reminder of its horror: Parked outside is a patrol car riddled with bullet holes.

## Write Stuff

Tucked in a business park, the **INTERNATIONAL PRINTING MUSEUM** (315 W. Torrance Blvd., Carson, 310-515-7166 or [printmuseum.org](http://printmuseum.org)) comprises a remarkable assemblage of presses from the early 1800s through the 1950s that reflects the period's swift pace of industrialization and innovation. In a reproduction colonial print shop, staffers demonstrate letter forging and printmaking on an 1806 Ramage, one of the largest printing machines still in existence in the United States. The adjacent Book Arts Institute features a small gallery of wood type and hosts lectures as well as classes in letterpress, bookbinding, and calligraphy.

## Friendlier Skies

Aviation museums tend to spotlight the planes themselves and their history, but the **FLIGHT PATH LEARNING CENTER** (6661 W. Imperial Hwy., L.A., 310-215-5291 or [flightpath.us](http://flightpath.us)) concentrates on airline culture. It's housed in a mid-century former terminal at the southwest corner of LAX, where wall-mounted panels trace the history of flight, with emphasis on advances made in the South Bay. Colorful displays show off memorabilia and ephemera from the days when air travel was oh-so-glam, like the golden paper dress worn in the 1960s by TWA attendants (then called stewardesses) to advertise flights to France.

## Driver's Ed

The late California businessman J.B. Nethercutt's lifelong obsession with vintage cars and his vast trove are at the heart of the **NETHERCUTT COLLECTION** (15200 Bledsoe St., Sylmar, 818-364-6464 or [nethercuttcollection.org](http://nethercuttcollection.org)), which encompasses 200 meticulously restored automobiles, most of them from the 1920s and '30s. Highlights include a 1923 Voisin, owned and crashed twice by Rudolph Valentino, and a 1956 Rolls-Royce Phantom 4, one of only 18 built exclusively for royalty and heads of state. Across the street is another of Nethercutt's passions: mechanical musical instruments. ■