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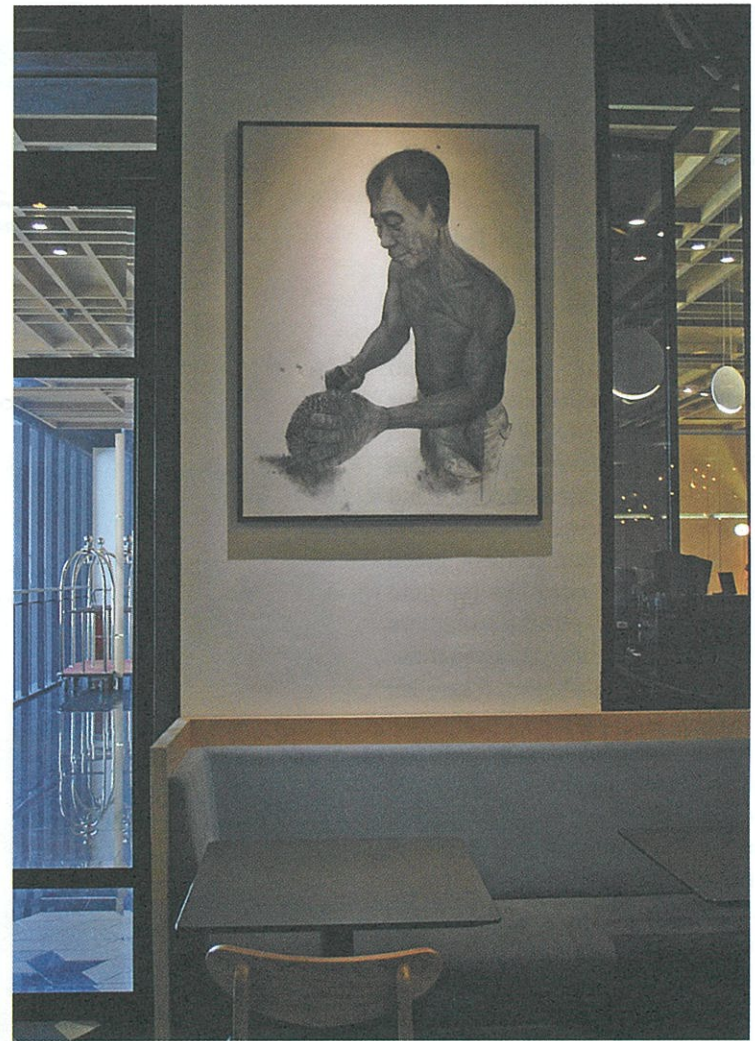
Celebrating art in all its forms

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Trading Spaces

Can hotels be the new art gallery du jour?

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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Pang Heng Khan's take on the Mandarin Oriental emblem; a portrait of a local character imbue a hotel with that sense of place; a hand-carved mural of the Banyan tree at The St. Regis Langkawi

RIGHT: Artist Henry Bong's depiction of Peranakan culture in the Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur's Mosaic

There are two types of travellers who walk through the doors of a hotel. For the first, a hotel is merely temporary accommodation – a sanctuary for the family on vacation, a room for the night on transit, a home for the week on a business trip, an anonymous hideaway for a love affair.

But for those who journey with eyes wide open, a holiday destination can be so much more.

Modern hotels aim to offer the most pleasurable experiences from all aspects. Gone are the days when in-house restaurants were notorious for bland cuisine that reflected nothing of the locality in all its colourful and flavoursome glory. Farewell to long and bare open spaces, not to mention snooze-worthy design and decor.

In addition to fascinating architecture, today's most inviting stays are adorned with incredible works of art. A mural of fiery hues wildly splashed across a lobby. A larger-than-life floral arrangement, fresh as spring in the middle of the hall. A curious installation of mixed media on one's way to the spa.

Beyond being just the perfect backdrop for Instagramming, these are cultural gifts from the hotelier, a lasting visual souvenir in the form of a quiet education to enhance your trip.

"Art is an essential part of a luxury hotel," says Frank Stoczek, general manager of Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur. "A fine hotel strives to provide its customers moments of delight whenever possible. Finding beautiful, unique pieces at various points helps to deliver such pleasant surprises to guests."

Stoczek believes that the choice of art styles can also add to the local culture and ambiance of the hotel, reinforcing its sense of place. "Having a rotating series of art and artists within parts of the hotel, such as what we have at the Mandarin Grill, also keeps the venue looking fresh and provides diners with ever-changing art to appreciate while dining."

