

INTERIOR DESIGN



The Man With the Midas Touch

After designing New York hot spots Cain and PM, Robert McKinley works his magic at Goldbar

By Dan Shaw -- *Interior Design*, April 1, 2007

Robert McKinley looked high and low for ideas he could borrow for a swank cocktail lounge in New York. "I've always loved the formality of the grand hotels of Europe," says McKinley, who'd previously designed the nightclubs Cain and PM. He notes the bars at the Hotel Principe di Savoia Milano and the Bauer Il Palazzo in Venice, then practically swoons over the service at the Hôtel Plaza Athénée in Paris: "When you order hot chocolate, three guys bring it to you on a rolling cart. You're blown away." The new bar was to be just as recherché—though with a louche tinge inspired by Paris's underbelly. "The catacombs are chilling at first, the miles of skulls and bones neatly stacked," he says. "But it makes Paris that much cooler to know that's underground." The designer continued his research in Rome by making a pilgrimage to the Catacombe dei Cappuccini. "The skulls were built into the architecture, even the chandeliers," he remembers. "It was something out of Indiana Jones."

Stateside, McKinley sought out set designers to help fashion the 2,400 skulls that now line the walls of the 1,800-square-foot Goldbar. "The first samples were hollow, and we needed them to be more durable," he says. So he had an Arizona foundry cast the skulls in plaster and concrete and gild them. They weigh 8 pounds, and each is individually attached to the wall with a 5/8-inch-thick piece of rebar. The skulls were initially supposed to be shiny, but it snowed one day at the foundry, and they developed an antiqued patina that McKinley calls a "lucky accident." Most of Goldbar's other surfaces truly gleam: the 14,000 feet of heavy rapper chain used for curtains, the gold-leafed ceiling vault, the brass of the floor tiles and the sides of drum tables that look like stacks of Cartier Love bracelets.

To give the bar a backstory, McKinley hired a photographer to shoot portraits of the fictional owner, Count Lodovico della Rovere, his family, and their pets. "Look closely," McKinley says, "and you'll notice they're all wearing Run-DMC gold chains around their necks." Even the dogs.

Clockwise from top left: In 1786, human bodies exhumed from Paris cemeteries were moved to an immense maze of catacombs. Visiting them in 2006, the designer and nightclub partner averted his gaze from the skulls that inspired Goldbar's defining motif. Exploring Rome's Catacombe dei Cappuccini furthered his installation concept. The mirrored top of a custom cocktail table reflects Goldbar's sidewall. Morten Smid's photo portraits of fictional Italian aristocrats and their pets are backed by the gilded skulls of cast plaster and cement. Custom crystal chandeliers hang over the bar in front. At the back of the main room's gold-leafed ceiling vault hangs a curtain made from chain; the curtain partially drapes the DJ booth, which features graffiti by Vincent Ficarra of Mpire.

CUSTOM TABLES, BAR: TR WOODWORKS. CUSTOM SKULLS: ANGEL CITY FINISHES. CUSTOM CHANDELIERS: LIGHT HOUSE. CUSTOM BANQUETTES: ARREDO CUSTOM FURNITURE; THROUGH MOOD FABRICS (FABRIC). CURTAIN CHAIN: MJ TRIMMING. FLOORING: MANHATTAN BRASS COPPER CO. CEILING SURFACING: SEPP LEAF PRODUCTS. PAINT: RALPH LAUREN HOME. DESIGN CONSULTANT: JASON MOSES PROJECTS. MEP: ROSINI ENGINEERING. ARCHITECT OF RECORD: STEVEN LEE ARCHITECT. GENERAL CONTRACTOR: R SPORICI.