

ITINERARIES



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON HASSAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

From left, "The Devil Wears Nada" by Abby Goodman, photographs by Nicolas Ruel and "Rising Stays," also by Abby Goodman, on display at the Renaissance New York Midtown Hotel.

Abandoning Cookie-Cutter Décor, Hotels Tap Local Artists

An Upgrade In Ambience To Please Guests

By MARTHA C. WHITE

Seeking to appeal to guests' desire for new experiences and stand out in a competitive market, hotel brand managers are mining their local art communities for everything from inspiration to installations.

"I think the travelers today are exposed to more," said Dan Vinh, vice president for global marketing of Marriott's lifestyle portfolio. "When they travel, they want an experience that they can talk about, that they can bring back and share stories about."

Even young adults looking for a cheap place to stay and business travelers looking for a place to recharge themselves and their devices overnight have higher expectations.

The evolution in how managers view hotel artwork is similar to the shift toward showcasing more local ingredients in hotel restaurants, Mr. Vinh said. In their restaurants, he said, hotels have begun striving to create an environment that is part of the local community, and now that's happening in the general hotel ambience.

"I think it's all part of the same movement to help the guest experience something new," Mr. Vinh said.

For example, the Renaissance New York Midtown Hotel opened in March and features works by New York City artists that riff on the hotel's garment district location. The artist Andre Woolery created a work consisting of red buttons arranged onto a canvas to create an abstract design, evoking the large sculpture in the district of a needle threading a button.

Other major hotel brands increasingly are making local art a more prominent fixture. When it opened in 2011, the Omni Dallas Hotel was considered an anomaly with its 6,500 pieces of original art, including work by 150 local artists. Two years later, the brand repeated the initiative, albeit on a somewhat smaller scale, when it opened the Omni Nashville Hotel. Now, it plans to do the same with hotels coming in the next two years in Atlanta and Louisville, Ky.

"People are really wanting to collect these experiences," said



"Attitude" by Andre Woolery in the 6th-floor main lobby of the Renaissance. Hotels are trying to personalize their guests' experiences with local art.

Jonathan Frölich, vice president for global brands at Hyatt Hotels' Andaz brand. "They're looking to be immersed in local culture."

A focus on local art is woven into the Andaz brand image. The Andaz Fifth Avenue hotel in New York City held a competition for art students in the city to select works that would decorate the hallways of the guest floors. And at the Andaz in Savannah, Ga., some pieces on display are the work of one of the hosts at the hotel restaurant, the abstract and pop-art painter Jor Smith Michel.

Hotel guests often ask about his art, Mr. Michel said, sometimes without realizing he is the artist.

Since the Andaz began displaying his work at the beginning of the year, Mr. Michel estimated that he had sold more than 90 works to hotel customers. "Know-

ing that I'm a local and when they kind of get to know me, they're more interested," he said.

Matthew Whitaker, director of Canvas Art Consultants, which helps hotels around the world curate art collections that reflect the local culture, said hotel customers seemed to have higher expectations for their stays.

"As society becomes more and more global, people want to appreciate and connect to the local," he said. "It helps to bring things down into a human scale."

Experts say the roots of the trend — a preference for experiences over objects, a penchant for tagging and bragging on social media — started with millennials. But travelers of all generations are taking note and boosting online to their friends.

"People want to Instagram.

People want to tweet about it," said Gavi Wolf, a founder of Indiewalls, an online marketplace that acts as a middleman between independent artists and a growing clientele of hotel brand managers and designers, including the Marriott brands Renaissance and AC.

While many prominent examples of hotels' investing in local art are at the high end of the spectrum, lower-priced chains are not ignoring the trend. Graduate Hotels, a six-hotel chain that started in 2014 whose target market is college towns, uses local art to help it stand out from comparably priced competitors like Best Western and Quality Inn.

Ari Grazi, Mr. Wolf's business partner, said original art was a good way for hoteliers to make space look good without spending

a lot. "Artwork is a relatively low-cost way to make a big impact," he said.

The metaphorical elephant sculpture in the room is Airbnb and other popular services that let travelers rent space in people's homes. Since travelers have alternatives to a cookie-cutter room, hotels are realizing they need to deliver more than the same design from coast to coast.

"Rather than things that are mass-produced and come across as a little uninspired, people are looking more for ideas that speak to them as individuals," said Ave Bradley, global senior vice president for design and creative director at Kimpton Hotels and Restaurants.

Ms. Bradley said Kimpton guests frequently wanted to know about the local art on display at its

properties, some even asking where they could buy it.

And Mr. Wolf said more hotels today viewed design and décor as part of their brand image.

"We've seen a large shift in the way the hospitality market has really thought about the design of their space. They really need to create strong brands around who they are to differentiate themselves," he said.

The Art, an independent hotel, opened in Denver last year with a focus on contemporary art, like an installation of 22,000 LED lights at the entrance. The hotel's general manager, David Bodette, said he expected the hotel's commitment to local art to grow in the future.

"The more sophisticated the traveler," he said, "the more sophisticated we need to be."