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Interview with an Art Consultant



Serious pampering and luxe amenities are expected by guests who book at iconic Las Ventanas, in Mexico's Cabo, but what they may not be anticipating is the inspired art collection that gives the property its distinctly Mexican flair. The countless pieces that are displayed throughout the lush grounds—including a colorful work by Mexican painter Rodrigo Pimental and a whimsical bronze sculpture by Los Angeles-based Deloss McGraw—are by no means a random assortment. They were meticulously compiled and curated by Joan Warren-Grady, a San Diego based art consultant who has advised hundreds of hotels on their art collections. Besides Las Ventanas, highlights in Warren-Grady's career have included the new Regent Bal Harbour, four-hundred pieces rich and featuring a 37-foot bronze sculpture by Guy Dill; the Four Seasons Miami, whose collection focuses on locally-based Latin American artists; and the new Residences at the Little Nell in Aspen. Indagare spoke to Warren-Grady about the challenges and rewards of curating hotel collections.

What are the factors that go into building a collection for a hotel?

They are twofold. First, the art program must be responsive to the needs of the client (the developer, architect or designer) and, of course, stay within the established budget. Second, in creating a collection, I always have the guests' experience in mind, as they take away a visual memory. I hope each guest has a unique experience in interacting with the art selected—seeing it in different light and responding to it at different times of day, and in different moods—similar to the experience collectors have of art in their own homes.

What are some collections you are most proud of and why?

For each project I choose artworks that bring vibrancy to the space, extending beyond the destucor, forming relationships through tension, or scale, or harmony, and therefore creating a dialogue between works. Every collection has its special story, making it impossible for me to choose favorites.

If you had to choose a handful of pieces you've acquired for hotels to add to your own personal collection, which ones would they be and why?

I find that this works in reverse for me: whereby I follow an artist's career and acquire work for my personal collection, and then at some point in the future I may include his or her work in a collection for a client. For instance, I purchased a James Surls ten years ago, and have recently included his work in the collection for the Residences at the Little Nell in Aspen. For many years I have collected work by Lita Albuquerque, and then included her in the collections of the Four Seasons San Francisco, and the Ritz-Carlton Palm Beach. I also own work by Darren Waterston, and later featured his work in the collection for the new Regent Bal Harbour.

What are some art/culture destinations you consider underrated?

Our own backyards—the places that we experience daily but don't take the time to enjoy are truly the most underrated. I live in La Jolla, California. Friends visiting from out of town have caused me to open my eyes to all of the art and culture we have right here in my community. Examples include the Stuart Collection at UCSD, to the La Jolla Playhouse, to the world-class Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (both La Jolla and Downtown locations). It can be exciting and enriching to be a cultural tourist in your home city or cities that are very familiar to you.

Which international art fairs do you attend?

I always make sure to attend Art Basel and Art Basel Miami Beach as well as The Armory Show. Art Chicago is one to watch.

Can you tell me some of your favorite lesser-known museums?

Some of my favorite lesser-known museums are: The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.; the Rose Museum at Brandeis University in Boston helped introduce me to Boston-area emerging artists, many of whom I included in the Ritz-Carlton Boston Common collection; the Broad Collection in Los Angeles, which is now on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, which has stunning architecture by Louis Kahn that is alone worth the visit; Whitechapel Art Gallery in London the Frick in New York; and the Aspen Art Museum.

What are some of your favorite cities for their gallery neighborhoods?

The cities with my favorite gallery neighborhoods are San Francisco, Boston, Santa Fe, London, and of course, New York.

What are some other favorite cultural activities?

As a former student of ballet, I love the New York City Ballet, the San Francisco Ballet, and the Royal Ballet in London.

What trip made the biggest impression when you first began traveling?

My first South African photographic safari changed my life. With a large group of friends, I visited Mala Mala Game Reserve in the Kruger National Park. I will never forget waking the first morning to a magnificent male giraffe on my patio, and the lion prints outside my door most mornings. The best experience was closely observing the animals and understanding the unique social behaviors of each species, and how much those behaviors resemble those of humans.

Where are you dying to go next?

Buenos Aires. I'm planning to visit over the holidays this year. Its reputation as the 'Paris of South America' is intriguing.

What are some upcoming auctions you're looking forward to the most?

I'm really looking forward to Art Basel Miami Beach in December, which I haven't missed since its inception in 2002.

Simone Girner 11/12/2008