Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Lost Warhols and Local Artists: Art Tourism at Santa Monica's Viceroy

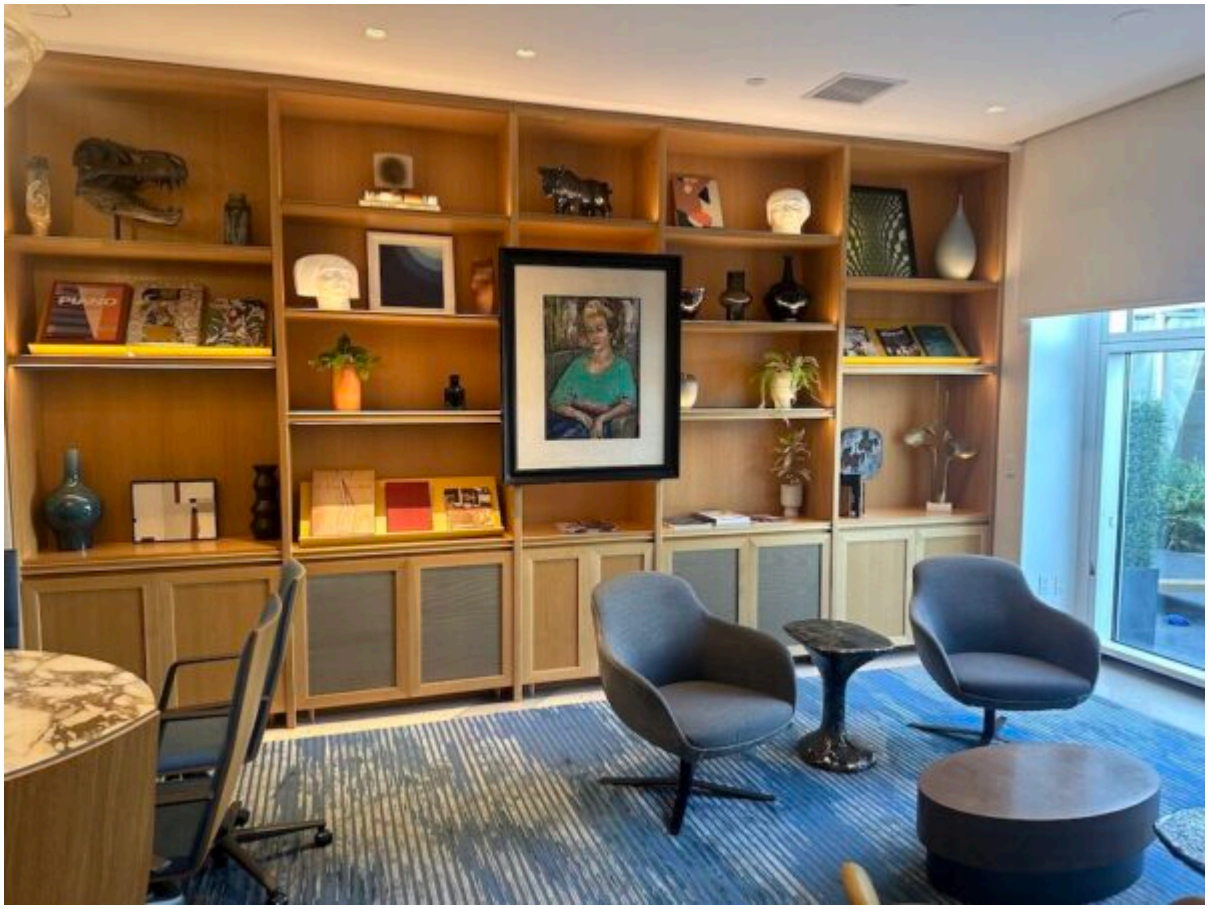
R. Daniel Foster · Tuesday, July 22nd, 2025

I checked into the Viceroy Santa Monica on Ocean Avenue on a Tuesday afternoon—Edith at the front desk greeted me. She has been with the hotel since 2012, initially as a housekeeper, followed by stints in food and beverage and the back office. The lobby had a breezy vibe, anchored by a massive seating area–a sofa of sorts carved from a single log. It was paired with the wood-decked ceiling. The effect, according to PR materials, was akin to walking beneath the Santa Monica Pier, which is a short walk away.

Photographs of Andy Warhol, shot by Karen Bystedt, are featured in the lounge's video art. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Roaming the space, I paused in front of two large screens showing Andy Warhol (in late career) seated in a chair wearing a tweed suit and tie with horizontal stripes. A hand rested on the left side

of his face. He looked directly at me.



A meeting room at the Viceroy Santa Monica. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Warhol's head began to morph, deconstruct really, spreading like jam as it melted off his head. And now, on an adjoining screen, he was holding an American flag. The photographs, shot by Karen Bystedt, are often called the *Lost Warhols*. She took them in the early 1980s. After being lost for decades, the shots were restored in collaboration with an archivist at the Getty Museum.

