



# DISPLAYING ART TO ATTRACT

**When people delight in works of art displayed in a hotel, the property gains marketing value by providing them with a memorable experience they are certain to mention to others.**

By JoAnn Greco

**I**n New Orleans, an \$8 million assemblage of British art and antiques draws visitors from around the world; in Singapore, a collection of 4,200 pieces of pop-art and color-field painting is considered one of the finest in Southeast Asia; and in Phoenix, a comprehensive grouping of textiles, pottery, and baskets joins works on paper and canvas to present a comprehensive look at the culture of the Pima and Maricopa Native American tribes.

The funny thing is, all of these works are on display not at world-class museums or specialty galleries but in the lobbies, restaurants, and guest rooms of, respectively, the Windsor Court, Ritz-Carlton, and Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort and Spa. They're part of a trend — the building of major art collections by hotels — that reached its pinnacle

with the 1998 opening of Steve Wynn's Bellagio in Las Vegas.

Bellagio housed a collection of masterpieces by the likes of Rembrandt, Monet, Manet, Van Gogh, Renoir, Cezanne, Matisse, and Picasso. When Wynn sold Bellagio along with his other casino holdings to MGM, he took his collection home. Under its new owners, though, Bellagio has offered its own rotating exhibits, charging \$12 for gallery admission to shows like a retrospective of Alexander Calder sculptures, and one highlighting works from the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.

### **Art As Marketing Tool**

The reasons behind this latest artistic movement range from the benignly egotistical (such collections are often the private property of art-loving hotel owners

looking for a way to publicly display their holdings) to the philanthropic (in places like Las Vegas, such collections may offer the fullest and best displays of art in the city). But in most cases, a healthy realization of the marketing value of a tightly-themed gathering of art is also part of the mix. In its pre-opening tours for meeting planners and destination managers, the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort and Spa, for example, took care to point out its extensive body of art works. "The collection helps us create a unique marketing hook for potential guests and others interested in the property," says general manager Allen Kramme. "It's a true marketing distinction."

Laurie Post, a Phoenix-based art consultant who worked with the just-opened property, concurs. "Original art definitely gives a hotel or resort an air of being luxurious," she says. "It doesn't matter how much you actually spend on the art — it's just the fact that you did it and it's there for all to see."

And you don't have to spend much, according to Roger Sonnabend, chairman of Sonesta Hotels. Art, he says, can actually be less expensive than other

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design options. “Elements like wood paneling and other fancy finishes are a lot more costly,” Sonnabend observes. “Besides, they have no added inherent value — and, of course, aren’t nearly as rewarding or enriching.”

Sonnabend and his wife Joan have been passionate collectors of contemporary art for 35 years and use their hotels as galleries to display more than 5,000 pieces by moderns like Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Frank Stella, Claes Oldenbourg, and Andy Warhol. Sonesta guest rooms always feature original graphic works, usually budgeted at between \$600 and \$900 per room. “Art isn’t a marketing tool for us,” Sonnabend says, “it’s just a way of life.” But Sonesta does use art to “sell” in a gentle way — as with its Royal Sonesta Boston, which bills itself as offering two suites outfitted with top-quality pieces by well-known artists. Sonesta’s art is also featured in brochures, annual reports and menus; additionally, each holiday season, the couple commissions a work by a contemporary artist to use on cards it sends out to valued customers, the press, and travel agents.

At Millennium Partners, which owns

seven U.S. Ritz-Carlton properties, five of them brand new, art has also become a way of life — albeit one with a richer budget and a most definite marketing component. The group estimates that it has spent more than \$1 million on original art for each of its new properties, in pursuit of a stated goal to “amass one of the world’s largest, privately-held collections of American artists.” It’s likely a good investment — although not necessarily from a collector’s standpoint.

“When people start buying art en masse, it’s possible that they get some good deals — but on the other hand, they may not always be the most educated of buyers,” points out Philadelphia-based art historian Christopher Pastore. “I think for buyers like this the real ‘investment’ comes in other ways. They might see art as a way to help foster a certain image, or to generate free publicity.”

That’s certainly been the case at Millennium, concurs spokesperson Matthew Hall. “We’re trying to energize the Ritz-Carlton brand and including contemporary art in the design of our new hotels is one way of doing that,” he observes. “These works help us get out

the message that Ritz-Carltons can be a cool place to stay and visit.’ So say goodbye to the gilt-framed, fox-hunt oils and the mahogany wood paneling of Ritz-Carltons of old. With contemporary art, “we hope to make the hotels more of a destination and more exciting — places that can be pleasing to guests but can also be places for locals to gather,” Hall says.

The group’s Ritz-Carlton Battery Park City, for example, has more than 1,000 pieces of original art — some of it purchased, some of it commissioned — on display throughout the building, included in every guest room. Created by artists currently working in New York, the great majority of the works play on themes involving water, in reference to the hotel’s unique situation at the base of Manhattan. The hotel invited all participating artists and their artist pals to attend its swanky opening. “I think that really helped establish within the downtown artist community that this was a valid collection, and a place for them to hang out,” says Hall.

The media, too, has taken notice. “The *New York Post* ran a three-page spread on the art at Ritz-Carlton Battery Park when

it opened earlier this year,” Hall says. “And when *American Art Review* published a cover story on the work of Samuel Heath, they turned to us for information and photos.” The group’s Ritz-Carlton Central Park property displays 21 pieces by Heath, who lived from 1884 to 1930 and is considered one of America’s first modernist painters. Millennium actually hired an art consultant to write a 150-page Heath monograph, then placed one book in each guest room.

