

Psssst...

Wanna see
a museum?



In Europe,
the erotic arts
get their own
houses of culture

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Mention the word "sex" in America and odds are the word "president" will soon follow. But in Europe the word "sex" is just as likely to be followed by the word "museum."

Rather quietly over the past several years, Europe has seen a blossoming of museums devoted to a subject that would send American curators ducking for cover. From Barcelona to Copenhagen these museums have enshrined everything from ancient fertility icons to contemporary interactive sculpture and sex toys.

And these museums have quickly become major attractions. In booming Berlin, for example, the Beate Uhse Erotik Museum attracts a quarter of a million visitors annually and is one of the five most-visited museums in the city, according to Bernd Buhmann, head of the press and public relations department of Berlin Tourismus.

We visited six erotic museums in four cities — Amsterdam, Berlin, Hamburg and Paris — and gathered information on those in Barcelona and Copenhagen. These sites vary dramatically in presentation and content, ranging from a fun-house atmosphere to more dignified settings apropos of serious collections. Some were attached to tacky sex toy shops, others to elegant bookstores. Yet all are worth visiting; the objects they hold provide insight into the times and places they were creat-

Hamburg

Erotic Art Museum/ Privat Museum

The St. Pauli district of Germany's second city is its poorest,

and its main drag, the Reeperbahn, definitely has a seaport feel. — Our instant joke was calling it the grim Reeperbahn, but right there, in the thick of it, rise the five floors of Claus Becker's magnificent Erotic Art Museum.

What was once a hat factory has morphed into a seductive, streamlined four-story receptacle of glass and light — a perfect setting for what is probably Europe's most comprehensive collection of publicly displayed erotic paintings, lithographs and drawings.

The museum's roots go back to 1990 when Becker, a real estate developer, purchased an enormous collection of erotic art from the Renaissance to the present that belonged to an "anonymous banker." Feeling that erotic art has been either ignored or destroyed — and most certainly withheld from public view — Becker bought the collection and installed it in a beautifully rehabbed warehouse in St. Pauli.

With the collection continuing to expand, Becker moved to a new

location on the Reeperbahn last year, keeping the original site as the Privat Museum, a modern art gallery devoted to revolving displays of contemporary erotic and other works plus bookstore and cafe. Becker spent about \$6.5 million preparing the new space, and it shows.

Since 1990, Becker has amassed a treasure trove of more than 1,800 works ranging from Barent von Orley's "Neptune and Nymph" (c. 1520) to the edgy 1990s S/M work of French photographer Gilles Berquet. The only disappointment in this otherwise world-class museum, which clearly caters to foreign visitors, is that there is little description of the works, and it is only in German.

And that is too bad because the collection of 18th Century French erotic prints, for example, is sublime and would have been even more fascinating had there been some shred of information beyond an approximate date and the occasional author's name.

Still, no museum we saw matched the breadth and depth of Becker's assemblage. Last year visitors to the two sites topped 80,000, according to a museum spokesman who added that Becker is also contemplating a similar museum in either eastern Europe or Russia.