

## The Big Trend in Hotel Art

Leading properties around the globe are spending millions to install museum-quality works that are architectural in scale.

By Alexandra Peers | April 2, 2019

When the Peninsula Hong Kong hotel installed its newest sculpture last week, it took 72 people—and two cranes—to complete the task. Artist Janet Echelman’s swaying 130-foot-high net of fiber embracing the building’s façade is enough of a happening that lounge chairs have been added for viewers to stop and enjoy the view.

There’s a new wave in hotel art, unprecedented in scale and in ambition. A handful of properties are betting that, when marketing luxury, the best way to set yourself apart is to offer emblematic and totemic contemporary art experiences. Think a three-stories-high weeping cartoon character set seaside in Bermuda. Or a Damien Hirst bronze headless giant, taller than most Ferris wheels, that debuts in a Vegas hotel swimming pool this week. Or a one-ton metal horse galloping across the top deck of a cruise ship. In a break from the past, many artworks being installed now at hotels around the world don’t hang on the walls, aren’t always by household-name artists, and aren’t conventionally decorative. But for sheer impact, they are spectacular.



Close-up of Janet Echelman’s *Earthtime 1.26* at the Peninsula Hong Kong, part of the brand’s “Art in Resonance” program. Photo: Courtesy of Peninsula Hotels

For its new “Art in Resonance” program, the Peninsula has commissioned massive works that are almost architectural. The initiative, timed with the Art Basel Hong Kong art fair, is “global in scale,” notes art consultant Bettina Prentice, who co-curated the project with Isolde Brielmaier and says Peninsula plans to send some of the pieces to its properties in Paris, New York, Istanbul, and London over a period of years. In addition to Echelman, initial artists include Ivan Navarro, Timothy Paul Myers, and Shanghai collective MINAX, with more to come.

Such campaigns are not cheap, but they serve a purpose. At Palms Casino Resort in Las Vegas, amid a \$690 million renovation, general manager Jon Gray is surprisingly candid about the 18-year-old off-strip resort’s desperate need for reinvention. It needed to create a completely “brand-new experience—we had to.”

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The property's new art-collecting owners opted to launch a "From Dust to Gold" campaign that conceded the hotel and even its famed Ghost Bar nightclub had become, well, dusty. As Gray chats against the backdrop of Richard Prince's huge, spooky *Vegas Nurse* painting in a hotel bar, it's clear things are changing. The property is now swimming in fine art, including some seven-figure Hirst shark tanks in the lobby and in the bespoke Hirst suite.



Left to right: The newly unveiled *Demon* sculpture by Damien Hirst, at the Palms Casino Resort in Las Vegas; Timothy Paul Myers's *Alizarin*, in the lobby of the Peninsula Hong Kong, part of "Art in Resonance.", Photo: Courtesy of Peninsula Hotels

Integrating art throughout a property isn't about impressing guests, says Esin Güral Argat, from Turkish-based Gürallar Group. Instead it's about identity, "uniqueness," and "authenticity," explains Argat, the founder of the recently opened Joali Maldives resort, herself a collector of contemporary sculpture. The resort's slew of huge works are both site-specific—created for the property—and, often, made of local materials. At Joali, some artworks float on the water, and guests can dive down 40 feet to see artist Misha Kahn's underwater coral sculpture garden. That sets the resort strikingly apart, even in the region's literal sea of ultraluxe properties.

This kind of collecting is taking place mostly at properties that have just redesigned or changed hands, that are expanding, or that seek to court a younger demographic. (Art = millennials, so the theory goes in certain circles.) But even hospitality companies that have been amassing fairly sophisticated art collections for years—Celebrity Cruises recently picked up work by artist Xavier Veilhan, French star of the last Venice Biennale—are now commissioning much bigger pieces, too.

Sometimes hotels are bringing in large-scale works for prosaic reasons. At one property, the curator says that in the past guests often didn't realize the importance or rarity of what they were looking at—or walking past, or posing for selfies in front of. Big art is harder to damage—and to overlook.

Luxury hotels using fine art to signal to guests their exclusivity is nothing new, of course. Steve Wynn inaugurated the Bellagio in 1998 with masterpieces, and Ian Schrager was a successful early adopter of the belief that contemporary art instantly signaled a certain style to guests. But the success of the strategy also handicapped it: In recent years it seemed that every European boutique hotel had posthumous prints by Miro on the walls and every resort a Dale Chihuly in the lobby—and all were calling themselves “Art Hotels.”



Left to right: A statue by KAWS at the Hamilton Princess & Beach Club, in Bermuda, Photo: Courtesy of Hamilton Princess & Beach Club; Artist Misha Kahn's underwater coral sculpture garden at Joali Maldives, Photo: Nuri Yilmazer

So what the players are adding today is different. In the summer of 2016, the Hamilton Princess & Beach Club, in Bermuda, placed in front of its 134-year-old picturesque pink home a wooden figurine, head in its hands, by artist KAWS. “It triggers a lot of reactions because it is an altered version of the traditional Mickey (Mouse) figure, who has always looked the same with that happy expression on his face,” says Dana Cooper, a docent of the hotel’s huge art collection. “Here, he looks very different and people are baffled by it and want to know why—or they may have their own reasons why. It’s a great conversation piece.”

Indeed, the Big Hotel Art trend seems to be taking off because, frankly, it works; it’s memorable, and it adds a certain coolness and credibility, plus interest from the wealthy travelers who do something of an art-world grand tour circuit. It’s also good for publicity, both professional and guest-generated through social media.

So step aside, overwater bungalows. There’s a new highly photographable amenity in town.