

UNEXPECTED INSPIRATION

Asheville, N.C., skyline

EXPLORE ASHEVILLE

By Matt Alderton

MANY OF THE WORLD'S famous and beloved works of art live in a handful of big cities, most of which lie in northern latitudes. Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, for instance, adorns a wall in Paris. Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* lives in Florence, Italy. Grant Wood's *American Gothic* calls Chicago home, while Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night* resides in New York City.

For art history buffs, traditional art cities can't be beat. But if you're as interested in the future of art as you are its past, you might find it somewhere you never thought to look: the American South.

"The South is such a vibrant region for the arts," says Teresa Hollingsworth, director of film and traditional arts for South Arts, an Atlanta-based organization with the mission of supporting and promoting arts across the South. "Southerners are very proud of our artistic heritage, but we're especially excited about the new work that's being developed in our region. It's incredibly entertaining and impactful."

But can Athens, Ga., hold its own next to New York City? The only way to find out is to experience Southern art for oneself. Here are some of the region's best places to indulge your inner critic:

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KENTUCKY



Speed Art Museum

MICHAEL CLEVINGER/THE (LOUISVILLE, KY.) COURIER-JOURNAL

Kentucky is best known for bourbon, bluegrass and thoroughbreds. So when art curator Alice Gray Stites moved to Louisville from New York City, she didn't expect much from the local art scene. What she quickly discovered, however, was a city with an appetite for art that easily matched its thirst for whiskey.

"I think, maybe, there's something to being a river city; it's a little more fertile by the waterside," says Stites, chief curator and museum director for 21c Museum Hotels, a Louisville-based developer with eight art-themed properties in seven states.

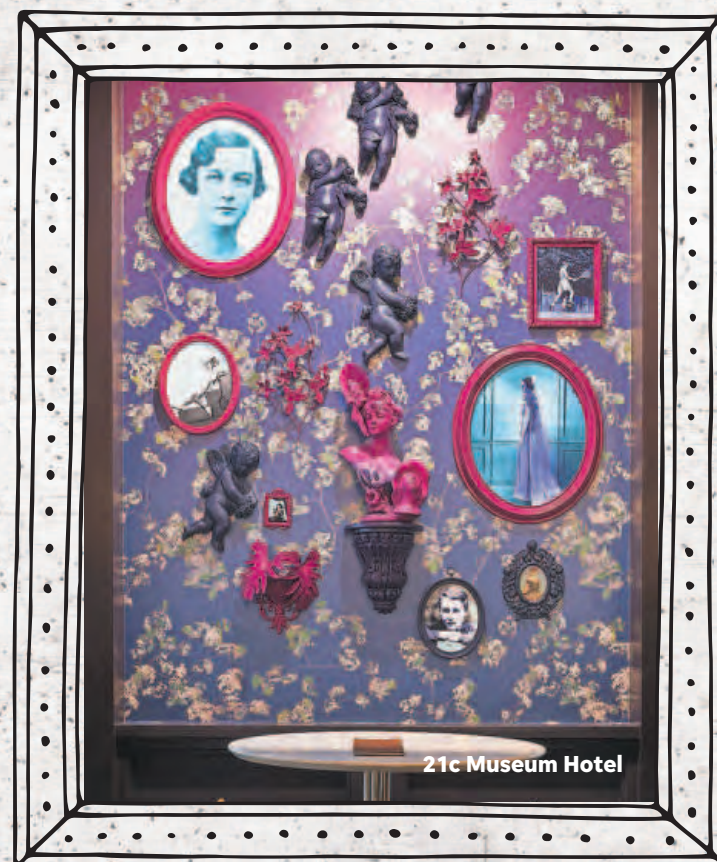
Its on-site museum offers guided docent tours and art-infused accommodations, making the original **21c Museum Hotel** (21cmuseumhotels.com/louisville) on historic West Main Street — Museum Row — a good home base for art-themed getaways. Outside, pause for a photo with a 30-foot-tall golden replica of Michelangelo's *David* by conceptual artist Serkan Özkaya. Across the street is the **KMAC Museum** (kmacmuseum.org) for contemporary art; a mile down the road is Market Street, which is plump with galleries; and a short drive away is

Kentucky's oldest and largest art museum, the recently renovated **Speed Art Museum** (speedmuseum.org).

But Kentucky's art offerings aren't limited to Louisville. For a smaller-town take on the state's creativity, check out Berea, a college town south of Lexington. Along with Berea College — a liberal arts school known for offering debt-free education to all students and being the South's first interracial and coeducational college — Berea is home to an eclectic community of artists and artisans. Stay at the historic **Boone Tavern** (boonetavernhotel.com), visit the **Kentucky Artisan Center** (kentuckyartisancenter.ky.gov), then browse the offerings in the College Square and Artisan Village Districts.

"There are a number of galleries and workshops where there are hands-on demonstrations, so you can actually see art being created," Hollingsworth says. "Also, there are opportunities for visitors to participate. If you want to take a weekend course in woodworking, for example, you can do that. ... It's an incredibly unique community."

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GETTY IMAGES; GLINT STUDIOS



21c Museum Hotel lobby

GETTY IMAGES; 21C MUSEUM HOTEL

THE CAROLINAS



Firebird at the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art

GEORGE LAINIS

Although Lake City, S.C., has a population of fewer than 7,000, it hosts one of the region's largest annual art events: the **ArtFields** (artfieldssc.org) competition, a nine-day exhibition that awards more than \$140,000 in cash prizes to artists from 12 Southern states.

"The community turns into a gallery space," Hollingsworth says. "Art is displayed literally everywhere in town."

