

The rooms are works of art

In cosmopolitan areas, and even remote locales, some boutique hotels resemble galleries.

By **GARY LEE**
 The Washington Post

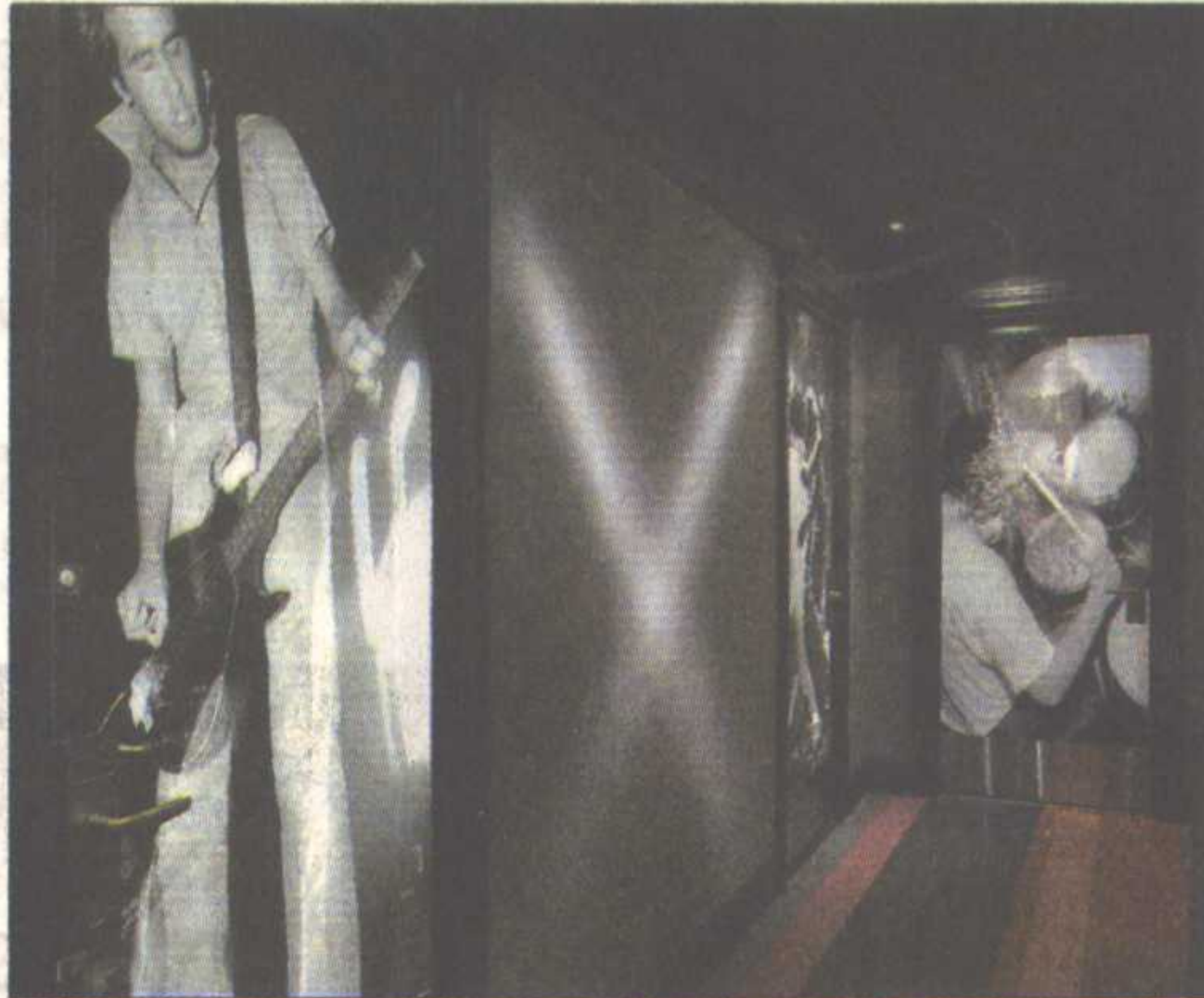
The lighting accentuates the bold mixed-media works of art hanging on walls of exposed brick. Except for the plasma television and four-poster bed with Egyptian cotton sheets, my room at the Lancaster Arts Hotel could easily pass for a downtown New York gallery.

Opened a few months ago, the 63-room hotel tucked away on a side street in Lancaster, Pa., is the latest in a new wave of art hotels: properties that combine accommodations with art displays. Like most of this breed, the Lancaster Arts Hotel has its own gallery and promotes an eclectic mix of local artists. The art adds not only aesthetic appeal but also a vibrant element that encourages guest interaction. While the phenomenon is more firmly established in Europe, it's catching on in North America. Other exceptional examples have opened in the past couple of years in San Francisco, Louisville, Toronto and Seattle.

Hotel specialists consider this marriage of fine art and stylized rooms more than a passing trend. "It seems to be expanding," said Laurent Vernhes, chief executive of Tablet Hotels, an online travel agency featuring trend-setting hotels. "In a world where new independent hotels with limited marketing budgets try to outdo each other, art will remain a powerful tool."

Of course, paintings and posters hang in most hotels. But they're mostly afterthoughts: bland prints or reproductions that do little more than cover blank walls. In art hotels, the paintings, sculpture, installations and photographs are original, and often for sale. Moreover, the art is at least an equal, and sometimes senior, partner to the lodging.

At the Hotel des Arts in San Francisco, for instance, the developers took a run-down



DAVID PHELPS/The Washington Post

Photos of grunge figures decorate the Hotel Max in Seattle, one of a growing number of hotels that feature sophisticated displays of art work.



BRIAN DONNELLY/Velocity Color

A chair at the 63-room Lancaster Arts Hotel in Pennsylvania offers a clue to the building's origins as a 19th century tobacco warehouse.

boardinghouse and gave a motley mix of artists an unrestricted mission to make over the guest rooms. The result has the feel of a high-energy gallery that offers overnight accommodations.

While art hotels in Europe are often pricey, their North American counterparts usually offer good value. At the Hotel des Arts, for example, doubles start at \$99 on weekends, a bargain for a prime downtown location

in San Francisco.

Travelers have warmed to the concept. Since its 2005 opening, the Hotel Max in Seattle has been a hot address for visitors. Reservations for the fifth floor, lined with photographs of Kurt Cobain and other iconic grunge figures, must be made weeks in advance in high season, says public relations director Dina Nishioka. At the 21C Museum Hotel in Louisville, guests roam the 9,000-square-foot atrium filled with New Age installations, a photo collage of transgendered Asians and other attention-grabbing works until the wee hours.

The art-lodging partnership has also been a boon to artists. Two years after it was renovated and reopened as an art hotel, Toronto's Gladstone has become a popular venue for Canadian artists seeking to promote themselves. With their profiles duly raised, many of the artists whose works are on exhibit in the Max in Seattle have been invited to exhibit in major galleries.

"Some of them were little-known but doing amazing work," said Tessa Papas, curator of the 300 photos and paintings at the Max. "Part of our goal was to give them exposure."