

Receptive to Receptions

Why Museums Are Increasing in
Popularity for Brides & Grooms
Celebrating Their Special Day

By Patricia Kelly
for MagnetStreet Weddings



The Field Museum, Chicago
Photo Courtesy of Grand Lubell Photography

Happy couples dance in the glow of Frank Lloyd Wright windows, greet their guests among masterpieces by Monet and Picasso, dine in the company of majestic stuffed African elephants, pose for photos in an 18th-century gilded room, and cut their wedding cake next to a 67-million-year-old dinosaur skeleton.

All across the country, museums of art, history, and even science are opening their doors for wedding receptions—and an increasing number of brides and grooms are discovering: There's no better place to hold their own historic events.

“There are definitely a lot of beautiful hotel ballrooms,” says Chicago wedding planner Ali Phillips, “but museums are unique. There's nothing else like them.”

Museums offer great backdrops for wedding portraits, as well as vast indoor atriums and halls that comfortably accommodate hundreds of guests for dining and dancing. Best of all, they often offer exclusive access to their collections. Guests enjoy a one-of-a-kind wedding experience as they mingle among masterworks at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., gaze at natural-history

dioramas at The Field Museum in Chicago, or step inside a huge kaleidoscope at San Francisco's Exploratorium.

“We typically open the galleries during the cocktail hour, so guests don't miss landmark events like the first dance, the cake-cutting, and bouquet-tossing,” says Allie Gallo, director of special events at the Corcoran. “It's a great way to incorporate all that the Corcoran has to offer, but it's still about the couple.”

Ali Phillips owns “Engaging Events by Ali,” and specializes in planning weddings in downtown Chicago, where museums are plentiful. The Art Institute of Chicago, the Adler Planetarium, The Field Museum, and the Chicago History Museum all welcome wedding celebrations.

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The Chicago History Museum is especially popular with couples who want to give their guests a true Chicago experience. “The main room, where you have dinner and dancing, is called the Chicago Room, and it's so beautiful,” she

says. “The windows are stained glass by Tiffany and Frank Lloyd Wright, and you have cocktails outside overlooking Lincoln Park. Couples will use Save the Date magnets with the Chicago skyline, and give out gift bags with Wrigley's gum and Garrett's popcorn. For a Chicago-themed wedding, what better place to be?”

Just blocks away, located right beside Lake Michigan, The Field Museum offers brides and grooms and their guests an adventure in natural history. Receptions usually begin

with cocktails on the balcony level, where guests stroll through galleries of gems, jades, dinosaur bones, and fossils. Dinner and dancing are downstairs in the Stanley Field Hall, home to two enormous, stuffed African elephants and “Sue,” the most complete Tyrannosaurus rex in the world. “People often set up lounge seating—or their dessert buffet—near Sue,” says special-events account manager Rebecca Parker.

Brides and grooms often name their tables after “Sue,” the elephants, and other key exhibitions throughout the museum. One bride had her place cards hand-painted with watercolors of various museum specimens; another themed her wedding after the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, decorating the hall with bright colors and feathers and serving root beer floats (a popular drink at the Fair).

“Our brides and grooms are usually pretty creative people,” says Parker. “They’re definitely looking to do something a little different.”



The Exploratorium, San Francisco
Photo Courtesy of Kirsty Edwards Photography

The Science of Fun

“Brides and grooms who hold their receptions at San Francisco’s Exploratorium are definitely fun-loving,” says Amy Adkins, the museum’s rental manager.

Couples have used glass beakers for their centerpiece vases, greeted guests with a sign-holding mannequin wearing a lab coat, and directed their guests to their tables with a “Periodic Table” seating chart. For a unique wedding portrait, says Adkins, couples often pose against the museum’s *Colored Shadows Wall* exhibit. “There’s a lot

Small is *beautiful.*

For smaller weddings, smaller museums can be a perfect fit. Regional art and science museums, historic urban homes, and elegant country manors are among the venues where a bride and groom can hold both their wedding ceremony and their reception, enjoying a setting that’s just the right size for celebrating with family and good friends.

In lieu of vast ballrooms and halls, smaller museums provide a variety of unique spaces throughout which the wedding event can unfold.



Glessner House, Chicago

Chicago’s historic 1887 Glessner House, designed by Henry Hobson Richardson, is an architectural landmark from the Gilded Age. Couples often tie the knot next door in the Chicago Women’s Park and Gardens, then walk to the Glessner courtyard and coach house for their reception. Guests can take private guided tours of the house in-between the ceremony and the reception.

The white walls and minimal décor of the carriage house are perfect for the couple who love to work with a blank slate, says Lynne Smaczny, assistant to the director: “We attract an eclectic crowd of artists, musicians, architects and history-lovers.”

On the East Coast, brides and grooms enjoy their special day at Gore Place, the “Monticello of the North.” This 1806 country estate of Massachusetts Governor



The Exploratorium, San Francisco
Photo Courtesy of Kirsty Edwards Photography

you can do with the science theme without going ‘mad scientist,’ ” she says with a laugh.

