

Hotel Business DESIGN®

WEB EXCLUSIVE: Circa 1881 Transforms Hotel Spaces With Lending Library of Art

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Circa 1881 art installation at The Peninsula Hotel

NEW YORK—For art enthusiasts, 1881 proved to be a very good year. It was the birth year of Pablo Picasso and brought forth the rise of modern art. Both events would serve as the inspiration for Alvaro Leal’s art collectors’ initiative, Circa 1881, based here. His creative objective: to bring world-class art out of storage and to wider audiences.

“I’m an art collector and I’ve collected in small scale for many years, then in larger scale in the last 10 years. I’ve always been enchanted by museum exhibitions and sharing it with the public,” said Leal, founder of Circa 1881. “My first experiment was with a restaurant in Venezuela. I worked with the architects to make space for larger installations; I built a dining room for a Kara Walker installation and, on the second floor, I made a 15-ft. wall for a big mural by Arturo Herrera. I enjoyed the conversation with the public, and they were eager to get more information on the art and the artists.”

That initial experience, now years behind him, has served as a springboard for bigger projects in hospitality and the cultivation of a new art business.

“In 2012, I started a partnership with The Peninsula Hotel in New York City. There was a need to bring our works to the spaces to refresh the interiors of the hotel. It was an experiment for both sides. To start, we chose a very famous artist to show and, over the years, we became more adventurous in picking art that’s controversial. The partnership is ongoing,” said Leal. “In 2014, I thought this was something I’d like to do on a full-time basis, and I convinced art collectors to join me as founding members of Circa 1881.”

Hospitality clients select art from Circa 1881’s Lending Library, which is a collection of contemporary art mostly from the 1970s to now. To source the art for his installation projects, Leal taps into his social network of art enthusiasts and collectors.

“We have been working mostly in the art community of New York and through auction houses, galleries, art advisors, etc. Through talking about the collections and public outreach, it’s growing and people are starting to find us,” he said.

Leal’s process of working with a hotel is a collaborative one. Art for the space may be selected from a group of works, or a specific piece of art may be commissioned to fit a theme or particular event.



“In the beginning, we visit the space and, sometimes, it’s already built with furniture and we have to determine the best approach for the existing living quarters where the art will be seen,” he said. “Last October, we commissioned an artist to design and build a special temporary installation to create awareness about breast cancer. The needs vary, but it’s always a collaborative effort. We need to understand their perspective, brand elements and specific interests.”

Circa 1881 also educates the hotel staff about the meaning behind the artwork, the creation process and how to properly handle these delicate, one-of-a-kind pieces.

“Because they are in public spaces, but behind Plexiglas, we teach the staff how to interact with the art and protect it. We work with them on caring for the artwork and how to respond to questions from the public and clients about the art or artist. We found hotel staff to be very motivated about this type of program. They want to learn and be able to answer questions. It’s very much a partnership with the client and not just a consulting job; it’s an ongoing relationship.

Personalization is another layer of service that Leal believes is key to his company’s success. In responding to special requests, Circa 1881 is nimble and willing to meet the fluid demands of the hotel he’s working with.

“Sometimes, we replace artwork because there’s a special guest coming that doesn’t like the imagery. We can bring something else for a week while the guest is there, and then bring the piece back or leave the new one,” he said. “You may get a guest who is not into nudity or it’s a religious issue, so we may get a request to replace artwork because of that. It’s just another example of how close the working relationship needs to be with the hotel.”

For Leal, it’s about cracking a window into the mind of an artist and offering a tailor-made selection of artwork that will create an authentic, yet engaging experience for the hotels and its guests.

“We want our clients to make their guests happy, and we believe that is the purpose of art—to make life enjoyable, beautiful, funny—and that’s what we want to bring to the public,” he said.

—*Corris Little*

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