

Hotels in historic Charleston capitalizing on contemporary art

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The pieces from the New York Academy of Art are on display at The Vendue until Oct. 12.
photos by Michael Pronzato/Staff

A rhinoceros made of some 20,000 brass bullets basks in the lobby of The Vendue.

Colorful caricatures that demand a leap of imagination to connect them with the celebrities they represent gaze down from the three-story walls of the atrium in the Charleston Grand Bohemian.



The old and the new blend at the Charleston Grand Bohemian. Dozens of caricatures by Peter Keil are displayed throughout the hotel. “Reflection of Projected Shadows” by Andrea Carreras is on the wall.

Peninsula hotels have traditionally centered around history and architecture, with art in the background. The Vendue and the Grand Bohemian center around art, and it’s not traditional art. The works are mostly contemporary and often provocative, and they come with price tags that can reach \$20,000.

The Vendue opened two years ago in two buildings near Waterfront Park as Charleston’s “art hotel.” Contemporary and sometimes puzzling works — a naked woman partly covered by a white frog head? — adorn brick walls that date back to 1780.

The Grand Bohemian opened a year ago at Meeting and Wentworth streets. The display of abstract faces, by Polish artist Peter Keil, on the second floor is accessible only to guests. A downstairs gallery is open to anybody.

Robert Lange, who owns a gallery on Queen Street, has been involved in the Charleston art scene since 2003 and plays a pivotal role at The Vendue.

He observed that just as Charleston gaining recognition as an international tourist destination changed the food scene and hotel restaurants, it also changed the art market and, by extension, hotel art.

“I always say we’re on the coattails of the culinary scene,” he said. “We have so many New Yorkers coming down to try this restaurant and this chef, and they tend to be the same clientele that like artwork.”

Nontraditional art has always found an audience in Charleston, which has been home to Spoleto Festival USA since 1977. Both the College of Charleston’s Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art and the City Gallery at Waterfront Park focus on nontraditional art. But the tourist industry has traditionally been associated with marsh scenes and Rainbow Row, or other memories to remind visitors of their trip to the Holy City.

Not anymore.

The number of contemporary galleries has grown along with the increasing number of international visitors. Now the galleries are moving into some of the hotels.



Artist Mary Engel ordered so many bullets to create this rhino in the lobby of The Vendue that she caught the attention of the FBI, according to the curators. Michael Pronzato/Staff
Mary Martin, who owns a gallery on Broad Street, also provides much of the art at The Vendue.

“So many hotels are beautiful inside, and the art is really only decorative and there’s nothing engaging about it,” she said. “When you actually take works from artists who have their heart and soul in their work, it engages people differently.”

Where are the ducks?

The Vendue is the vision of Jonathan Weitz, president of Avocet Hospitality Group. He grew up near the hotel on Adger’s Wharf, worked with the developers of The Sanctuary on Kiawah Island, oversaw the renovation of The Hermitage in Nashville and purchased The Tides on Folly Beach. When he bought The Vendue Inn in 2012 to renovate it, the challenge was finding a way to stand out in an increasingly crowded lodging market.

He kept thinking of The Peabody Hotel in Memphis, where ducks step off the elevator onto a red carpet and march through the lobby to an indoor pond. He made his development partners watch it on YouTube.

“Charleston has great architecture and great service,” he told them. “What I don’t see in Charleston today is The Peabody.”

About that time, Martin kept calling him, leaving messages that she wanted to put some art and business cards in the hotel. The idea didn’t appeal to him, and he never returned her calls. One day he was standing outside the property talking to a colleague, still looking for a unique idea, when his phone buzzed and he saw Martin’s number. He looked around and was struck by the fact that he was surrounded by art galleries. He went on Google and counted 54 in the French Quarter. He estimates it’s closer to 90 now.

“That is the inspiration,” he said. “The pure seed was Mary Martin calling me over and over again and then catching me literally on the street in the French Quarter, realizing I’m surrounded by art galleries.”

