

## For hotels, pampering is a fine art

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No time for the local museum on an overnight trip? Try lingering at your hotel.

A new breed of hotels is dressing up walls, lobbies and guest rooms with original artworks from a mix of famous, midcareer and promising artists. Instead of hanging bland or factory-produced art that blends in with the background, they're choosing memorable -- and in many cases, very expensive -- works. A growing number of hoteliers think that art can help them create an experience that will draw more travelers.

Cities as varied as New York, Nashville and Tacoma, Wash., now boast of hotels in which the fine art is so fine that they could almost double as museums.

Louisville, for instance, has the 91-room 21c Museum Hotel, opened two years ago by developer Steve Wilson and his wife, Laura Lee Brown, to showcase some of their \$10 million contemporary art collection. It includes Text Rain, an interactive video installation by conceptual artists Camille Utterback, an American, and Romy Achituv, an Israeli.

Investor Gordon Sondland of Seattle is working on his sixth art-themed hotel, the Hotel Murano, which is in Tacoma. Last month, **Danish artist Vibeke Skov** flew to the hotel to install three colored glass Viking ships ranging in length from 12 to 16 feet. The ships hang from the four-story atrium corridor.

Over the last four years, as travel has rebounded from a post 9/11 slump, the industry has spent billions renovating hotels' interiors and technology offerings to raise their hipness quotient. Bigger competitors have watched small boutique chains such as Ian Schrager, Kimpton and Thompson carve out a niche with unique art and design.

Stephen Brandman, co-owner of Thompson Hotels, a chain of six luxury boutique hotels where rooms can cost more than \$800 a night, says inclusion of fine art is important to demonstrate "a thought process that's been put into every element" of the hotel.

"No longer is the traveler just looking for a clean bed and a free cup of coffee in the morning," Brandman says.

Depending on the hotel's collection and budget, guests may find art dispersed throughout a hotel, from elevator areas to expansive lobby walls. Sonesta hotels showcase at least two original works in guest rooms. Guests, for example, could sleep near pieces by artists such as photographer Robert Maplesorpe and abstract painter Robert Mangold.

For hoteliers, original artworks can distinguish a hotel from rivals and create the type of atmosphere that well-traveled, discriminating guests have come to expect. For travelers, art offers a richer experience during their stay.

The new emphasis on original art comes as the hotel industry continues trying to appeal to Generation Xers -- ages 27 to 43 -- who tend to have disposable income and who seek uniqueness rather than cookie-cutter predictability.

Josh Short, 31, and his wife Tiffany Sauls, 33, of Lexington, Ky., normally stay at bed-and-breakfast inns because "hotels don't interest us." But after reading about 21c's collection and restaurant, the couple decided to drive about 90 minutes to Louisville to see what's behind the buzz.

"The fact that they had a hotel, a modern art gallery and a restaurant all in one place intrigued us," says Short, an emergency room physician.

Short gave the hotel a rave review. He especially liked a life-size red, plastic penguin from 21c's collection with a congratulatory note about a recent professional accomplishment by Sauls, who is a child psychiatrist.

The art-filled hotels aren't just for leisure travelers.

Columbia Sportswear in Beaverton, Ore., puts up its sales representatives at Hotel Lucia, an art-filled Provenance hotel in downtown Portland. The company's sales staff -- most of whom are Gen

Xers -- like the hotel's atmosphere and level of service and prefer it over major-brand hotels in the downtown area, says Carolyn Greenwood, the firm's corporate travel manager.

Artist-film director Julian Schnabel gave the use of original works a lift in 2006 when he helped create Schrager's latest hotel, the Gramercy Park Hotel in New York. From the lobby to the bar, the hotel is filled with oversize paintings and other works by artists such as Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Schnabel himself.

But it's not just the boutique brands.

Ritz changes its image

Ritz-Carlton, in transforming itself from an old-world-style luxury chain to a contemporary one, has been selling off elaborately framed 18th-century oil paintings of sailing ships and hunting dogs. In their place are vibrant, abstract paintings, glass sculptures and other modern works.

"Our artwork has been seen as decoration for a long time, but it can be more," says Susan Konkel, the chain's chief interior designer. After all, she says, "Our clientele today is more sophisticated and has greater appreciation for contemporary artwork."

Ritz-Carlton's South Beach property, which opened four years ago, embodies the chain's new approach to art. Art collector Diana Lowenstein, the hotel's part-owner, filled the hotel with a \$2 million collection of Latin American and European artists such as Spanish artist Joan Miro. Most of the art was created in the 1940s and 1950s, reflecting the Art Moderne period when the hotel was built.