To create the video treatments that overlay the photographs, Bystedt enlisted artists to add layers that morph and shift as they accumulate, ultimately resulting in the completed works. I later learned that one of the works, *Beach House Andy*, features Warhol in his Montauk beach home with scenes of Santa Monica surf and skate culture streaming on a vintage television behind him. The other, *Sugar Palm Andy*, presents a mind-bending, dissolving version of the artist, incorporating colors pulled directly from the hotel's poolside mural.

I had known the Viceroy was a hotspot for hot art. The Warhols were a good introduction. I was eager to see more.

The front lounge at the Viceroy Santa Monica. Photo courtesy of Viceroy Santa Monica hotel

The 162-room hotel, built in 1969, was renovated in 2000, relaunching as the Viceroy Santa Monica in 2002. The artwork collection is part of a $21 million property-wide renovation completed in 2023. “A Canvas for Discovery” is the Viceroy Hotels & Resorts art initiative, with works spread across its nearly dozen properties worldwide.

The Rise of Art Tourism

Playing art tourist has always been a favorite pastime. Indeed, the global art tourism market is expected to top $62.7 billion by 2033. Given that, hotels worldwide are making art a central statement. Standouts include Regent Phu Quoc on Vietnam’s Phu Quoc Island (it includes a gallery for art and design), Waldorf Astoria’s Rome Cavalieri (the hotel’s private art collection includes masterpieces from the 16th century to modern day), St. Moritz’s Hotel Monopol (it doubles as a Pop Art Museum), and closer to home: Chicago’s landmark Hilton property, Palmer House. The hotel is the former home of leading art patron Bertha Matilde Palmer, who amassed the largest collection of Impressionist art outside of France. The masterpieces now reside at the Art Institute of Chicago. To introduce guests to the hotel’s storied art history, the property runs the Chicago Art Institute Cezanne experience that tours nearby exhibits.

The hotel has nine artworks by Uruguayan artist Monica Perez. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The Viceroy Santa Monica, alas, did not harbor any works by Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, or Degas. But what it featured looked museum-worthy.

After dinner at the property's signature Sugar Palm restaurant, I took in an abstract painting series hung in the lounge. Done in acrylic, the works are expressive washes of green, pink, gold, and charcoal. They were created by Uruguayan artist Monica Perez, who lives in nearby Venice. She also creates sculpture and installation pieces, using everything from wool and wax to soil and paint. "These materials are not passive: they hold energy, memory, and agency," reads a statement on her website.

All told, the Viceroy has nine colorful works by Perez, a departure for the artist who usually works in black and white. The full collection is called *Melt into Love.*

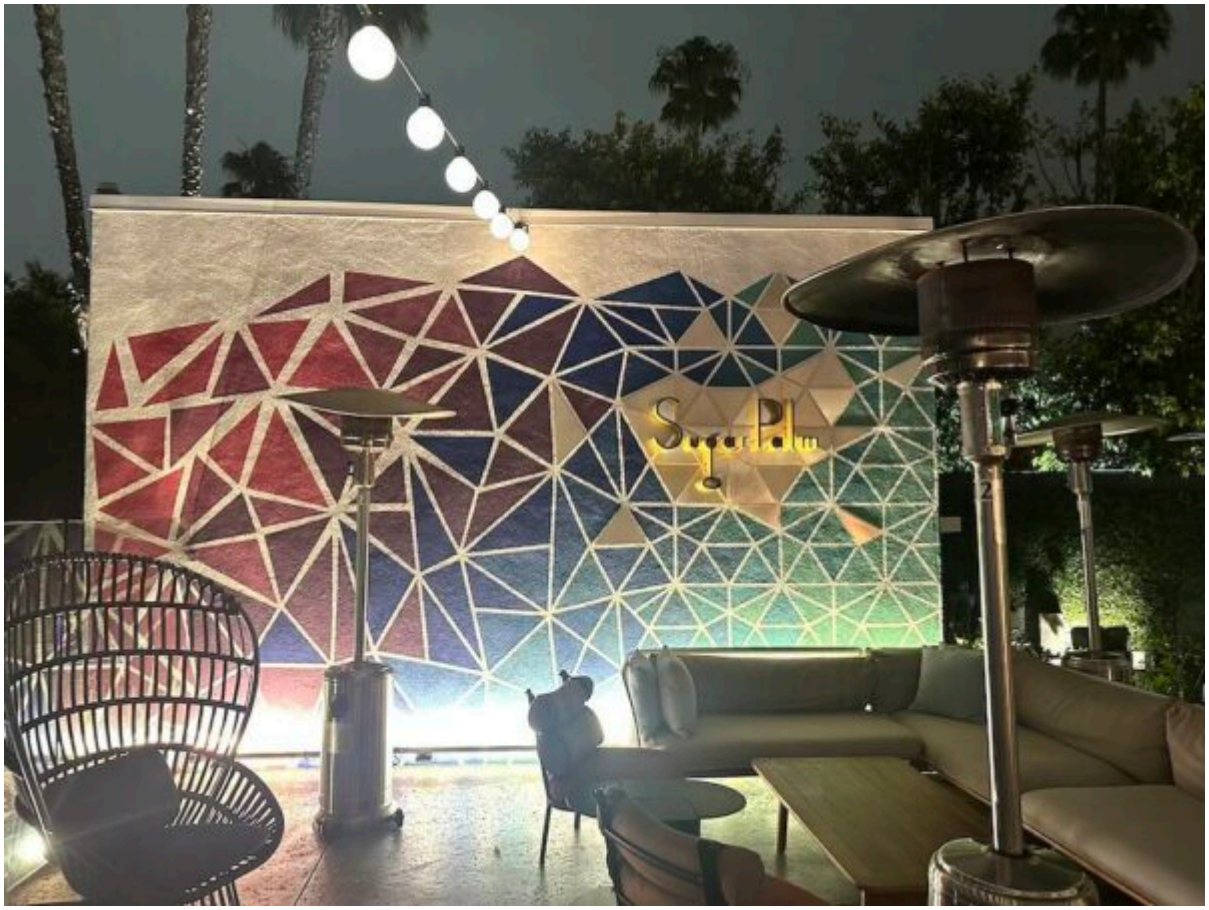
The Viceroy Santa Monica is located on Ocean Avenue. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Back to the Sugar Palm. A white, shack-like structure (without the unkempt look of a shack) is set at the front. It's meant to forecast a beachy look, and it does its job. I especially enjoyed the menu's pepperoni pizza, the cloud-like crust pairing optimally with the savory interior. Executive Chef Johnny Marin has made the eatery a popular Ocean Avenue spot, sourcing ingredients from the nearby Santa Monica Farmers Market. The restaurant flows between its various spaces—patio, cafe, restaurant, and poolside bar scene with lots of fire features.