He started studying other art hotels around the country and visited the 21c Museum Hotel in Louisville and Cincinnati.

“They really took the art hotel to a whole other level,” he said.



Grand Bohemian owner Richard Kessler liked Peter Keil's caricatures so much he bought a couple hundred, including these in the second-floor atrium in Charleston.

The next step was to find a curator. He turned to Lange. Lange was skeptical until Weitz assured him he would have complete control. They brought in Emily Rigsby, a College of Charleston graduate who formerly worked at the Halsey Institute, as full-time hotel art director. She meets guests in the Principle VI gallery at 26 Vendue for wine and hors d'oeuvres before leading them on a tour each afternoon. Guests often stop to chat with Fred Jamar, the personable, white-bearded Belgian artist who works out of a studio on the first floor.

Paintings line the walls of the hallways. Rigsby counts 300 from 90 artists. Most mix traditional and contemporary elements.

"I think a lot of people out there tend to still be drawn toward a certain amount of realism," Lange said. "So our goal is to bring newfound realism. But we also have a goal of matching the city's personality type and having a certain amount of optimism that floats through the spaces. We're not looking to put this morose, depraved kind of cerebral work on the wall that's all about getting to the guts of it all. Instead we're looking for things that provoke the imagination and liven the spirit, so you feel good when you look through the work."

Even the woman with the frog head.

"Your heart smiles a little bit, because it's clearly not taking itself too seriously," he said.

"Gold Rhino" by Mary Engel and "Frog Ballet" by Melanie Vote are part of an exhibition from the New York Academy of Art that runs through Oct. 12.

Not grandma's hotel

The Charleston Grand Bohemian started with Richard Kessler, who owns several similar hotels around the Southeast and Colorado. He grew up in Savannah and is based in Orlando.

"Needed the Grand Bohemian spirit in Charleston, something different from the typical 'grandma' designed hotels that exist," he said by email when asked what convinced him that Charleston was ready for a hotel centered around contemporary art.

He said he had been waiting for the right location in the city for about 10 years. The hotel was built on the vacant site of the former Farah's Beauty School and Chapter Two bookstore. At the 2014 groundbreaking, he said his clients in other cities had been asking him for a Kessler hotel in Charleston.

Kessler owns the caricatures by Keil. Besides the atrium display, works line the walls outside the guest rooms, and visitors can see several on the first floor near the gallery. Kessler liked Keil's work so much he bought a couple hundred pieces, according to Dayna Caldwell, the Grand Bohemian's art director.

He's developed quite the reputation as a collector. His personal holdings also include about 1,000 original writings penned in the 1500s by Martin Luther, the leader of the Protestant Reformation. They're housed at Emory University.

Kessler calls the marketing concept for his hotels a combination of classic and contemporary. For example, on a wall between the gallery and the lobby hangs a painting of a female figure reminiscent of Gustav Klimt, being studied by a woman holding a Starbucks cup. Artist Andrea Carreras of Argentina calls it "Reflection of Projected Shadows."

"She plays with the theme of the ancient and the contemporary, creating a time dynamic where the old mixes with the new," said Caldwell, who came to Charleston from a Kessler hotel in Savannah.

The "expressionist-colorist" landscapes by Frenchman Jean Claude Roy are on display through November. His compositions typically center around an unusual depiction of the sun, often appearing to be a white hole in the canvas.

Not all the works are abstract. The gallery also has several paintings by Florida native Marc Chatov, a realistic portrait artist nationally known for the rich texture of his skin tones.

The gallery is not just aimed at guests. About 70 percent of sales are to residents, Caldwell said. The Grand Bohemian includes wine in its art experience, and that program also reaches out to the community as well as guests. Two rooms are devoted to wine tasting and wine mixing. Wine lovers can blend their own recipes and then order a case of their own creation to take home.

"It's about the total experience — art, music, food and wine," Caldwell said.

Rates for The Vendue and Grand Bohemian vary with the time of year and length of stay but start above \$300 a night.

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