Sonesta Hotels Chairman Roger Sonnabend, with his wife, Joan, pioneered the concept of hanging original artworks throughout their hotels about 40 years ago. He says quality art can actually save money, because hotels are able to skip sconces, wood paneling and other decorative elements.

The 22-hotel chain includes properties in Boston, Miami and New Orleans.

"It's probably the most inexpensive way to make a space look exciting," Sonnabend says. "You put up art and the space comes to life."

The Sonnabends, who are among the most experienced at putting expensive art within reach of guests, have never had a serious problem with theft or damage of art, says Joan Sonnabend. She says the artworks are secured with a special security system and insured.

"We've never had to put in a lot of claims," she says.

The Sonesta art collection contains roughly 6,000 pieces, including original prints from Warhol and Jasper Johns that the couple bought for a few hundred dollars apiece when they were newly married. Some of the Sonesta prints, if sold today, would get as much as \$40,000, he says. But Sonnabend says they're not for sale.

Brandman's Thompson Hotels favor art that's relevant to each hotel's location, he says. For instance, at the Hollywood Roosevelt in Los Angeles, hallways feature photographs by Ron Galella, the pioneering "paparazzo" who has photographed celebrities since the 1970s.

When Thompson's Lower East Side hotel opens in Manhattan in March, it will include work by artist and poet Gerard Malanga, Warhol's longtime collaborator. Malanga is going to install a blown-up photographic image of Warhol at the bottom of the swimming pool that guests will be able to see from higher floors. "It should be very dramatic," Brandman says.

In Louisville, the success of the Wilsons' 21c Hotel -- with its destination restaurant, a 9,000-square-foot contemporary art museum run by their foundation and expansive art collection -- has convinced them there's a bigger market.

So the couple are working on opening a second hotel in Austin, and they're considering invitations from other cities. Steve Wilson says they may open about a dozen art-filled hotels in downtown areas of midsize cities.

Las Vegas for years has included expensive art in its glitziest hotels.

When billionaire Steve Wynn opened the Bellagio in 1998, it contained priceless masterpieces by Degas, Picasso, Monet, Manet and others. Under new ownership, the hotel now puts on revolving art exhibits and displays works by Picasso in its Picasso restaurant.

But in cities where sensory overload presents less risk, the inclusion of fine art in hotels seems to stand out more.

Picking up where Vegas left off

Louisville Mayor Jerry Abramson says the 21c is sparking interest around the world, and it is boosting Louisville's profile as its downtown area undergoes a massive makeover with lofts, condominiums and new towers.

"It creates a buzz," Abramson says. Visitors "walk away with a feeling that Louisville's becoming much more of an edgy community than what they'd originally perceived."

At 21c, Wilson says, he has sought to balance serious, provocative works with whimsical works.

The Wilsons don't want theirs to become one of those boutique hotels that "can get so cool, they're almost inhospitable," he says.

Sondland, the Seattle hotel developer, tends to feature works of local artists in his Provenance chain, which includes Hotel Preston in Nashville and Hotel Max in Seattle. He's building the Murano, home of the glass ships, in a converted Sheraton built in the 1980s.

"We're trying to give travelers the ability to roam the building and nurture their souls," says Sondland, who's been investing in hotels for more than two decades --and collecting art longer. But good art also is good business.

Says Sondland: "There are a lot of competitors who do as good a job as we do, but we have a distinguishing feature" that attracts customers.

For some travelers, however, the next morning's business meetings are more important than the original canvas hanging in their rooms.

"I'd trade a memory-foam mattress for a glimpse of an original Warhol any day," says Michael Shannon, a consultant based in Woodbridge, Va. "Free, reliable, fast Wi-Fi is much more relevant to my hotel decision-making process. Art in hotels is a worry for people who don't have enough to do in their day job."

For now, travelers who do want to wake up near original art must stay in swanky, luxury hotels or one of the growing number of boutique hotels. Rates vary. Rates at the 21c Museum Hotel, for instance, start at about \$210 per night, while the highest room rates at the Provenance chain's Hotel Lucia in Portland can top \$700 per night. When Thompson Lower East Side opens, the least expensive room will cost \$425 a night.

But that may be changing.

Local is where it's at

This year, for instance, the Hilton chain Homewood Suites will launch a program that encourages its owners to buy original artwork from local artists.

And, NYLO, a midprice upstart chain catering to business travelers, plans to include paintings and photography from local artists that reflect the hotel's location.

The first hotel opened in North Dallas last month, and the second is set to open next summer in Warwick, R.I. The chain finds its artworks by holding contests in each market where it builds a hotel. It will serve as a gallery by letting the artists sell their works without taking a cut of the profit, says NYLO CEO John Russell.

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