Among the states represented at ArtFields, North Carolina is particularly prolific. Charlotte, for example, has one of its largest art scenes, the highlight of which is the **Levine Center for the Arts** (levinecenterarts.org), home to the **Bechtler Museum of Modern Art**

(bechtler.org), which houses works by Picasso and Degas, among others; the **Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture** (ganttcenr.org), which celebrates black artists; and the **Mint Museum Uptown** (mintmuseum.org), an offshoot of the Mint Museum Randolph, which opened in 1936 as North Carolina's first art museum.

If you tire of museums, take the LYNX Blue Line light rail from South Charlotte to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, suggests Katherine Mooring, senior vice president of community investment for the Arts & Science Council, a nonprofit that supports and encourages local culture.

"As you travel on the light rail,

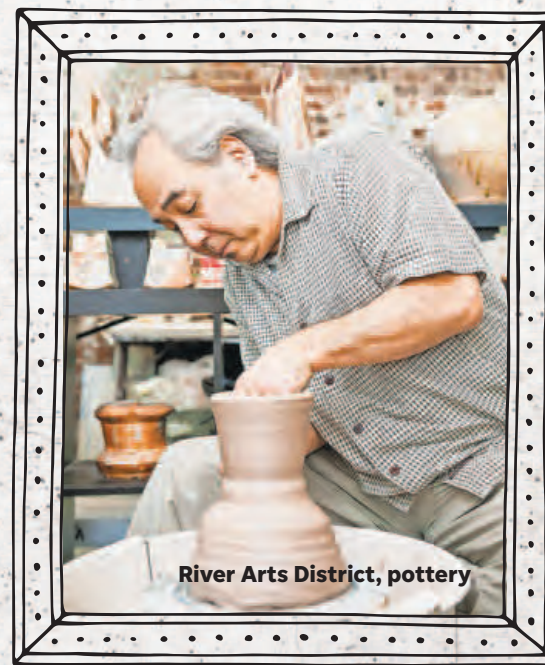
you're treated to a revolving exhibition of public artworks," Mooring says, referring to artistic design, murals and sculptures at stations along the route. "You're not going to find that in a lot of places."

Another one of those places with distinct offerings is Asheville, where "folk meets funk," says Landis Taylor, spokesperson for the Explore Asheville Convention & Visitors Bureau. Along with the expanded **Asheville Art Museum** (ashevilleart.org), check out the **North Carolina Glass Center** (ncglasscenter.org) for glassblowing workshops; the **Folk Art Center** (southernhighlandguild.org) for galleries and demonstrations showcasing traditional Appalachian crafts; and **East Fork** (eastfork.com),



River Arts District, glass blowing

GETTY IMAGES; JARED KAY/EXPLORE ASHEVILLE



River Arts District, pottery

GETTY IMAGES; CHRIS COUNCIL AND EMILY CHAPLIN

a pottery studio founded by Alex Matisse, great-grandson of French painter Henri Matisse.

"Asheville's art scene is very accessible," explains Taylor, who says visitors can explore on their own or take a guided tour from **Asheville Art Studio Tours** (ashevilleartstudiotours.com) or **Art Connections** (arttoursasheville.com). "The River Arts District, in particular, offers access to more than 200 artists in a couple dozen buildings. At any given time on any given day, multiple galleries and studios are open with artists working and welcoming guests to learn more about their craft."

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GEORGIA



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SCAD Sidewalk Arts Festival

VISIT SAVANNAH

Because it's often called "the capital of the South," Atlanta is an obvious draw for artists and their patrons. From conventional attractions like the **High Museum of Art** (high.org) to novel ones like **Art on the Atlanta BeltLine** (art.beltline.org) — a year-round public art exhibition staged along pedestrian trails — options abound.

Some of Georgia's best art, however, lies beyond its capital. Seventy miles away, for instance, is Athens. Although it's home to Georgia's official state art museum, the **Georgia Museum of Art** (georgiamuseum.org), the city's most exciting works reside outdoors.

"The Athens art community is ... robust and edgy," says Alvieann Chandler, communications specialist at the Athens Convention & Visitors Bureau. "When a visitor comes to Athens, they can expect to find many of the gates, statues, interior of buildings, signs and various other items designed and/or painted by a local Athens artist."

Among the public assets transformed by local artists are bus shelters, fire hydrants and building facades.

"Twenty-one murals decorate the sides of buildings and restaurants in downtown Athens," continues Chandler, for whom another highlight is Athens' tribute to the University of Georgia's mascot: more than 40 bulldog statues custom-decorated by local artists.

Savannah is another city that

effuses art. Along with remarkable art museums — including the **Telfair Academy** (telfair.org/telfair-academy), the contemporary **Jepson Center** (telfair.org/jepson-center) and the worldly **Savannah African Art Museum** (savannahafricanartmuseum.org) — it owes its artistic eminence to the **Savannah College of Art and Design**, or **SCAD** (scad.edu), which consistently ranks among the world's top universities for art and design.

"SCAD is really the impetus and the inspiration for the art scene here," explains Visit Savannah president Joseph Marinelli, who says SCAD students and alumni are revitalizing neighborhoods like the Starland District, home to spades of homegrown studios, galleries and shops, including **Starlandia Art Supply** (swvtarlandiasupply.com) for reclaimed art materials, coffee shop-gallery **Foxy Loxy Café** (foxyloxycafe.com) and the kid-friendly **Henny Penny Art Space & Café** (hennypennycafe.com), where coffee comes with a side of arts and crafts.

Street art is a common sight, and so are artists, many of whom spend hours behind easels in Savannah's shaded squares. Watching them is a vivid reminder: What makes the South such a promising art destination isn't famous paintings in monolithic museums, it's the energy of artists raising their voices on behalf of the region that made them.