Works by Local Artists are Featured

A painting by Kelcey Fisher hung in my room. Titled *Axis*, it's of birds flying overhead against a mottled blue sky. The imagery, rendered in acrylic, was inspired while Fisher was lying on the beach, gazing at the sky. He explains that it imparts the wonder and awe he experienced in the moment. A full-size custom surfboard (Erin Miller Wray's *Endless* series) hangs in the presidential suite. Her surf fin artwork hangs in each room.

Other standout artworks in the hotel: Jessica Aquino's *Polaroid Wall*, consisting of four candid, locally inspired shots of beach scenes. Aquino has doodled around the Polaroids, adding comments. Julie Coyle's *Camera Wall* is a framed collection of antique cameras collected at Los Angeles flea markets. The models date from the early 1900s to a "vintage" iPhone 6, circa 2014.



A poolside mural by Evelyn Leigh. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Jan Birch's photograph, *Above the Beach*, is a bird's-eye view of the California coast, the image becoming nearly like a Rothko painting because of its perspective.

Kelly Harris' artwork *Skate Wheels* is a kicky take on the area's skate culture. The vivid piece is constructed of 396 skateboard wheels, each hand-painted in a mid-century inspired color. It's hung in the reception area.

The Building as Canvas

A narrow geometric mural is used on the face of the hotel, dividing the structure into two. Created by visual brander Erin Miller Wray, the piece is an interlocking puzzle of sorts, created from mid-century shapes and modernized colors and lines. "In designing this piece, I wanted to create artwork that embodies the true Santa Monica 'cool' that this city is known for," Wray said. "A piece that is youthful and eclectic but that also ties us to the history of the city."

Spencer Mar Guilburt created a large mural on the building's south side. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Spencer Mar Guilburt, a Santa Monica native, created a large mural on the building's south side–bright green palm leaves backgrounded by interlocking black lines. The artist explained that the lines represent a plant's underground root system. "They mirror the energetic connection uniting all humans," reads an artist statement about the piece." A blue window near the top, inset with palm leaves, "signifies the human race collectively looking to a brighter future."

There's also a poolside mural by Evelyn Leigh–a stimulating array of geometric shapes done in cool blues and vivid purples and magenta.

Sugar Palm’s cocktails and dinner can be enjoyed inside or by the pool. Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Emergency Response, Hotel Style

During a bike ride along the beach path, I cycled down to Will Rogers State Beach, much of the coastline around Pacific Palisades scorched by the January fires. It was heartening to learn of the Viceroy’s response to the disaster.

The Viceroy was opened up to the city, “making sure that whoever needed assistance could get it,” said Viceroy’s managing director Connie Wang. “The hotel lowered rates and made arrangements for some who needed to stay longer term.” The Viceroy also donated various sundries, including 15,000 bottles of shampoo, boxes of toilet paper, and numerous sheets, blankets, towels and pillows.

Area families stayed at the Viceroy during that time–for a few weeks, and for some, a few months. “A lot of people came in immediately and during that first weekend, to get out of the danger zone,” Wang said. “We’re proud of the Santa Monica and LA hotel industry–everyone came together during that time. I didn’t see anyone hiking up their rates. The attitude was, ‘Hey, what can we do to help?’”

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