

By Tara Mastrelli

## Hotels are finding a likely partner in the arts

# la vie boehm

Many hotel designers and owners are finding art to be an inspired way to connect with the local community and culture, add individuality to guestroom and public space design, and in some cases, create a parallel business as a gallery space.

"In the past, art has been totally overlooked in hotels," says Brad Wilson, co-founder and COO of the James Hotel Group. "People are more interested in their spaces today. I think art is a natural extension of that."

"Art is something that a lot of developers are leaning toward associating with," agrees Eddie Haddad, founder and president of HUE Lofts, a lifestyle development in the emerging Las Vegas arts district. "Rather than fads like



*Clockwise from top:* Dining at the Hotel Max in Seattle; guestroom doors showcase the work of local photographers at the Hotel Max; and an installation piece of vintage suitcases and blown-up photography define the lobby at the James Chicago.

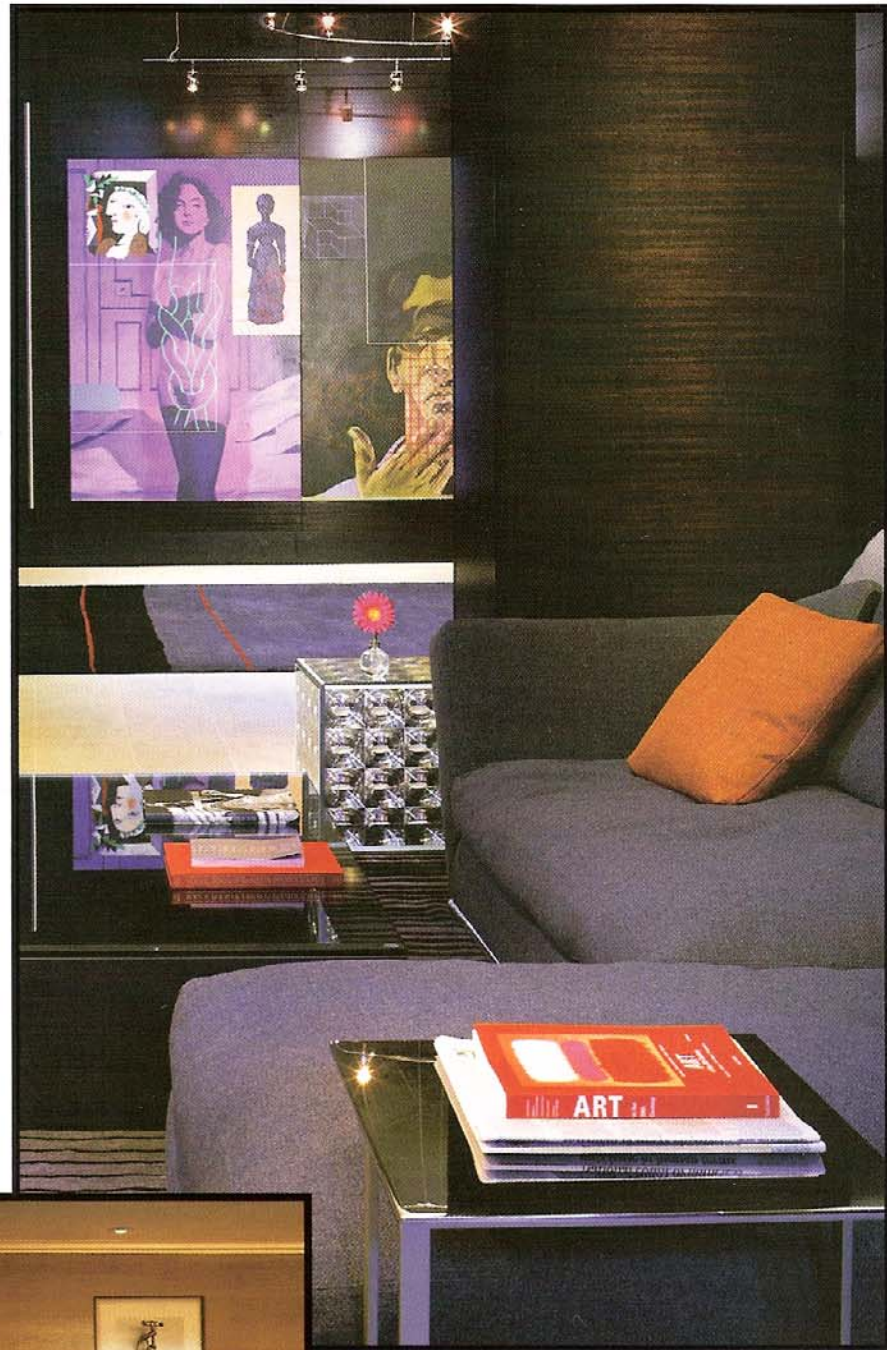
cigars, art is something that literally can be everlasting by simply changing components in it.”

