



GETTING YOUR CCC'S

LEXINGTON'S 21C MUSEM HOTEL
PUTS THE CHIC INTO SLEEP

By Patti Nickell



COURTESY OF 21C MUSEUM HOTEL



Welcome to 21c Museum Hotel — the Lexington edition. While the 88-room boutique hotel, with its 7,000 square feet of gallery space exhibiting pieces by artists working in this century, is the talk of the town, it is also a project some, including Wilson himself, never expected to happen.

When Wilson and Brown opened the first 21c in Louisville in 2006, it was originally intended to be the only property — a venue for showcasing the couple's collection and for helping revitalize the city's downtown core (the Louisville property is in a rehabbed former bourbon warehouse.)

To say that it was a success is a colossal understatement. Almost overnight, the "cool museum with rooms" garnered international buzz, being featured in publications from the *New York Times* to the *London*

Opposite, clockwise from bottom left: the bar at Lockbox features *Tomorrow's Weather*, which changes based on the latest weather service reports; a view of the hotel from Main Street; each 21c Museum Hotel features a collection of penguins by artist collective Cracking Art Group; visitors check out a recent exhibit. This page, *Spectralline*, a work by New York design studio SOFTlab greets guests in the hotel entrance.



After four years and \$43 million, the (blue) penguins are finally ruling the roost. The lovable mascots of the 21c Museum Hotel brand stare unblinkingly from the tall glass windows of the former First National Bank Building on Main Street. As many Lexingtonians know by now, the penguins' new digs are not a repository for cash and bonds but for pieces from the seemingly unending contemporary art collection of Louisville husband-and-wife philanthropists Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown.



Stallions 2016



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by Distorted Humor



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Times, and enjoyed a continuous parade of awestruck, art-loving guests.

No one was more shocked by 21c's enthusiastic reception than Wilson.

"We really had no master plan or blueprint when we started," he said. "We just wanted to share our collection and give a boost to downtown Louisville. It came as a complete surprise that we were able to have a successful business based on art and creativity."

It wasn't long, however, before 21c — for 21st century, a name thought up by Brown — had morphed from being a hotel into a brand. The success of the Louisville property spurred similar historic renovations in Cincinnati; Bentonville, Arkansas; and Durham, North Carolina. It was no longer a question of whether there would be another museum/hotel, but where it would be.

Lexington, with its burgeoning contemporary art scene, seemed an obvious fit.

Aside from the flourishing art scene, the city had the other factors the couple looked for in selecting sites:

Historic building ... check. The 1913 bank building had the distinction of being Lexington's first skyscraper.

Enthusiasm of city officials ... check. Mayor Jim Gray, a collector of contemporary art himself, never had any doubt that a 21c in Lexington would be a game changer.

Community support ... double check. For the past decade Lexington has been on an ambitious quest to revitalize its downtown core, and a 21c Museum Hotel at its center would be a coup indeed.

It seems that the only one not excited at the prospect was Wilson, who initially thought Lexington and Louisville were too close to justify properties in both cities.

"After the success of our Louisville hotel, the growth of our brand has been determined by the desire of the community," said Wilson. "While I admit I was

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KIRK SCHLEA

skeptical about Lexington at first, the positive response has proved me wrong.

"The support of this community has been overwhelming," he continued. "There were more people at the ribbon cutting here than there were in Louisville when we opened 10 years ago."

Those assembled at the February ribbon cutting got their first look at six permanent works of contemporary art chosen specifically for the Lexington site.

Two twisted, interlocking lampposts on the corner of Main and Upper streets, in front of the hotel, that look as if they had run afoul of a city bus. On closer inspection it turned out to be the first of the six pieces — *Totally in Love*, a whimsical steel-and-hand-blown glass sculpture by Dutch artist Pieke Bergmans meant to evoke intertwined lovers.

Since then guests and gawkers alike have marveled at the unique pieces they encounter inside, such as the large geometric, jewel-toned cubic mass suspended from the ceiling of the hotel's entrance. This is *Spectralline* from the New York Design Studio SOFTlab.

The hotel's restaurant, Lockbox, has another of the permanent pieces in its bar area — a

Left, Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown created the first 21c Museum Hotel to showcase their growing contemporary art collection. Above, *Totally in Love*, by Dutch artist Pieke Bergmans, features two intertwined lampposts.

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HOTEL 21C

group of glowing orbs dangling from the ceiling. *Tomorrow's Weather*, by Swedish artists Bigert and Bergstrom, utilizes acrylic spheres, LED lights, electric cable, and weather data to change colors as a way of predicting the next day's local weather forecast.

Guests also can get a hint as to what the notoriously unpredictable Lexington weather will

be like from the single orb suspended over the registration desk. If it's blue, get out the coat; if red, it's shorts and T-shirt time. Take that, meteorologist Bill Meck!

