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Zaha Hadid's boldly designed **Maxxi**, the National Museum of 21st-Century Art. Photograph: Zoonar GmbH/Alamy

Rome holidays

Rome isn't all ruins - check out its breathtaking contemporary art and design, too

The Forum and Colosseum have to be seen once, but after that the Eternal City has a never-ending wealth of modern art worth exploring

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It's a controversial opinion, but Rome's major sites are overrated. Crowded, costly and utterly devoid of charm, the city's most visited landmarks have been cheapened in the age of mass tourism into little more than a box-ticking - or selfie-taking - exercise.

Which isn't to say you shouldn't go. Everyone should be accosted by a middle-aged Italian man in a plastic centurion's costume or shouted at by a Vatican security guard at least once in their life. But there's a lot more to the Eternal City than its ancient ruins and Renaissance sculptures.

First stop is a monumental beaux-arts structure on the north-western side of the Villa Borghese park

The best way to enjoy Rome's *centro storico* is on a night-time stroll. The buildings and fountains will be beautifully lit, you'll often have the views all to yourself, and it frees up time during the day to explore the city's exciting, contemporary side.

First stop is a monumental beaux-arts structure on the north-western side of the Villa Borghese park. It's a gallery that, in any other city, would be towards the top of everyone's to-do list, but Rome being Rome, the [Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea](#) doesn't draw huge crowds, despite having a breathtaking array of works.



The Palazzo della Civiltà is representative of the fascist period. Photograph: Martin Thomas Photography/Alamy

The collection features most of modern art's most famous names, important works from Italian masters and a fine selection of pieces from living artists. What's most enjoyable about it though, is not the quality of the art, but the way it's displayed, because the gallery has been dramatically transformed in recent years under the stewardship of outgoing director Cristiana Collu. The result is a space that makes you reconsider a lot of preconceptions about modern art movements. The diverse collection is exhibited with lots of energy and a thematic, rather than chronological, layout that brings a freshness and vitality that large national collections too often lack.

Macro is a popular haunt among Rome's art fans in the city, but one that's difficult to define

A mile and a half north-west, slightly further if you take the scenic route along the river, is a gallery as monumental as anything in the *centro storico*. But [Zaha Hadid's](#) boldly designed [Maxxi](#), the National Museum of 21st-Century Art, is worth a visit for more than the architecture. As an example of the variety on show, current exhibitions include retrospectives of Greek *arte povera* painter and sculptor [Jannis Kounellis](#), Neapolitan designer [Riccardo Dalisi](#), and comic-book artist [Benito Jacovitti](#). There are also several large installations and a contemporary design collection, as well as an extensive permanent collection of drawings, models, photographs and recordings from Italy's best-known modern architects. The museum also runs talks, performances, exhibitions and workshops throughout the year.

Off the beaten tourist track, east of the Villa Borghese in residential Salario, [Macro](#), the Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome, was once Peroni's main brewery in the city. It has been transformed into a sleek, postindustrial space that is a popular haunt among Rome's art fans in the city, but is difficult to define. The museum's own website calls it both a "container that becomes content", and a "polyphonic cultural centre". Whatever you call it, it's well worth a visit, and admission is free.



Museum Macro was once Peroni's main brewery in Rome. Photograph: Andrea Palma/Alamy

Across town to the south, in Rome's EUR district, the [Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana](#) is another worthwhile stop for anyone who wants to see the more modern side of Rome. Now the global headquarters of Fendi, the "square colosseum" is a striking example of the neoclassical Italian Rationalist style from the fascist period. The area around it offers an interesting glimpse of what Mussolini's Italy might have looked like. The building's unique aesthetic and complicated history make it worth a visit - but don't miss out on its gallery. It recently featured a gorgeous site-specific exhibition of works by contemporary sculptor [Arnaldo Pomodoro](#), including an extensive assortment of documents and drawings from his archive.

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More of Rome's modern art spots

Fondazione Pastificio Cerere

This great gallery known for its educational projects and for promoting young artists is in a former pasta factory in the San Lorenzo neighbourhood, not far from Termini station.

Matèria

Five minutes' walk away, near Porta San Lorenzo, is another little gem of a gallery, known for its promotion of young talent and experimental shows across different mediums.

Centrale Montemartini

Originally Rome's first public power plant, this gallery has an extensive collection of ancient sculpture surrounded by diesel engines and enormous alternators. This sense of contrast brings the incredible age of the collection into sharper focus.

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