



## For hotels, pampering is a fine art

Glamorous, trend-setting inns  
treat guests to great artwork

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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



Set sail: Jeff Lane, left, and Paul Grange work on one of the three glass Viking ships in the lobby of the Hotel Murano in Tacoma, Wash. It took nearly two weeks to install.

# Hotels dress to impress – with a fabulous array of art

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\$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, Kiepton 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 Mapplethorpe 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 scapes, 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



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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.

**Hotel Max Seattle:** It has more than 350 original works of art throughout its lobby, guest rooms and corridors.