Most Exploratorium wedding receptions start with cocktails served among the museum’s hundreds of hands-on science exhibits, where it’s perfectly okay to drink champagne and snack on hors d’oeuvres. “The exhibits are great icebreakers for out-of-town guests who don’t necessarily know one another,” says Adkins. “We have an 18-foot tornado that you can touch, a giant kaleidoscope

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where you can see yourself reflected into infinity, and a gravel path that you try to walk across as quietly as you can. At the end, you get a score. If you’ve been too loud, the screen writes: ‘Too loud. Try again.’ That’s a fun one for guests, especially after they’ve had a couple of drinks!”

The Art of Surprise

When Denaye and David Barahona were searching for a place to hold their wedding reception, they wanted to give their guests a true Washington D.C. experience. David immediately thought of the Corcoran, where he had taken a photography class.

When Denaye learned that a special exhibition of her favorite Impressionist paintings would be on display on their wedding day—and that it would be open for her guests’ private viewing—the decision was a snap.

Christopher Gore features acres of emerald lawns, formal gardens, and even a small working farm. Event director Catie Camp says weddings of all styles occur at Gore Place, although most are what she calls “country elegant.” All brides are welcome to use the mansion’s dressing room, and to pose on the splendid, spiral staircase. You can host a sit-down dinner for up to 50 inside the mansion, an outdoor carpeted tent accommodates larger groups, and the carriage house is perfect for dancing long into the night.



Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

At the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, West Coast couples say their vows under arching trees, then cross the bridge over sparkling Mission Creek to dine and dance in the auditorium. Guests are free to wander through the 95-year-old museum and, during the summer, the Butterfly Pavilion.

“Our space is rustic and relaxed, and a great place to be creative,” says events manager Meridith Moore. One couple served See’s chocolates and port instead of wedding cake, another decorated with stuffed animals (the bride was a taxidermist), yet another took the museum’s no-open-flame rule in stride and filled antique candelabra with fresh flowers.

Just as with larger venues, it’s wise to reserve the space you love early. “I’ve had brides burst into tears if they can’t have their wedding here,” Moore says. “It’s so much more than a rental hall; it’s a very special place to fill with memories.”

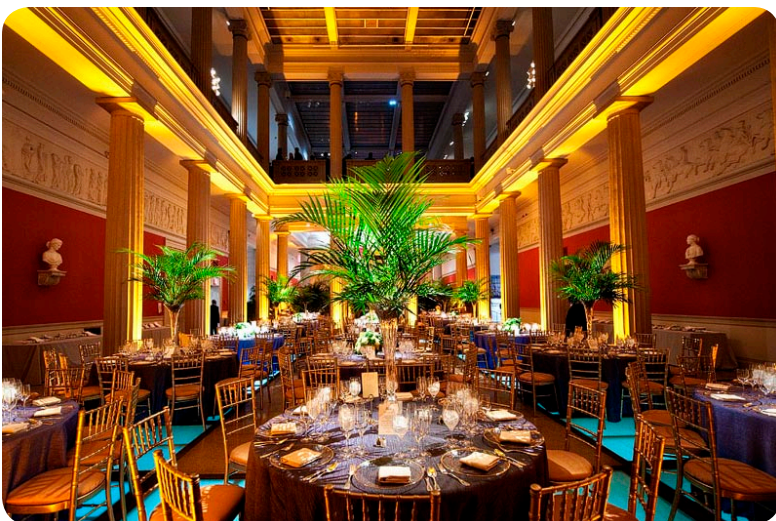
Last April, David and Denaye's guests dined and danced in a setting inspired by Monet's famous water lilies. The colors were soft and spring-like: pinks, blues and purples. Place Cards were displayed on top of a clear, water-filled, Plexiglas cube, inside which actual water lilies floated peacefully.

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The couple posed for portraits in the gilded Salon Doré, a room paneled from floor to ceiling with Corinthian pilasters, trophy panels, garlands, and large framed mirrors created by the Comte d'Orsay in the 18th century. But they also took full advantage of the museum's varied architecture.

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Allie Gallo says the Corcoran's magnificent architecture is a draw for many brides and grooms—especially the large atrium, with its 40 immense limestone columns and its grand sweeping staircase. She has a favorite memory of a bride who was adamant about making a surprise entrance at the top of the staircase. "The Corcoran is an old, quirky building, so there are lots of back ways to get places," she says. "We went up a back elevator, helped her adjust her dress and veil, and the emcee assembled everyone at the bottom of the staircase. I was standing on a little balcony off to the side when she and her new husband made their grand entrance. And she was just BEAMING. She said that her favorite part of the whole evening was to magically appear at the top of the staircase without anyone seeing. And that's what we want: to give the bride everything she wants for her special day." 



The Corcoran, Washington D.C.
Photo Courtesy of Chris Baltazar

Think a museum could be right for your wedding event?

- Find a museum in your area that fits your style. Check your city's official website or your local board of tourism for suggestions.
- Consider the needs for your event.
 - How many guests will attend?
 - Can you hire your own caterer?
 - Is it available on your date?
 - Do they have a liquor license?
 - What are the accessible areas?
 - Would you like docents or other staff?
- Check the museum's website for details on rental policies or give them a call and ask to speak to their event coordinator.

About the author

Patricia Kelly is a Minneapolis/St. Paul journalist who writes features for St. Olaf Magazine and covers industry trends for publications such as Twin Cities Business magazine.

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MagnetStreet is an online stationer specializing in personalized designs including Save the Dates and Wedding Invitations.