

MASTER SUITES

LUXURY HOTELS ARE BECOMING FINE ART SPACES TO RIVAL MANY GALLERIES

BY DALYA ALBERGE

He is a former winner of the Turner Prize and represented in collections worldwide, but if you tell Sir Antony Gormley his art sends you to sleep, he won't be offended. That is assuming you are referring to the "inhabitable sculpture" that he created for a hotel bedroom, rather than one of his other artworks.

Gormley, best known for his "Angel of the North" sculpture in Gateshead, received the commission from the new Beaumont Hotel in Mayfair, London. He came up with an oak-lined bedroom — titled "Room" — which fills the void of his monumental crouching figure on the building's exterior. Since it opened last year, "Room" has had no shortage of guests prepared to pay £2,500 for a night there.

It is a bold statement piece and one that reflects a trend among top hotels worldwide to fill their spaces with original art. They are acquiring paintings and

sculptures that would not disgrace a public gallery and which, even if you can't afford to stay there, you can see free of charge or for the price of a coffee in the bar.

Alex Toledano, a Paris-based art consultant whose clients include Ritz-Carlton hotels, says: "Hotels, especially hotel owners, recognise that they have been spending a decent amount on art for many years without it doing anything special for their property. They've realised that the money could be used not only to tell an interesting narrative about their properties but also to make them more memorable."

He adds that hotels used to purchase decorative art from "manufacturing companies" that churned out works in bulk. "Now you're starting to see the desire of hotels to ask more of the artwork to make their property unique, rather than resembling many others," he adds.

There is also a move away from abstract art, previously considered the "least offensive" form, he says. "Now, hotels are willing to take more of a risk. That is what is making art in hotels exciting right now. Our clients are asking for a diversity of art that we wouldn't have expected a couple of years ago."

He has been purchasing contemporary art for the Ritz-Carlton's second hotel in Kazakhstan, due to open in 2017 in the capital, Astana. He also acquired an historical collection for The Lanesborough in London. "Every single room is different from the next," he says. "We sourced all the art, bought it, framed it and restored a lot of it." The focus was on art from the 1830s and earlier. "We imagined a wealthy English family living in London at the time The Lanesborough was built."

Along with English portraits and military and hunting scenes, the hotel has two paintings by Sir Joshua Reynolds, the 18th-century master. His portraits of a Captain John Smith and his unnamed wife greet visitors.

Some hotels want to establish a sense of place through their art, though not necessarily through local artists. In Norway, a luxury establishment in Oslo called The Thief has three original collages inspired by national and cultural symbols and created by British Pop artist Sir Peter Blake, best known for his iconic sleeve design for The Beatles' *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. The collages, which include depictions of the quay in Bergen and folk dancing, decorate the hotel's penthouse suite. ➤

Bruce McLean's "Concept Menu", right, on display at 45 Park Lane



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'I LIKE THE FACT THE WORK IS NOT IN A GALLERY. YOU LOOK AT IT IN AN INFORMAL WAY'

The Thief, whose guests have reportedly included Bill Gates, the American technology entrepreneur, is situated in an area that was once home to criminals and shady goings-on. Today, it is a centre for contemporary art and the hotel's exhibitions are curated by Sune Nordgren, former director of Norway's National Museum of Art. Exhibits include loans from the nearby Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art and Petter Stordalen, a Norwegian collector, hotel tycoon and owner of The Thief. Changing displays include modern and contemporary artists, from Andy Warhol to Gormley.

Richard Prince's painting "The Horse Thief" is in the reception area.

Scottish artist Bruce McLean, whose work is held by Britain's Tate galleries, is among artists chosen to decorate entire floors — bedrooms and public spaces — at 45 Park Lane, a new Dorchester Collection hotel in London. He selected large semi-abstract prints — he would not have wanted to create something especially for a hotel, he says.

Asked about his work being viewed by a captive audience in a bedroom, he adds: "I like the fact that the work is put not in a gallery space. You look at something in an informal way. You're not told, 'it's meaningful because it's in the Tate'. You can look at it — or not."

He is among high-profile artists who work closely with Gillian Duke, managing director of CCA Galleries, which supplies high-quality prints to international hotels. They include 45 Park Lane, where the art programme extends to offering guests personal exhibition tours by artists and even painting lessons with them.

