There are many art museums in France, the most famous of which being the state-owned Musée du Louvre, which collects artwork from the 18th century and earlier. The Musée d'Orsay was inaugurated in 1986 in the old railway station Gare d'Orsay, in a major reorganisation of national art collections, to gather French paintings from the second part of the 19th century (mainly Impressionism and Fauvism movements).[295][296] It was voted the best museum in the world in 2018.[297] Modern works are presented in the Musée National d'Art Moderne, which moved in 1976 to the Centre Georges Pompidou. These three state-owned museums are visited by close to 17 million people a year.[298]

During the Middle Ages, many fortified castles were built by feudal nobles to mark their powers. Some French castles that survived are Chinon, Château d'Angers, the massive Château de Vincennes and the so-called Cathar castles. During this era, France had been using Romanesque architecture like most of Western Europe.

Gothic architecture, originally named Opus Francigenum meaning "French work",[299] was born in Île-de-France and was the first French style of architecture to be imitated throughout Europe.[300] Northern France is the home of some of the most important Gothic cathedrals and basilicas, the first of these being the Saint Denis Basilica (used as the royal necropolis); other important French Gothic cathedrals are Notre-Dame de Chartres and Notre-Dame d'Amiens. The kings were crowned in another important Gothic church: Notre-Dame de Reims.[301]

The final victory in the Hundred Years' War marked an important stage in the evolution of French architecture. It was the time of the French Renaissance and several artists from Italy were invited to the French court; many residential palaces were built in the Loire Valley, from 1450 as a first reference the Château de Montsoreau.[302] Examples of such residential castles include the Château de Chambord, the Château de Chenonceau, or the Château d'Amboise.

Following the Renaissance and the end of the Middle Ages, Baroque architecture replaced the traditional Gothic style. However, in France, Baroque architecture found greater success in the secular domain than in the religious one.[303] In the secular domain, the Palace of Versailles has many Baroque features. Jules Hardouin Mansart, who designed the extensions to Versailles, was one of the most influential French architects of the Baroque era; he is famous for his dome at Les Invalides.[304] Some of the most impressive provincial Baroque architecture is found in places that were not yet French such as Place Stanislas in Nancy. On the military architectural side, Vauban designed some of the most efficient fortresses in Europe and became an influential military architect; as a result, imitations of his works can be found all over Europe, the Americas, Russia and Turkey.[305][306]

After the Revolution, the Republicans favoured Neoclassicism although it was introduced in France before the revolution with such buildings as the Parisian Pantheon or the Capitole de Toulouse. Built during the first French Empire, the Arc de Triomphe and Sainte Marie-Madeleine represent the best example of Empire-style architecture.[307] Under Napoleon III, a new wave of urbanism and architecture was given birth; extravagant buildings such as the neo-Baroque Palais Garnier were built. The urban planning of the time was very organised and rigorous; most notably, Haussmann's renovation of Paris. The architecture associated with this era is named Second Empire in English, the term being taken from the Second French Empire. At this time there was a strong Gothic resurgence across Europe and in France; the associated architect was Eugène Viollet-le-Duc. In the late 19th century, Gustave Eiffel designed many bridges, such as the Garabit viaduct, and remains one of the most influential bridge designers of his time, although he is best remembered for the Eiffel Tower.

In the 20th century, French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier designed several buildings in France. More recently, French architects have combined both modern and old architectural styles. The Louvre Pyramid is an example of modern architecture added to an older building. The most difficult buildings to integrate within French cities are skyscrapers, as they are visible from afar. For instance, in Paris, since 1977, new buildings had to be under 37 metres (121 ft).[308] France's largest financial district is La Défense, where a significant number of skyscrapers are located.[309] Other massive buildings that are a challenge to integrate into their environment are large bridges; an example of the way this has been done is the Millau Viaduct. Some famous modern French architects include Jean Nouvel, Dominique Perrault, Christian de Portzamparc and Paul Andreu.

The earliest French literature dates from the Middle Ages when what is now known as modern France did not have a single, uniform language. There were several languages and dialects, and writers used their own spelling and grammar. Some authors of French medieval texts, such as Tristan and Iseult and Lancelot-Grail are unknown. Three famous medieval authors are Chrétien de Troyes, Christine de Pizan (langue d'oïl), and Duke William IX of Aquitaine (langue d'oc). Much medieval French poetry and literature was inspired by the legends of the Carolingian cycle, such as the Song of Roland and the chansons de geste. The Roman de Renart, written in 1175 by Perrout de Saint Cloude, tells the story of the medieval character Reynard ('the Fox') and is another example of early French writing. An important 16th-century writer was François Rabelais, who wrote five popular early picaresque novels. Rabelais was also in regular communication with Marguerite de Navarre, author of the Heptameron.[310] Another 16th-century author was Michel de Montaigne, whose most famous work, Essais, started a literary genre.[311]

French literature and poetry flourished during the 18th and 19th centuries. Denis Diderot is best known as the main editor of the Encyclopédie, whose aim was to sum up all the knowledge of his century and to fight ignorance and obscurantism. During that same century, Charles Perrault was a prolific writer of children's fairy tales including Puss in Boots, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and Bluebeard. At the start of the 19th century, symbolist poetry was an important movement in French literature, with poets such as Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé.[312]