### Local Color

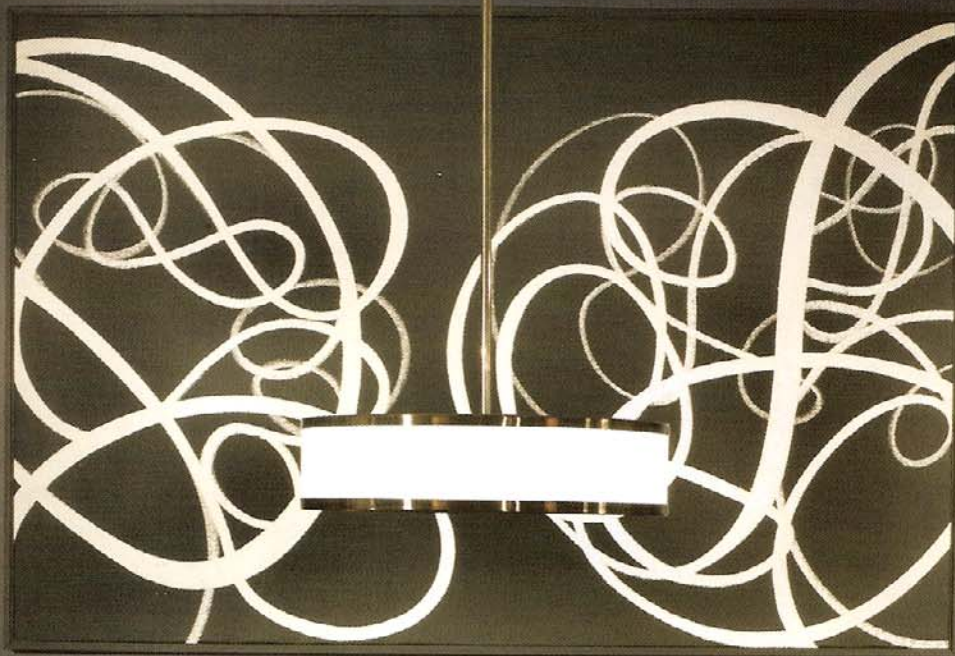
In the struggle to create an authentic experience and to give back to the community, hotels are finding a win-win situation in partnering with their local arts community. At Hotel Max in Seattle, for instance, designer Denise Corso of Portland-based Corso Staicoff used guestroom doors as an unexpected avenue to showcase community artists. Nine photographers were each given a floor of doors to display their work: for instance, the third floor features photographs of Seattle street performers and the fifth floor shows shots of the city’s grunge music scene. “There has been a huge increase in the last four years in photography,” says Tracy Chevalier, vice president of Soho Myriad, an Atlanta-based art consulting company specializing in the hospitality market. “For a long time photography was really not thought of as being art, but now that’s changed.”

Guestroom interiors at Hotel Max provide a neutral backdrop that Corso calls “consciously receded” to display commissioned paintings from 30 emerging Seattle artists. (Chevalier says she’s seen about a 25 percent increase in the number of requests for localized art.) The entire collection is branded and called “Maximalism,” and the hotel published a book by the same name. “I don’t think design alone is going to hold hotels anymore,” Corso says. “A lamp isn’t going to stick in a guest’s mind.”

Boutique hotels aren’t the only ones going local. For its first location, the James, the über-hip chain from Wilson (part of the founding team of W Hotels) and



Left: David Burke's Primehouse at the James Chicago. Above: Hotel Max's lobby.



*Left:* Playful art defines a suite at the St. Regis San Francisco designed by Yabu Pushelberg.

Danny Errico (co-founder of Equinox gyms), partnered with the arts community in Chicago. Guestrooms feature an eclectic collection of fine art and photography, installation pieces pepper the lobby, and a video art installation projecting a cartoon view of the city is displayed in the interior courtyard. “We wanted to do authentically good art and produce something that is at the level of the rest of the hotel, not just an afterthought,” Wilson says.

### Gallery Guestrooms

There are a few options when designing with art in mind: go minimalist like Hotel Max and provide a neutral back-

drop; follow the James’ lead and create a residential feel; or go full out like the Renaissance Arts Hotel in New Orleans and make the entire hotel a work of art. “The guestroom from the inception are a work of art in themselves,” says Thomas Foti, general manager of the hotel. Striped fabric headboards, graphic carpets, and original exposed brick in the guestrooms reinforce the hotel’s signature sound byte: “thank you for sleeping in our contemporary art gallery.”

However art is presented, the potential remains the same: hotels are positioned to become the next generation art gallery. “Statistically speaking art venues and museums are the most widely visited venues in

America," Haddad says. "A 100 million visit a year, that's more than all sporting events combined. It's an important part of our society." And it's a market that's just beginning to be tapped by hospitality.

"It [hotels] is a business that most retailers would be envious of," says Helen Bulwik, president of Pacific Art Group, a newly launched company providing custom art programs for the hospitality industry. "Customers are in that facility for 10, 12, 14 hours a day."



### Redefining Hip

The industry trendsetter himself, Ian Schrager says it's over for design hotels "with their slick, spiffy, over-styled interiors." For his recently debuted reincarnation of the Manhattan's Gramercy Park Hotel, he partnered with artist Julian Schnabel to create an experience that he likens to being inside an artist's studio or home. Surreal contemporary pieces mingle with centuries-old furnishings in the lobby and public spaces; each of the 185 rooms has its own vivid Renaissance color palette and distinctive collection of art and objects; and the lobby acts as a gallery for the masses, exhibiting 20th century masterpieces by artists like Andy Warhol, Damien Hirst, Richard Prince, and of course, Julian Schnabel.

"I sensed a paradigm shift. Nothing can be 'hip' or 'underground' anymore because everything is out there instantly and goes mainstream," Schrager says. "It's a complete left turn for me and different than anything we have ever done before, and I expect it will wind up being a prototype for the hotel industry the same way my first hotel was 25 years ago."

Could be, but Chevalier thinks new printing techniques will revolutionize the way we view art in the very near future. "Technology is really pushing the way we produce art," she says. "I don't think the images will change as much as what it goes on—art printed on aluminum, on Plexiglas, on fabric, photography on wood. You can print anything on anything these days, and that's what makes it really cool." **hd**

*Left:* A print from Pacific Art Group. *Top:* Heritage Hotels, a company focused on creating local experiences, selects authentic art. Pictured is its *Nativo Lodge* in Albuquerque, New Mexico.