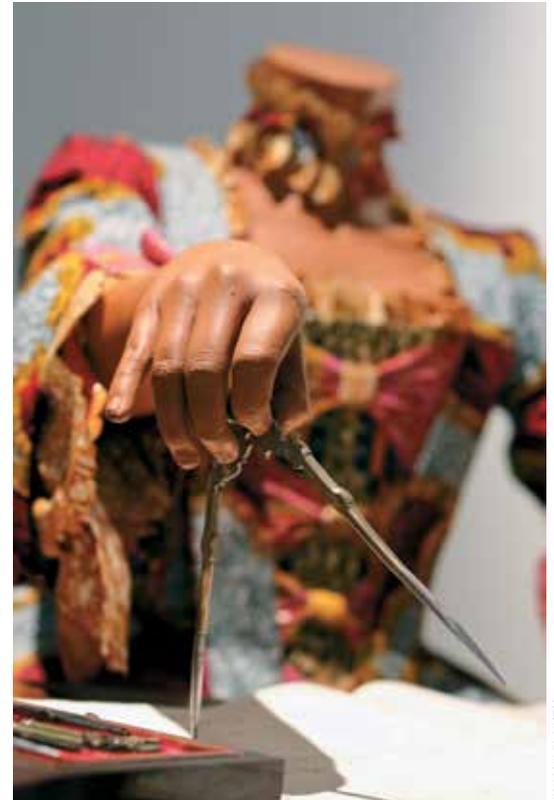
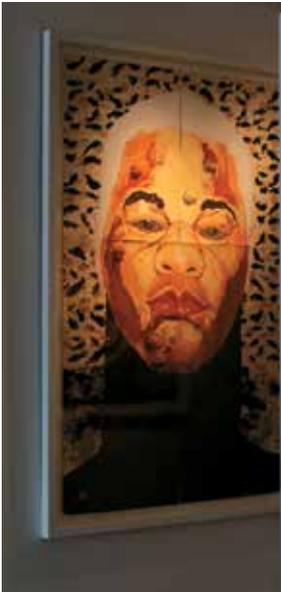
Not quite as "in-your-face" but equally intriguing are the three other permanent pieces: *Ice Branch Chandelier*, a scattering of Swarovski crystals by Dutch artist Tord Boonjite; American artist Ned Kahn's mixed media piece *Aeolian Landscape*, which creates a constantly shifting desert landscape through the use of air and sand; and *BRASS*, ceramic tiles from American artists Leslie Lyons and JB Wilson, which make up the floor of the private dining room, once

the bank's vault.

The art for Lexington's 21c, as with all the properties, is selected with the idea of connecting the hotel to its specific building, as well as to the community, explains Alice Gray Stites, chief curator for all the 21c Museum Hotel galleries.

"Each 21c features several site-specific installations that are integrated into the building, and these are commissioned via a wide range of avenues," said Stites.

"For example, the embracing lampposts, *Totally in Love*, were acquired from the Design Fair in Miami," she continued, "while *Tomor-*



"We believe that all art can be thought-provoking," chief curator Alice Gray Stites says. "We feel that our art is a great place to begin difficult discussions about the state of our world or of our hearts."

row's *Weather* was commissioned after Laura Lee, Steve, and I met the artists, Bigert and Bergstrom, in their studio in Stockholm in 2010 and were fascinated by other projects they had created in various Scandinavian cities."

A similar thought process of how to tie the art with its community is given to each of the rotating exhibits. 21c Lexington's inaugural rotating exhibition (running until September) is a mixed-media offering, *Dress Up/Speak Up: Costume and Confrontation*, a provocative work that uses clothing and costumes as metaphors for the cultural realities and aspirations in many nations. One of the most prominent of the featured artists is Jamaican-born Ebony G. Patterson, a University of Kentucky associate professor.

Provocative is probably the first word that comes to mind when describing the art at 21c. Stites, however, prefers thought-provoking.

"We believe that all art can be thought-provoking," she said. "While we can never predict how viewers will react to any one installation or artwork, we anticipate that the art will start conversations on any number of topics.

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Free 45-minute docent tours are offered every Wednesday and Friday for those interested in learning about 21c's exhibitions and how they fit into the ethos of the building and city where the hotel is located.

Careful renovation

The permanent and rotating art installations are just one kind of art at 21c Lexington. Wilson and Brown were just as concerned with preserving the integrity and history of the building itself.

To that end, they engaged New York-based architecture and design firm Deborah Berke Partners to ensure that period details such as marble walls, ornamental molding on the vaulted ceilings, and tiled floors were carefully preserved.

Wilson said he and Berke, whose firm has overseen renovation for all of the 21c properties, were bowled over when they saw the former bank building and imagined the possibilities.

"When Deborah and I first walked into the building and saw its



Docent-led tours offer visitors a chance to learn about the latest exhibitions.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF 21C MUSEUM HOTEL

Each hotel guestroom contains unique pieces of art.

elegant bones and then visualized how it would turn out, we knew immediately that it had the kind of character that a Lexington property deserved," he said.

That feeling is one he wants hotel guests to experience as well.

"In Lexington, we have a unique audience," he said. "There are not only the people coming from all over the world to a relatively small community [actor Matthew McConaughey was a recent high-profile guest], but there are those connected with the University of Kentucky, the horse and bourbon industries, and tourists drawn to our world-class landscape.

"We want all of them to leave feeling that they've been in a very unique environment — one they won't experience anywhere else," he added.

It's a feeling that Wilson, Brown, Stites, and company will export to four more cities in the near future. Opening this summer will be an Oklahoma City museum hotel located in a nearly century-old Model T assembly plant built by Henry Ford. After that will be properties in Kansas City (in the historic 125-year-old Savoy Hotel, where former president Harry Truman regularly stayed); Nashville (in an 1890s building listed on the National Register of Historic Places), and Indianapolis (in its old City Hall).

But for now, those blue penguins are basking in the reflected glow of the newest 21c, and Wilson is enjoying it all.

"When I started all this a decade ago, I hadn't been taught the rules, so it was easy to break them," he confided. "I guess now we have our own rules." **KM**