So much to see

By Madeline Nusser
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Glow in the dark flashlight fish? There’s an exhibit for that. Indian rickshaws and ripped canvases? There’s an exhibit for those, too. In 2013, Chicago’s museums mount exhibitions to sate almost any interest. For starters, the Art Institute of Chicago rolls out the big guns: Pablo Picasso and the hallowed Impressionists get their own blockbuster exhibits. The city’s love of pets inspires a legion of shows, including exhibitions at the Chicago Children’s Museum, Field Museum and the Museum of Science and Industry. Fashion is also a hot topic: The Chicago History Museum pays homage to a clothing collector, displaying garments from the most prestigious fashion houses the world over.

With so many options, how to choose where to go? We’ve rounded up the top exhibitions in 2013, so you can plan when to hit up Chicago’s biggest repositories of art, history, science, and even animals.

Voices rise up from the East


In 1989, political artist Safdar Hashmi was brutally attacked in the middle of a street performance. Upon his death, India’s activists and artists rose up to form the Sahmat Collective, a political performance group still promoting free expression today. See painting, photography, and sculpture; video recordings of past performances; and ephemera including postcards, posters, and a hand-painted auto rickshaw.

Painting gets physical.


In the wake of World War II’s devastation, some Japanese, American and European artists began to rip, cut and burn the canvas. View artwork from post-war artists including Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein and Alberto Burri—trailblazers who blurred the boundaries of painting and performance.

A master leaves his mark on the Windy City.
“Picasso and Chicago” (Feb. 20–May 12, The Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan, www.rtic.edu/aic)

The AIC rips open its vaults of some 400 Picasso works and chooses 250 for this exhibition. Explore all of the artist’s periods — including surrealist, cubist and blue — plus the maquette for his “baboon” sculpture, and 50 pieces owned by Chicago collectors. The rest of the museum falls under Picasso’s spell, too: A dozen side exhibitions explore the artist’s Chicago ties, and his influences and contemporaries.

A believer tackles the taboo.

“Graven Images: Marc Chagall’s Bible Illustrations” (March 2–June 2, Loyola University Museum of Art, 820 N. Michigan, www.uc.edu/luma)

Born into a Hasidic family, Chagall challenged a “no graven images” mandate and created an illustrated version of the Hebrew Bible. His famed dreamlike aesthetic is apparent in a selection of 50 prints from the original 105 portraying Tanakh stories.

Animals light up, batteries not included.

“Creatures of Light: Nature’s Bioluminescence” March 7–Sept. 8, (Field Museum, 1400 S. Lake Shore Drive, www.fieldmuseum.org)

Those little glow-in-the-dark stickers have nothing on the planet’s naturally illuminated animals. Check them out in displays of live flashlight fish and giant models of jellyfish, fluorescent corals, glowworms and more. Text panels and interactive iPad content break down the phenomena of luminescence — a chemical reaction that causes species to generate light.

Fido’s innermost secrets are exposed.

“Animals Inside Out, a BODY WORLDS Production” (March 14–Sept. 2, Museum of Science and Industry, 5700 S. Lake Shore Drive, www.msichicago.org)

“Body Worlds” makes its fourth MSI appearance — and this go-round, only animals are on display. These creatures, ranging from livestock to aquatic species, have been “plastinated,” a process in which plastics replace natural body fluids. Layers are then peeled back to show a rabbit’s brain, a shark’s blood vessels and other informative — if nauseating — anatomical models.

Europe’s catwalks move into the museum.


In 1958 Ebony co-founder Eunice Johnson started producing Ebony Fashion Fair, a traveling show of high designs sourced from around the world. In the early days, Johnson broke racial
barriers, often the only black woman in attendance at European fashion shows. Her perseverance and renowned style are on display in the form of 60 stunning garments by Yves St. Laurent, Oscar de la Renta, Pierre Cardin, Patrick Kelly and others.

Ancient history is revealed in a new light.

**Scenes From the Stone Age: the Cave Paintings of Lascaux** (March 20–Sept. 8, Field Museum, 1400 S. Lake Shore Drive, www.fieldmuseum.org)

In partnership with France’s General Council of Dordogne, the Field Museum recreates Lascaux’s ancient cave paintings down to their Paleolithic era pigments. Walk through the realistic reproductions, lit by simulated torch light, and investigate how people lived during the paintings’ origination — 20,000 years ago.

Kids warm up to furry friends.


Stuffed animals, child-sized pet homes and—on some days—real pets (provided by shelters) teach kids to hone emotion and empathy. Meanwhile, Mom and Dad gain an understanding of the benefits of pets and play.

The indomitable spirit takes flight.

**“Rising Up: Hale Woodruff’s Talladega Murals”** (March 23–June 16, Chicago Cultural Center (78 E. Washington, www.explorecitychicago.org)

During the golden age of the mural, Talladega College asked Harlem artist Hale Woodruff to create large-scale paintings exploring the struggle for civil rights, starting with the mutiny on notorious slave ship Amistad. Nearly 75 years later, Woodruff’s decadent figurative works travel for the first time. In addition to six murals, 30 of the artist’s prints and paintings fill the Cultural Center’s halls.

Fashion leaves an impression on painting.


Fashion and art maintain a closely intertwined relationship, and one example of this—argues the Art Institute—is the Impressionists’ use of dress as a vehicle for modernity. Around 90 paintings by Impressionist artists, including crowd-pleasers Gustave Caillebotte, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Georges Seurat, join the era’s fashion portraits, photographs, advertisements, and newly-introduced fashion magazines.

Fiction becomes larger than life.

Inspired by book illustrations, room-sized environments entice children, from babies to age 8, to learn how to read. Featured stories include The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter, If You Give a Mouse a Cookie by Laura Numeroff, and Chicka Chicka Boom Boom by Bill Martin Jr.

Artists steal a glance.


School of the Art Institute professor Michelle Grabner—recently slated to co-curate New York City’s 2014 Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial — organizes a group show of area artists. The theme: Chicago’s unique and often humorous use of borrowing in art.

Post 9/11 art re-imagines the past.


Dieter Roelstraete, one of the MCA’s many new curators, organizes his first major group show. He aims to point out a shift in contemporary art making: post-Sept. 11 work concerned with alternative history-telling.