TRAVEL

The art exhibitions you need to see in London in October 2026

From sun-drenched depictions of the French Riviera to the excitement of the Frieze art fairs, from the development of art photography to the invention of Impressionism – and much more

By Fiona McKenzie Johnston
1 October 2026

The best October art exhibitions in London: Salmon Toes, Someone Like You at the Courtauld

October is, without question, the most high-octane month in our capital's art calendar. There are prolific fairs, major auctions – and, as ever, a glorious glut of outstanding exhibitions: hurray for London's being a global art centre!

Let's begin with the fairs. Frieze is the big one – indeed, in some quarters, it gives its name to the week during which it runs (this year, it's October 14 – 18), if not the whole season. For the uninitiated, there are actually two fairs, each based in their own tent complex in The Regent's Park. Frieze London shows contemporary art by living artists, mostly made after the year 2000, and Frieze Masters is for antiquities, historical art, and Modern art made prior to the year 2000. Some galleries have booths at both. Tickets to attend are not cheap, however, there is no doubt that Frieze London is a pulse-setter, and the place to discover emerging talent from around the world – while a trip to Frieze Masters can open the visitor's eyes to previously unencountered beauty and prove terminally aesthetic-shifting is the best possible way. Between their locations is Frieze Sculpture, a – free – outdoor exhibition.

There are further fairs, running concurrently. The unequivocally chic PAD London in Berkeley Square is dedicated to historical and contemporary collectable design and decorative arts. The 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair at Somerset House presents exactly what its title describes, and is always an exciting voyage of discovery – and the same goes for the Affordable Art Fair in Battersea Park. New this year is Pursuit, a Latin American art fair, taking place at Ambika P3 at the University of Westminster. Then, at the end of the month, Ingenist Art Fair is the successor to the Woodwich Print Fair, relocated to SW1.

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At the same time, our commercial galleries put on outstanding, museum-worthy shows in their bricks-and-mortar spaces, and there is no charge to see those. Ordovas, W1, is looking at the life and legacy of Erica Brausen and the Hanover Gallery, which, in the post-war years, was the most exciting contemporary gallery in Europe, and instrumental in establishing the reputation of Francis Bacon. Ward Morrill, SW1, has got a jewel of an exhibition devoted to Marlow Moss, the first British Constructivist. Thaddaeus Ropac is showing a selection of the great Georg Baselitz's breakthrough paintings, and Pippa Nobbs is looking at the early years of B. B. King's career. And, while you're pacing the streets of Mayfair and St. James's, do stop by Sotheby's and Christie's while their major sales are hanging in the viewing rooms. At the latter is the extraordinary Peter Simon collection – the highest value single-owner collection every presented by the auction house, numbering exceptional works by a diverse range of artists from Francis Bacon to Bridget Riley. While at Sotheby's is a group of new to the market paintings by Bloomsbury Group artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant.

Finally, there are our institutions – which truly, are giving us *gold*. At the Royal Academy of Arts, *Painting the French Riviera* is a jaw-dropping bounty of loveliness, the grand rooms packed with landscapes, beach scenes, hotel rooms and lunches by Monet, Cézanne, Matisse, Dervain, Picasso *et al*. The National Gallery is bringing us Renoir's Paris – sun-dappled gardens, swirling dance balls, friends, family, and lovers. Tate Modern's focus on Pictorialism demonstrates that a camera can deliver just as much as a paintbrush, and at the Barbican, we're being shown, via Robert Bygum, the varying beauty of all-white. There's much more. Read on!

