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Cobo Center spotlights local artists and hometown pride.



Maureen Devine spearheads a creative effort to expand the art collections on display at Detroit's expansive Cobo Center.

While most visitors probably don't think of a convention center as a public place to find interesting works of art, Cobo's art curator since 2013 is far ahead of an industry trend where similar facilities around the country are now purchasing and displaying local art.

During the center's recent expansion and remodeling, Devine says art became an even more important aspect of the facility, especially new pieces that tell stories about the greater community of southeast Michigan.

Around 17 major works have been added since 2013 and the art curator plans to add more on the walls and in the hallways that are open to the public. A big project underway, for example, is a 30-by-30-square-foot fresco painting by Detroit artist Hubert Massey.

Painted onto wet plaster directly, the work is a time line of Detroit that starts more than 300 years in the past and stretches into the city's future, incorporating such elements as a proposed new Detroit River bridge and highlights from the automotive industry.

"We're hoping this piece could inspire young artists to take up the fresco technique," says Devine, adding it would be interesting to see Detroit become a fresco destination, similar to Mexico City, with murals on display throughout the community.

With experience in the arts industry since college, Devine brings a diverse background ranging from 10 years on staff at a museum to six years curating art for the North Campus Research Complex at the University of Michigan. She received a master's degree in art history from Wayne State University.

Her goal for more art at Cobo Center is to share the story of Detroit and spotlight points of community pride with all who enter its doors. Guests from all over the world visit Detroit's convention center and many are unfamiliar with the city and its history.

"It allows us to highlight local talents. We will include artists who are national or international. We're not strictly locked in to showing local artists, but that is our main interest," Devine explains. "It's something for everybody. We put our art in the common areas, not just in meeting rooms or areas that could be closed off to the public."

Cobo Center is a convention center first, she says, which means art displays are set up intentionally to work with the positioning of event banners and signage. Devine hopes that the art on display inside the center can direct guests to also visit the nearby Detroit Institute of Arts or other permanent and temporary displays by local artists around the city.

"Art has been part of Cobo Center from the very beginning," Devine says in reference to the noteworthy "Spirit of Transportation" bronze sculpture that was commissioned for the opening of the convention center in 1960. It is one of the last major works by Swedish sculptor Carl Milles, who was a mentor to Marshall Fredericks.

And the renewed focus on commissioning and displaying local art hopefully will continue that artistic tradition. cobocenter.com —Jenny Cvek

Sustainability

“A lot of event planners pick a city from a food perspective and sustainability is huge in the industry.”

—**JASON HOUARD**, regional vice president of Centerplate at Cobo Center



PHOTO: COBO CENTER

URBAN LEGEND

According to Jason Hougard, regional vice president of Centerplate at Cobo Center in Detroit, “a lot of event planners pick a city from a food perspective and sustainability is huge in the industry. Other trends include small plate items and an emphasis on dairy free, gluten free and vegan alternatives. People are much more health conscious.”

Executive chef Robin Wilson says, “There’s a carbon footprint of about 150-mile radius with local availability in season. We have a lot of small business suppliers. We’re part of the Executive Green Council and Cobo Center is green certified. We try to go above and beyond.”

Cobo’s rooftop even has a beehive farm and a small herb garden.

Jennifer McDonnell, director of sales, says, “They always suggest a diverse menu with a vegetarian entrée and a beautiful presentation that changes seasonally.”

Adds Hougard: “People eat with their eyes. It’s like a work of art.”

For the North American International Auto Show, the staff relies on the Alto-Shaam Combi Oven that can bake, roast, steam and more. “It helps us keep on top of large events and make 6,000 meals in about three hours,” says Wilson. “It controls the moisture-to-heat ratio to help deliver the best quality food and keep the flavor profile. It’s the Cadillac of ovens.”

Mishaps are bound to happen, like the time they were feeding 14,000 people and someone forgot to order extra dishes. “So we ran out and had to wash them as they were coming back while we were still trying to plate the meals,” says Wilson.

Through it all, they’re able to keep up with cutting-edge trends. “We’re all over North America, so we can reach out to other properties. We have a lot of resources and a lot of support,” says McDonnell. “We don’t have conventional convention food. Nothing stays the same. It’s always changing.”

STAYING POWER

Angela Whitener, director of sales for Stafford’s Bay View Inn and the Perry Hotel in Petoskey and the Crooked River Lodge in Alanson, has learned a lot in her 18 years there. “The longevity of the people you work with is so rare,” she says. “For my clients, that’s a great selling point because a lot of the guesswork is taken out.”

In food and beverage, she says, less is more. “It used to be a lavish banquet with lots of wasted food, ‘the big-

ger the better; we want it to look bountiful.’ Now people are very conscious and they want to keep it simple.”

Many guests want fresh local fare and they want to know if the eggs are free-range, the beef is grass-fed and the salmon is wild-caught. “In Michigan, there are so many great farms and agriculture is a big industry,” says Whitener who gets requests from gluten free, wheat free and dairy free to no garlic or onions.

“We have to label everything and we have to be accommodating,” she says. “At corporate events and weddings, there can be special requests for 20 percent of the guests. We have to prepare something that feels just as special as that filet mignon.”

Still, historic hotel rooms can pose a challenge when there are pillars, limited electrical outlets and odd-shaped spaces. “People love the hotel and the location,” says Whitener. “We give them the reality of what we have to work with from the beginning.”

As for planning, it all boils down to communication and accuracy whether it’s an event for 10 or 100,” says Whitener, who recalls a time when people showed up on the wrong day. “I got a call from my general manager to serve breakfast to a group of 60 attendees who showed up at the Bay View Inn.” It turns out the planner had booked a business meeting for the following day, but gave the wrong date to the group.

“We all make mistakes. We made it work,” says Whitener who believes in putting yourself in another’s situations. “A bride has never planned a wedding and neither has a new planner. Don’t assume people know everything you know. It’s important to be personable and patient and it’s okay to make mistakes.”

ON THE TABLE

At Mission Point Resort on Mackinac Island, Rylin Ploe, senior conference services manager, says they make it a point to discuss each property option. “We’re very unique to a conference. Every meeting space is going to be different, so having an open mind-set helps. It’s great if they’re being open to what might work best in the hotel and we’re blending ideas together and understanding their needs and going above and beyond.”

She believes it’s important to understand your property and the experience guests will have from the time they get there to the time they leave. “We can go into

Less Is More

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—ANGELA WHITENER, director of sales for Stafford’s Bay View Inn and the Perry Hotel in Petoskey and the Crooked River Lodge in Alanson



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