In a sense, hotel owners can play a key role in fostering art appreciation. Stoczek adds: "They are responsible for securing

appropriate pieces to be displayed throughout the property. That said, unless the owner is a true art aficionado, the selection is best left up to a designer who can select the right pieces to complement the overall design."

He reveals that hotels normally utilise art consultants or interior designers to find artists that best fit the hotel image. "The artist must have a repertoire of suitable works and be genuinely interested in creating such a commission. Their heart must be in their work and not view the job as a task that must be done in between their true love of creating their own original art."

Once an artist has been selected for commissioned pieces, they are carefully briefed on the intent of the artwork. "If there are any areas or aspects to avoid, then it is up to the artist to do their thing. After the artist has been appointed, it is essential that the owner does not get involved to change or modify the artist's work."

Stoczek is confident that hotels are a great platform for art as well as the artists behind them, simply because they provide the perfect environment for showcasing. "And one that is safe, secure, well displayed and open to viewing to a large number of guests. Well-chosen and well-crafted artwork reflects upon the hotel and also the artists."

Stimulating Environment

For Kenny Tai, director of Beremi Holdings and owner of The Kuala Lumpur Journal, artwork captures the guests' imagination and instils curiosity. "It presents opportunities for engagement and discussion amongst themselves and with hotel staff."

Art is a big part of the brand identity at The Kuala Lumpur Journal and is literally inspired by its surrounding in Bukit Bintang. Think photographs of historic local landmarks hung majestically in the bedrooms and paintings of vintage stamps or childhood



ABOVE: Moments in music line the walls of a meeting room in The Kuala Lumpur Journal

RIGHT: Paintings of traditional landmarks redirect focus to Langkawi amid the Moorish interiors of The St. Regis Langkawi



games such as Pop Pop snappers on the walls. "We look for spaces to place or install art where guests can take their time to view the works," says Tai, who is especially proud of the reimaged barber-shop stripes in the lobby.

One of the key differences in an independent hotel like The Kuala Lumpur Journal is the freedom to create a unique guest experience. "That expression is normally a reflection of the owner's taste and preference. The creation of The Kuala Lumpur Journal has taught me a greater appreciation for the works of a number of local artists, and I wanted to share that."

Tai explored many ways to integrate the artwork into his hotel. "We wanted unique pieces that captured the spirit and energy of the city. None embodied this more than the work of Malaysian photographer Che' Mat. His stunning images captured the essence of life in the city and I'm ever so grateful that he agreed to work with us."

The nature of the hotel business guarantees a constant stream of guests from all over the world, and Tai is especially interested in how they bring with them different perspectives and tastes.

"Each piece of artwork resonates differently with each individual," he notes. "It is great exposure for the artists who might not get the attention outside of the confines of an exhibition or a gallery, and it is my hope to create more opportunities for engagement between artists and the public."

Inspired Moments

Christophe Victor, executive assistant manager of The St. Regis Langkawi, has also observed a new breed of travellers

who prefer experiential stays. "Guests are evolving and art enhances their experience aesthetically," he muses.

At The St. Regis Langkawi, a vibrant collection showcases insight into the culture of the island. "It helps spark conversation and curiosity. Although the resort has a colonial and Moorish interior, the artwork reminds guests of their natural island paradise surroundings."

According to Victor, the St. Regis brand has always honoured the spirit of its visionary founder, John Jacob Astor IV, who built the original St. Regis Hotel in New York as the finest expression of art and architecture. "Today, St. Regis hotels and resorts around the world celebrate original artworks to inspire guests. Appreciation is further fostered through workshops and exhibitions."

Artists at The St. Regis Langkawi are all locals, commissioned to showcase Malaysian from nostalgic *kampung* houses with traditional *attap* and fishermen casting their nets into the azure Andaman, to the backdrop of wooden *kelong* over calm waters and the thriving flora and fauna of the Unesco Global Geopark. Here, one will discover the bold abstract strokes of Kevin Loo, the vibrant and textured canvases of Jack Ting as well as the intricately detailed water colours of Ch'ng Kiah Kiean.

"Hotels make a great platform to support artist and educate the local community of the appreciation of art," says Victor. "That said, it is also a great way to introduce the resort and its location where history and culture are showcased in an artistic manner."

In short, giving the space, and all its luxurious trappings, a much-needed soul.

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