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The Impulsive Traveler: Blown away by the art in Winter Park, Fla.

By Necee Regis, Published: March 18, 2011

“Wow. Wow. Wow.”

The spontaneous outburst comes from a woman across the room, and I must say that I share her enthusiasm.

After five minutes in the new Laurelton Hall wing of the [Charles Hosmer Morse Museum](#) of American Art in Winter Park, Fla., part of the greater [Orlando](#) area, my eyes are bugging out of my head as much as those of any kid in Disney World. But instead of fireworks, flying elephants and costumed dolls that sing, I’m gazing at a colorful leaded-glass flamingo window, a black-eyed Susan leaded lamp and a wall of blown glass and glazed white clay vases, all designed by [Louis Comfort Tiffany](#).

It’s a question of style, I suppose. I confess that I’ve never been to that big theme park on the other side of town, and although I hold no grudges against actors in plastic mouse heads wearing oversized white gloves (I was raised singing “Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo”), I prefer a more low-key, high-culture, less manufactured kind of vacation.

The city of Winter Park, established in 1882, is enough of a theme park for me. Grand exhibition halls? Check. Scenic boat tour? Check. Boutique shops, and restaurants serving cuisines of many nations? Check, check. An Astro Orbiter that spins and soars high above the landscape? Um, maybe not. But that’s fine by me.

Founded by wealthy Northern industrialists as a winter getaway, the town sprawls in languid splendor among a cluster of lakes and a large park in the central square. Driving around, I’m reminded of my first novel, penned at age 9 (“Grander Days Will Come”). Brick-paved streets, defying the usual Floridian grid, wind past stately turn-of-the-last-century homes beneath a canopy of live oaks festooned with Spanish moss that sways in the breeze like teenage girls tossing their hair. It’s that kind of town.

Beyond the Morse Museum, with one of the most comprehensive Tiffany collections in the world, Winter Park is home to other equally compelling arts institutions. Anchoring the southern end of downtown, [Rollins College](#) is home to the [Cornell Fine Arts Museum](#). I had heard that the Cornell was known for its American landscapes and portraits, an extensive Bloomsbury collection and old

masters' Renaissance work, but I was stunned even so to encounter the vivid "Madonna and Child Enthroned" by Cosimo Rosselli (circa 1475-80) in the spring exhibition "Piety and Magnificence."

"Rosselli also hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York," said Sandy Todd, executive assistant to the museum director. "There's a lot more to this area than just Disney."

Along the shores of nearby Lake Osceola, the [Albin Polasek Museum and Sculpture Gardens](#) is one of 30 artist homes and studios in the United States protected by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

I hadn't heard of Polasek — my degree in fine arts notwithstanding — which underscores the fleeting nature of fame, as the man achieved in his lifetime (1879-1965) honors and commissions that artists today would envy. Born in Moravia, now the Czech Republic, Polasek immigrated to the United States, became a citizen and won the Prix de Rome competition before heading the Department of Sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago. Best known for monumental commissions in the States and Europe, he retired to Winter Park in 1950 and set up his home, studio and sculpture garden on this three-acre property.

More than 200 of the artist's sculptures, paintings and drawings are displayed throughout the residence and the gardens and in a small chapel.

"He never met a medium he didn't like," said Debbie Komanski, the museum's executive director. "He tried fiberglass, terra cotta, aluminum, bronze, granite and wood."

To see works by local artists, I was directed to a commercial strip with big-box stores and a Publix supermarket. There I located the [Crealde School of Art](#), a community-based nonprofit organization that offers studio workshops in many media. A funky-fun outdoor garden contains more than 60 works of contemporary sculpture, and two galleries in the complex host changing exhibitions of established artists.

Back in the historic downtown, I had an easy walk from the boutique shops and restaurants of Park Avenue (the spine of the town, where one can also find a number of galleries and decorative-arts shops) to the [Hannibal Square Heritage Center](#). Located in the heart of the former African American business district, now spruced up with restaurants and boutiques of its own, the center was established in 2007 to honor the contributions made to Winter Park by its African American citizens.

Affiliated with Crealde and the City of Winter Park, it presents more than 100 framed photographs of residents and former residents paired with oral histories. Taken as a whole, they present a moving representation of the area's black families from 1900 to the present.

