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Hip Hotels

Artful Lodging

In stark contrast to the cookie-cutter nature of many large chain properties, art-themed hotels strive to be unique. In doing so, they induce a creative atmosphere for groups and often reflect the flavor of the local community.

Art in Motion

The recently opened Hotel Palomar in Chicago, designed by Orlando Diaz-Azcuy, distinguishes itself from other local boutique properties with art playing a key role in the decor of the hotel. The hotel is located in the River North neighborhood, which has the highest concentration of art galleries in the U.S. outside of Manhattan, according to Denise C. Schultz, director of sales and marketing for the hotel.

Each of Kimpton Hotel and Restaurants' Palomar hotels incorporates the theme Art in Motion, taking shape in different forms—visual art, dance, literature, home design—depending on the hotel.

"Each hotel pulls Art in Motion from the community it resides in," Schultz says. "Hotel Palomar in Philadelphia focuses Art in Motion on the architectural aspect because they are in a historic building. We picked visual art—painting, photography—because we are in the River North neighborhood."

Two Chicago themes play heavily into the artwork exhibited throughout the hotel: the 1893 Columbian Exposition and Fair, known as the Chicago's World's Fair, and the city's jazz and blues culture. Art in the hotel's 261 guest rooms sticks to the historic theme. In addition, walls are adorned with plaster friezes representing the World's Fair, while the hallways are lined with reproductions of original Chicago Blues Festival posters.

Meeting rooms are artfully named as well, such as The Gallery Ballroom, The Abstract Boardroom, The Mosaic Suite and The Portrait Suite. Even food and beverage partakes of the art theme with catering options that include Rhythm Buffet, Harmony Buffet, Watercolor Buffet and Chicago Art Institute Buffet.

"We've taken our theme and tried to figure out how to wrap ourselves around the community," Schultz says. "We want business, but we want to give back to the community."

That goal has become a reality with the hotel's partnership with a local nonprofit organization, CAPE (Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education) that supports arts-based education in the city's public schools. Palomar aims to spread awareness of CAPE's mission through a long-term partnership, which includes displaying local students' artwork in the hotel, hosting teachers, artists and administrators affiliated with CAPE and involving guests in support for the organization.

"We approached CAPE in commissioning some students to do artwork for the hotel. In turn, we do things for CAPE, such as an annual fundraiser," Schultz says.

CAPE's artists and teachers can be hired to conduct private art classes with groups.

Artistic Northwest

Also among the growing number of art-themed properties is Seattle's Hotel Max, which features original works from 30 local artists and displays more than 350 paintings and photographs in the lobby, guest rooms and corridors.

"There are so many amazing creative artists in that region and many relatively unknown that allowed us to tap into a variety of work," says Howard Jacobs, president and CEO for Portland, Ore.-based Provenance Hotels. "It's fresh and inspiring for us as a company. We had 30 Seattle artists do different works in every room. We took each floor—nine floors total—and gave local photographers an entire floor and wrapped exteriors of guest room doors in their photographs. Every floor has a different theme."

One floor features a Parisian still-life theme, another exhibits photographs of the Seattle grunge rock scene.

"It's a fun process," Jacobs says. "We see guests wandering from floor to floor to experience the photography."

The hotel's main boardroom also showcases original paintings from local artists.

"People tell us, 'It's such a creative environment to have meetings in there.' It's not bland and homogenous," Jacobs says.

The hotel plans to offer meet-the-artist events on property, rotating its base of 30 artists who will present additional artworks in the lobby area. There is also the option for groups to bring in one of the emerging artists for a private event or have an artist create a theme with their artwork.

Planners can arrange for attendees to receive the hotel's art book, which profiles the Northwest-based artists. They can also arrange for artists to sign their page that represents their work.

Each of Provenance Hotels' five properties sports a different theme. Hotel Lucia in Portland, Ore., exhibits over 300 original photographs from Pulitzer Prize-winning and former White House photographer David Hume Kennerly. The 680 photos of political figures and entertainers are on display throughout the hotel's public spaces and 127 guest rooms.

In Tacoma, Wash., Hotel Murano focuses on glassworks. As Tacoma is the birthplace of renowned glass artist Dale Chihuly, the hotel exhibits works from Chihuly as well as other glass artists, with a different theme on each floor.

Art plays a role in the hotel's 50,000 square feet of meeting space, including two large glass Viking boats that hang suspended from the ceiling over the ballroom.

The hotel also works with Tacoma's Museum of Glass, where many of the artists featured at the hotel offer glass-blowing exhibitions and exhibit other works.

"The artists stay with us when they are doing a presentation for the hotel or the Museum of Glass," Jacobs explains. "That allows us to offer a meet-the-artist opportunity in-house."

Hotel deLuxe, also in Portland, Ore., focuses on a Hollywood theme, with each floor featuring a different legendary film director. The hallways and rooms are decorated with photographs taken from film sets.

Southwest Inspiration

In Scottsdale, Ariz., Westin Kierland Resort & Spa's signature restaurant, Deseo, doubles as an art gallery, showcasing the work of Cuban artist and resort associate Nelson Garcia-Miranda. Garcia settled in Phoenix in 1999 seeking political exile from his homeland, Cuba. His first job at the Westin was as a steward at a time when he barely spoke English.

"As he learned to speak more, we learned more about his career as an artist in Cuba," says Sally Hilow, director of catering for the property. "That's what makes it so fascinating. We had him here working for us and we had no idea what he had."

His vibrant abstract artworks, which depict tales of the Cuban countryside, are displayed on large canvasses inside the restaurant. The restaurant can be rented by groups and offers a 90-seat main section and private room for 12.

"The themes are interesting and specific. He grew up in Cuba; it's typically reminiscent of scenes he saw over there—how he translates that from his mind to the painting," Hilow says. "Once you read his story and realize what he's painting it's fascinating to watch him."

Garcia-Miranda sets up shop regularly in the Deseo lounge for what is called Unwind Hour, as he puts paint to canvas for art demonstrations.

Groups can request his live art for private events as well. Garcia-Miranda also custom paints champagne or wine glasses, candleholders and small canvasses to be used as gift items for groups or for purchase by attendees.

"We have had him take a plate and paint the menu on the plate so each guest has a custom menu for takeaway," Hilow says.

Miami Display

Also new and sporting an art theme, Miami's Hotel Urbano-Brickell partnered with Art Fusion Galleries, a 4,000-square-foot gallery in the Miami Design District. Representing an international roster of contemporary artists as well as local talents, director and curator of Art Fusion Galleries, William Braemer, along with co-curator Martha Dominguez, display new exhibits introduced seasonally at Hotel Urbano's art receptions.

"We have a partnership with Art Fusion Galleries to display art in the lobby and hallways," says Cecilia Orbegozo, director of sales for the hotel. "Everybody loves the vivid colors. It makes the hotel look fresh and new, and local artists have a chance to display their artwork to different clientele."

The artwork changes every three months, with an opening reception for each new artist exhibited.

The paintings and sculptures, which are displayed in the hallways, meeting rooms, fitness center and pool area, are for sale. Artwork also graces the meeting rooms, which total 1,650 square feet. Local artists can come in to meet groups either in the meeting space or at the poolside lounge, which holds up to 150.

Groups can arrange private meetings with the artists and arrange tours to the gallery itself, which can be used as an off-site venue. The gallery also participates in the monthly Second Saturday Art Gallery Walk.

There is also an option to purchase the artworks displayed at the hotel.

"The actual artwork may be a little pricey, but the art gallery has told us they have more affordable work over there," Orbegozo says. "Groups can find other works from the same artists displayed at the hotel art gallery as well."