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Thinking Outside the Frame

At These Hotels, the Rooms Are Works of Art

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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 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."

Here are five of our favorite art hotels. The rates quoted are for rooms with private baths in low season.

* *21C Museum Hotel, Louisville.* Steve Wilson and his wife, Laura Brown, both Kentucky business investors and committed promoters of avant-garde art, were looking for a space to display their private art collection. Included are works by sculptor Judy Fox, video artist Bill Viola and photographer Andres Serrano. The hotel, which opened a year ago, has 91 rooms, a restaurant and bar.

But the art is the main show. And it's a spectacle, starting with the lifelike statues of pre-pubescent nude children behind the front desk, continuing to a video installation piece depicting the eyes of seven members of a blind dart-throwing team, and a series of devices set in a courtyard that shoot rings of smoke into the air. Only living American and international artists are featured.

"One of the things we want to do is provoke people, to start them thinking and talking about art," Wilson said.

The guest rooms, all spacious, have an industrial-chic decor, with exposed-brick walls and high ceilings. Original paintings and photographs adorn the walls. The beds are comfortable, with 500-thread-count cotton sheets. Docking stations for iPods and 42-inch televisions enhance the modern look.

700 W. Main St., 877-217-6400, <http://www.21cmuseumhotel.com>. Doubles start at \$129 a night.

* *Gladstone Hotel, Toronto*. After a year's renovation, this historic Georgian Romanesque property was reopened in late 2005 and quickly became a hot spot on Toronto's art scene.

The 37 guest rooms, all designed with aplomb by Toronto artists, range from zany to elegant. Some are small and come with a shared bath. Think downtown funky rather than five-star luxury. The Teen Queen room is one of the most popular. Created by artist Cecilia Berkovic, it features a pink crocheted bedspread and hot pink walls covered with teen idol posters.

Parkdale, the surrounding neighborhood, is an inviting enclave of galleries and artsy cafes. But travelers who want instant immersion in Toronto's art scene may never make it out the front door. With the paintings hanging everywhere, a constant run of art shows in the second-floor galleries, dance performances and movie showings, the place is a rich social scene. Even if nothing special is on, a lively crowd of locals gathers nearly every night at the bar.

1214 Queen St., 416-531-4635, <http://www.gladstonehotel.com>. Doubles start at \$168.

* *Lancaster Arts Hotel, Lancaster*. Originally a 19th-century tobacco warehouse, this property, with 47 rooms and 16 suites, combines ultra-modern decor with original fixtures. Public spaces and guest rooms feature wood-beamed ceilings, and many of the walls are exposed brick. The guest rooms, all larger than average, have plush beds, plasma televisions, iPod docking stations, glassed-in showers and spacious granite bathrooms. Armoires, handmade by local craftsmen, are included in the rooms.

The mix of styles carries on to the 200 or so works of art on display. The ground-floor art gallery features monthly exhibitions of works by Lancaster County artists. In February, the gallery featured mostly oil and acrylic landscapes of the Pennsylvania Dutch countryside, while the works in the lobby and guest rooms were mostly contemporary abstract or figurative. Most of the artwork -- and wood furniture -- is for sale.

The hotel is a six-block walk from downtown and is closely linked to the city's arts scene. A directory of local museums and galleries is included in the guest rooms. On the first Friday of each month, when Lancaster art galleries hold open houses, the hotel hosts a reception.

300 Harrisburg Ave., 866-720-2787, <http://www.lancasterartshotel.com>. Doubles start at \$149.

* *Hotel Max, Seattle*. An oversize painting of a nude woman with a man's head in her lap hangs near the

front desk. The doors of all 163 guest rooms are covered with full-length black-and-white photographs. Step inside any one of the rooms and you'll find more art -- paintings, collages, mixed-media canvases -- all created for the hotel by artists from the region.

Opened two years ago, Hotel Max began when the owners took an aging downtown property and commissioned 30 Washington state and Oregon artists to produce art for the guest rooms. Nine photographers -- one per floor -- were invited to display their work in the corridors. The fifth floor displays images by Seattle photographer Charles Peterson, who helped chronicle the grunge scene. On the third floor are local Joan Broughton's photographs of Pike Place Market performers.

Although most of the rooms are small, the amenities -- pillow-top beds, wireless Internet, high-definition televisions, a 24-hour fitness center -- help make this a deluxe property. And the location, a few steps from popular Pike Place Market, could not be more central.

620 Stewart St., 866-833-6299, <http://www.hotelmaxseattle.com>. Doubles start at \$199.

* *Hotel des Arts, San Francisco.* This 51-room property in the French Quarter has all the creative dynamism you would expect in a place decorated mostly by street and graffiti artists.

The artists, chosen by the Start Soma gallery, created a spirited range of styles. The show starts in the lobby, lined with colorful canvases. But the real draw is in the guest rooms.



In Room 208, for example, Jet Martinez made a romantic nature scene by applying gold leaf over a midnight blue background. The scene is framed by bamboo shoots and tiny frogs. In Room 404, Tim Gaskin painted an image of Madonna superimposed on a background of logos by fashion maven Louis Vuitton. In Room 317, Anthony Skirvin designed a space of studied clutter, highlighted by maps plastered everywhere and a picture of a log cabin covering an entire wall.

Except for the art, the small rooms are modestly furnished. The clientele is a youthful mix of Americans and Europeans. The hotel is an easy walk to Union Square.

4 47 Bush St., 800-956-4322, <http://www.sfhoteldesarts.com>. Doubles, including a continental breakfast, start at \$99. The so-called Painted Rooms can be booked only by phone, not online .

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