She says that when hotels are refurbished, art is sometimes seen as a last-minute add-on, "missing the point that the art and artefacts — the things that go in last — are usually what make the hotel what it is".

Roy Ackerman heads an art consultancy, Tadema Studios, whose specialisms include hotels. Commenting on art that hotels previously acquired, he says: "It was normally cheapskate art brought in, quite a lot from the Far East. It was pretty ordinary stuff." He curates art at 45 Park Lane, regularly briefing staff on the work with one of the artists. "There are changing exhibitions, so a new artist comes in once a quarter. It makes it interesting for the staff as well as for the guests," he says.

At the Beaumont, Gormley's artwork is within a suite of rooms finished in the hotel's deco style. White marble



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PHOTOS: XXXXXXXXX



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steps lead to a threshold divided by a thick black curtain, creating a sense of theatre. Walk through them and you enter Gormley's "Room", which he wants "to bridge the gap between sacred and domestic space". You are cocooned in a space that resembles a cross between a sauna and a garden shed, with glows of discreet lighting and a high ceiling. A large window is placed too high for guests to see more than the sky.

Overlooking Brown Hart Gardens in Mayfair, the hotel was converted from a former garage, built in 1926 and most recently occupied by car rental company Avis. It is the first hotel of Jeremy King and Chris Corbin, business partners behind a string of justifiably popular London restaurants, including The Wolseley on Piccadilly.

As the Beaumont was a listed building, the Gormley project needed approval from Westminster council, the Grosvenor Estate (the ultimate landlord) and English Heritage, the building preservation and listing agency now known as Historic England. King says after initial reservations, it was rubber-stamped. "It's an interesting parable. Everybody is scared of the unknown," he says. "If you look back on the big public manifestations of art — in Paris, the Eiffel Tower was derided when it was first built and the Louvre Pyramid was loathed by many — after a bit of time people begin to appreciate them."

King had his own doubts, though, about agreeing to Gormley's suggestion that a television should not be in the room. "My commercial head thought this is commercial suicide," he says. But he felt it was in keeping with the work itself — taking a guest from a world where "we're constantly beset by distraction — electronic, social, whatever it might be — into a haven where you can lose yourself only 200 yards from Oxford Street".

He adds: "People sleep incredibly well there. To achieve profound sleep means that not only is it an aesthetic success, but a practical one too." (Guests can, if they choose, watch TV in a separate sitting room.)

Asked about hotels buying more original art, he says: "The danger is that they use the art to attract attention, rather than to enhance the experience. You find that a lot of it becomes too narcissistic, as opposed to harmonious for the clients' experience."

Possibly the finest top-class hotel with an art collection is La Colombe d'Or in St Paul de Vence in France. It

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boasts art by 20th-century masters who frequented this charming Provençal establishment, often exchanging their work in return for a stay or a few meals.

There is a Matisse portrait of a woman and a Picasso still life of flowers. "As we are not a museum, they always considered artworks as part of the house, so there are no exact titles," the hotel says. "The Picasso was given to Paul Roux [the original owner in the 1920s]. Picasso came to see him with two paintings under his arms and left with one." Works by other regular guests include ceramics by Georges Braque (by the pool) and Fernand Léger ("La jeune fille et l'oiseau", on the terrace).

Among the grand hotels of Europe with notable fine art collections are The Dolder Grand in Zürich, Switzerland, which has paintings and sculptures by masters such as Camille Pissarro and Salvador Dalí.

American art dominates US establishments such as New York's Gramercy Park Hotel, which is decorated with works by Warhol, among others. The hotel says the works it displays are "constantly changing, ensuring guests never experience the same hotel twice".

Erin Hoover is vice-president of global brand design at Starwood Hotels, which includes the Westin, Sheraton and Le Méridien names. "Art is becoming more and more important for hotels, just as it is for other kinds of buildings and public spaces," she says. "A great example is the soon-to-be opened Westin Denver International Airport. The city of Denver requires all public buildings to contribute 1 per cent of their construction dollars on large projects to artwork. As a result, the hotel features \$5m-worth of artwork and installations."

While many a public museum would be envious of such a budget, security is a concern for hotel groups. The art consultant Toledano advises his clients to use special hangings to prevent works being removed. "You have to have special tools. If you tried to take them off, you'd probably rip the wall off," he says. ☺



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