A second-floor gallery features changing exhibitions. The stunning current show (through April 9) is of paintings by artist and architect Andre Smith (1880-1959) depicting Eatonville, the hometown of Zora Neale Hurston, in the 1930s and '40s.

Almost everyone I met in my travels asked me the same question: "Have you been on the boat?" Not one to shirk what seemed to be the most popular tour in town (other than a walking tour — stop by the Chamber of Commerce Welcome Center for a map), I arose at the crack of 9 a.m. to catch the first

pontoon departure of the [Scenic Boat Tour](#).

During the hour-long cruise through Winter Park's lakes and canals, Captain Tim provided nonstop chatty descriptions of the historic estates and museums, as well as the nearby flora and fauna.

Still, nothing left me more open-mouthed and gawking than the galleries at the Morse Museum. In the Laurelton Hall wing, a re-creation of rooms from Tiffany's mansion on Long Island Sound, the Daffodil Terrace sports eight 11-foot-high marble columns topped with glass daffodil bouquets. In the Tiffany Chapel, a Byzantine-inspired wonder designed for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, I gasped at the sheer unexpected spectacle of the arches and mosaic columns and the 18-by-10-foot electrified chandelier in the shape of a cross.

"It's hard to not touch everything," said Lynne Librizzi from Titusville, Fla., she who uttered the litany of wows. "I'm hanging on to my hands."

Me, too. Who needs a roller coaster when art can be so dizzying?

Regis is a Boston-based travel and food writer and a founding member of the literary blog [Beyond the Margins](#)

If You Go

Want to take a spur-of-the-moment trip to Winter Park, Fla.? Here's what you need to know for the weekend of March 25-28:

Getting There

Delta flies nonstop from Reagan National to Orlando, Fla., with fares starting at \$260 round trip.

Where to Stay

Park Plaza

307 S. Park Ave.

800-228-7220

www.parkplazahotel.com

Vintage boutique hotel in the heart of the historic district. Rooms from \$150. No rooms available for next weekend, but worth a stay whenever you can snag one.

Comfort Inn Suites

2416 N. Orange Ave., Orlando

407-228-4007

comfordsuites.com

About two miles from Winter Park. Rooms from \$110.

Where to Eat

The Ravenous Pig

1234 N. Orange Ave.

407-628-2333

www.theravenouspig.com

Innovative pub fare from award-winning chefs. Sandwiches from \$12; entrees from \$25.

Bosphorous Turkish Cuisine

108 S. Park Ave.

407-644-8609

www.bosphorousrestaurant.com

Authentic Turkish cuisine on stylish Park Avenue. Entrees from \$13.

What to Do

Morse Museum of American Art

445 N. Park Ave.

407-645-5311

www.morsemuseum.org

Tuesday-Saturday 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. (also Friday 4–8 p.m., November-April); Sunday 1–4 p.m. \$5; seniors \$4; students with I.D. \$1; under 12 free.

Cornell Fine Arts Museum

1000 Holt Ave.

407-646-2526

www.rollins.edu/cfam

Tuesday-Friday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Saturday-Sunday noon to 5 p.m. \$5; students with I.D. free.

Albin Polasek Museum and Sculpture Gardens

633 Osceola Ave.

407-647-6294

www.polasek.org

Tuesday-Saturday 10 a.m to 4 p.m.; Sunday 1-4 p.m. \$5; seniors \$4; students \$3; under 12 free. Admission includes docent-led tours of historic home and chapel.

Hannibal Square Heritage Center

642 W. New England Ave.

407-539-2680

www.hannibalsquareheritagecenter.org

Tuesday-Friday noon to 4 p.m.; Saturday 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Free.

Jenkins Gallery

Showalter Hughes Community Gallery

Crealde School of Art

600 St. Andrews Blvd.

407-671-1886

www.crealde.org

Monday-Thursday 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Friday-Saturday 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Free.

Scenic Boat Tours

312 E. Morse Blvd.

407-644-4056

www.scenicboattours.com

Tours 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily except Christmas. \$12; children 2-11 \$6. Cash or check only.

Information

www.cityofwinterpark.org

All flight and lodging info valid as of press time March 17, 2011.

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