### Art As Cultural Tourism

Such a lavish touch may seem extreme, and is certainly not typical. Hotels do treat their collections seriously, though, and as valid cultural attractions. “The more a hotel really works at its collection, the more material and support it will offer guests and visitors,” observes consultant Post. “You’ll see house copies of hardcover books on lobby tables or in guest rooms, printed brochures for them to take home, and even guided tours.”

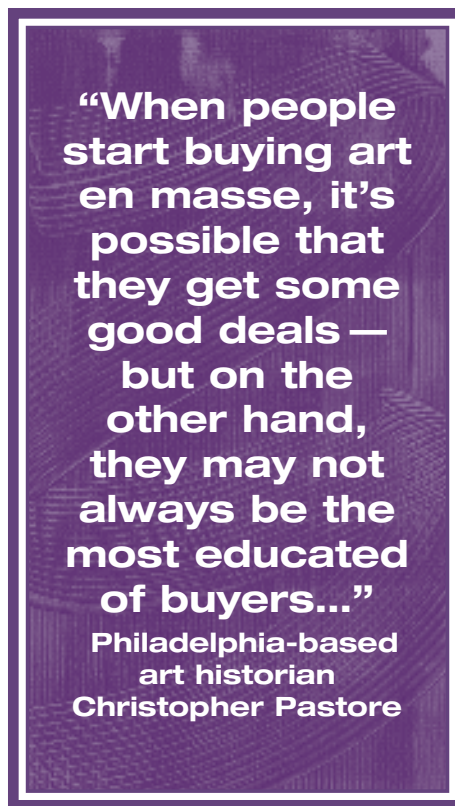
The Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort and Spa, for example, has hired someone it terms a “cultural theme manager.” This staffer leads guests on tours and chronicles the stories behind the Native American art and artifacts on display — “almost like a museum,” according to Kramme, the property’s general manager. The Royal Sonesta Hotel in Boston offers a press backgrounder, booklet, and self-guided tour with map to highlight its collection of 600 pieces.

At the Hyatt Regency Scottsdale, which has maintained its collection since opening in 1986, a 30-page, full-color booklet is available. It includes illustrations and offers a self-guided tour, complete with map. The hotel offers a weekly guided tour of its eclectic collection, which includes large abstract paintings and sculptures, Brazilian “feather art,” an 18th-century wooden carousel horse and a primitive Eskimo soapstone carving of a bear. “Guests, as well as locals, are curious about the pieces they see on display and want to learn about them,” says Donna Reining, the property’s on-site docent. “The fact that this is such a wide-ranging collection is a realization of Hyatt’s position as a global hotel company,” she points out, “but its overarching theme is

one of contemplation. Our art consultant helped us choose and place objects from around the world that would offer a sense of discovery as guests moved throughout the public spaces.”

### Artful Considerations

Choosing what to display and where to display it, is one of the primary considerations when building any art collection. For hotels and similar public spaces, though, other factors come into play. “We’ve worked with a wide variety of hotels and resorts — from Residence Inns to Westins to five-star brands like the



Phoenician,” says Post, the art consultant. “They’re all different in what they would like to achieve with their art collection. So we sit down to discover what kind of setting the hotel is located in, what the history of the property is, who comes to stay there, and what the culture of its surrounding area is. After that,” Post continues, “we have to examine what it is they want to accomplish with their art program. This can be one of several things: to portray an image, enhance a decor, support local artists, or express corporate values. Some hotels develop a theme that they want their art, as well as their architecture and interior furnishings, to

revolve around.”

Answering these questions, preferably with the help of an art consultant, should help a property figure out what exactly it wants to collect. Next, come always-important budget concerns but — as Post has pointed out — original art needn’t be expensive. “Small hotels can think beyond large canvases,” she says. “And they can consider three-dimensional pieces like pottery and textiles or works on paper like watercolors, limited edition prints, and photographs.” Remember, too, that thousands of talented, but emerging, artists produce relatively inexpensive work — check with local galleries. Or, instead of a few dozen small pieces, maybe four or five statement pieces in the lobby and one on each floor by the elevator is what will work for you.

Placement of whatever art you purchase will indeed be your next consideration, says Post. She recommends that you start with the spot that is seen by the most guests — your lobby or reception area, say — before moving on to less-trafficked but still public spots. These include secondary lobbies, elevator areas, meeting rooms, and even spas (a new place where art is making an appearance, Post observes, in the form of tilework and high-end crafts). Got more stuff? Then it’s time to place pieces in guest rooms, always a special treat.

“You just can’t expect to buy art and hang it and leave it at that,” says Hall of Millennium Partners. “An art consultant can really help you look at the pieces in perspective as far as understanding what you want the art to accomplish and how you want it to help move people through the hotel spaces.” Hall adds that such educated eyes also aid in making art look its best. “Our consultants have really added to the impact of the work by suggesting various lighting options and by understanding what goes with what,” he says.

The upshot, says consultant Post, is not to be afraid that original art will be costly or that it’s beyond your ken. “When hotel managers and owners really give thought to how they want to present themselves and how art can enhance that presentation, an art consultant can help them realize those wishes. The art should work for you, not you for it.” ■