The best art exhibitions in London for October 2026

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Painting the French Riviera at the Royal Academy of Arts

In 1884, Claude Monet declared that to truly record the light and the vibrant hues of the Riviera, he'd 'need a palette of diamonds and precious stones'. Invited on a three-week painting trip by Auguste Renoir, who had already spent time in L'Estaque and Aix-en-Provence with Paul Cézanne, Monet had extended his stay for another three months. He was so enraptured by the changing tones that – for the first time – he painted the same scene at different times of the day. A glorious new show in the main galleries at the Royal Academy of Arts, W1, brings to life his experience – and the decades that followed. For other artists were similarly inspired and flocked to the dramatic coastline whose beauty propelled them to new creative heights. Thus, its colours and motifs thread through the emergence of modernism, and the work of Signac, Matisse, Dervain, Bonnard, Bruguer, Picasso, ballet impresario Serge Diaghilv, fashion designer Coco Chanel, and Yves Klein, who famously sought to capture the exact shade the sky above Nice.

Until January 31; royalacademy.org.uk

Pictured: Raoul Dufy, Golfe Juan, 1927. Oil on canvas, mounted on board, 81.8 x 100.0 cm. Collection of the McNay Art Museum, Bequest of Marion Koogler McNay, 1950

The National Gallery Photographic Department

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Renoir & Love at the National Gallery

The arrival of Impressionism shattered the tradition of academic representation – and, with rapid brushstrokes that sought to capture fleeting moments of light, changed the course of art. An exceptional exhibition at the National Gallery, WC1, traces Pierre-Auguste Renoir's experimentation with style and theme between the 1860s and 1880s, and his becoming – alongside Monet, Degas, Manet, Pissarro and Berthe Morisot – one of the movement's leading figures. There are paintings that have never before been seen in the UK – and sun-dappled gardens, swirling dance balls, families, friends, and lovers. Meanwhile, beyond the gallery walls, Renoir's *The Umbrellas* has been reimagined as a five-metre-high mural at the corner of Carnaby Street and Ganton Street.

October 3–January 31; nationalgallery.org.uk

Pictured: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Madame Monet and her son, 1874 © National Gallery of Art, Washington, Alisa Mellon Bruce Collection, 1970.

WATCH

Inside a fully renovated Scottish farmhouse secluded in The Outer Hebrides

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Light & Magic: The Birth of Art Photography at Tate Modern

Tate Modern, SE1, is holding the first major show to explore the global extent of Pictorialism, the term coined in 1869 to differentiate photographers whose ambition went beyond documentation. Beauty is in abundance: Robert Demachy, a contemporary of the Impressionists, manipulated his process to make images as soft as a charcoal drawing, while Long Chin-san took from the evocative language of traditional Chinese ink painting. Peter Henry Emerson imbued his studies of rural life with an atmospheric authenticity comparable to the Glasgow Boys' treatment of the same subject. And Edward Steichen conceived painterly landscapes – as well as portraits of such figures as the boxer Primo Carnera for *Vanity Fair*. Notably, magazines contributed significantly to the development of Pictorialism, producing the wherewithal for experimentation. The Tate exhibition also includes work by Adolphe de Meyer, who in 1913 became *Vogue*'s first staff-photographer – and, on occasion, shot for *House & Garden*.

October 14–February 17; tate.org.uk

Pictured: Peter Henry Emerson and Thomas Frederick Goodall, Gathering Water-Lilies, 1885. Copyright Wilson Centre for Photography

National Portrait Gallery London

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Hanover Gallery at Ordovas

Founded in 1947 by Erica Brausen, a German émigré, the Hanover Gallery was viewed by collectors and critics of the time as the most exciting gallery in Europe. Its programme combined the continental avant-garde with contemporary British artists, showing Lucian Freud, William Scott, Henri Matisse, Richard Hamilton, Germaine Richier, Niki de Saint Phalle, Man Ray, Marlow Moss, Jean Miró, Alberto Giacometti – and, importantly, Francis Bacon, whose reputation Erica established. This autumn, Ordovas gallery, W1, is celebrating Erica's extraordinary life and legacy, and presenting works by artists she showed.

October 2–December 11; ordovasart.com

Pictured: Lucian Freud, Girl in Bed © The Lucian Freud Archive. All Rights Reserved 2026 / Bridgeman Images copy

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