

# CORPORATE ART AT SEA

International Corporate Art (ICART) is an art consultancy company with headquarters in Oslo, which seeks to bridge the gulf between the art scene and the commercial world. ICART advises the hospitality industry about what sort of artworks to install in passenger ships and hotels. Staffed by art historians, designers, architects, and technical experts, ICART offers commercial clients a 'turn-key' service, using whatever art budget they are given and collaborating with ship owners, interior designers and naval architects.

TEXT: BRUCE PETER



PHOTO: MIKE LOUAGIE

International Corporate Art was established in 2004 through a merger between an Oslo-headquartered Norwegian company, ArtLink, and a London-based firm called LCA Corporate Art, but the story goes back to 1986 when Norway's first corporate art firm ArtForm was established by one of ICART's partners. Today, ICART has offices in London, Oslo and Miami and its work mainly involves selecting, acquiring and installing art collections for passenger ships and hotels. Indeed, ICART has so far been involved in projects for no fewer than 130 different vessels, ranging from ferries such as the STAVANGERFJORD to cruise ships varying in size from Royal Caribbean's massive OASIS OF THE SEAS to a whole flotilla of comparatively small craft for Viking River Cruises. Indeed, ICART's client list nowadays reads as a 'Who's Who' of the passenger shipping industry.

#### RECONCILING THE CORPORATE WORLD AND THE ART WORLD

The idea of 'corporate art' is an intriguing one. Historically, famous artists have relied upon wealthy and influential patrons to commission their work and to help build their reputations and cultural status. It is only in relatively recent time that some prominent and critically acclaimed artists have sought slightly to distance themselves from those wielding wealth and power. This was firstly in response to the rise of fascism in the 1930s and the consequent suppression of the European Avant-Garde, which was forced into a mass exodus to America. In place of cultural innovation, Europe's totalitarian regimes sought to achieve mass popularity by encouraging the 'tame' artists who remained to produce kitsch pseudo-realist imagery to convey propagandistic messages. Meanwhile, artists of progressive disposition sought refuge in New York which became the world's great artistic melting pot in the post-war era.

To thrive in New York, it became necessary for these artists to find new patrons without being seen to fraternise too closely with the already powerful and privileged. The best way forward was to appoint agents and galleries as 'middle men,' bridging the gulf between their bohemian world and the corporate world of their clients. Thus, an appearance of critical distance could be maintained while a whole new 'business' of modern art distribution



*A glass sculpture, selected by ICART for the cruise ship CELEBRITY SOLSTICE.*

PHOTO: MIKE LOUAGIE

and consumption was developed. The most high profile dealers nowadays are celebrities in their own right, famous examples being Larry Gagosian in New York and Jay Jopling in London, each of whose galleries sell highly-priced pieces of conceptual art, unique and exclusive status symbols for the super rich.

Not long before he died, the New York Times' legendary art critic Robert Hughes made a controversial television programme called 'The Mona Lisa Curse', which is now joyfully available for viewing on YouTube ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUh\\_NSpiTsY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUh_NSpiTsY)). Hughes was a straight-talking Australian with a fearsome intellect, a lifetime's knowledge about modern art and friendships with acclaimed artists. In the programme, he met and interviewed various prominent collectors who at first pretended that they bought artworks principally for aesthetic pleasure and intellectual fulfilment. By asking some

direct questions, Hughes found that none of the influential art collectors to whom he spoke had any connoisseurial knowledge about their collections.

If multi-billionaire art collectors in New York find it difficult to talk convincingly about their taste in art and motivations for being attracted to particular artworks, what chances have the rest of us? They surely would want to be thought by others as cultural arbiters, yet taste in art is very broad and diverse nowadays and people are drawn to artworks for multiplicities of reasons. Historically, artworks were admired for their demonstration of focused craft skill (virtuous labour) and for their life-like qualities and naturalistic detail (verisimilitude). Artists whose work showed such abilities were celebrated for coming as close to God's original act of creation as humans could dare attempt. Despite the prominence today of conceptual art, many people

still admire and enjoy artworks that are accurately representational, the pleasure of recognising subject matter and admiration of the artist's skill being central to these works' success. Conceptual art, however, is a whole other world, the artist's intention being to communicate an abstract idea and usually, to understand such pieces, it is necessary for viewers first to have some knowledge of philosophy as well as of the theoretical discourses of the contemporary art world. Arguably, conceptual art had its origin in the 1920s when Marcel Duchamp exhibited a factory-manufactured urinal bowl as an abstract sculpture which he called 'Fountain.' Duchamp's point probably was that if one stated one was an artist, ergo, whatever one said, did or selected to display was art. Therefore, even a banal, mass-produced object like a urinal could become art if an artist chose to display it on a plinth in an art gallery. Of course, for cultural conservatives at the time and since, the idea of describing Duchamp's urinal as art was errant nonsense. Yet, there has grown a large and enthusiastic audience for 'modern' art of various kinds and so many cities have attempted to emulate the popularity of Louisiana in Denmark, the various Guggenheim museums around the world and of London's Tate Modern by opening new galleries dedicated to the subject.

Since the inter-war era, art theory and the number of art movements has multiplied to such an extent that it is no longer possible to talk of an Avant-Garde forging ahead in opposition to a conservative mainstream. As pretty much anything apparently might be thought of as art in the correct circumstances, choosing what to buy can be a

daunting prospect, even for the wealthy and willing. The problem is only magnified when the task becomes one of selecting art for a large cruise ship or hotel, attracting and accommodating a broad very diversity of people, each with a distinctly personal accumulation of educational and cultural capital. Should one attempt to be all things to all people and risk curating an incoherent mess, or does one select only a limited range of types of artwork, perhaps only appealing to a small minority with specialised knowledge? Dare one impose contemporary fashionable taste on one's passengers or hotel guests, or might it be better to appeal to what Everett Rodgers termed 'late adaptors' in his 'Diffusion of Innovations Theory' by adopting a traditionalist artistic policy, similar to 1930s Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin? (Over the years, I have visited several passenger ships on which just such a policy is evident.)

From the 1960s onwards, so-called post-modern approaches came to the fore, celebrating and critiquing popular and commercial culture. Of many post-modern theorists whose ideas became influential, Roland Barthes, an academic at the Sorbonne, sought better to comprehend how cultural imagery – including art – is read and understood by diversities of viewers. Before focusing his research on visual culture, Barthes was a semiologist, interested in the construction and use of written and spoken language. His vital contribution was to apply methodologies developed within linguistics to the appreciation of art and design. Thus, man-made objects and environments were seen by him as richly complex 'texts' which could be de-coded into series of signs, attempt-

ing to communicate ideas to users and viewers. Another relevant commentator working concurrently in Paris was Michel Foucault who observed that commercial environments were 'heterotopic' mixtures of carefully selected items and images intended to ensure broad appeal – and Foucault even stated that ship interiors were the example par excellence of this phenomenon.

## SELECTIVE DIVERSITY

Since the 1980s, the privatisation of state-owned businesses coupled with the rise of post-modern cultural theories brought about more diverse and inclusive approaches to the commissioning and display of art in the public realm. Very good early examples of what might be described as 'selective diversity' on ships were the mid-1970s Swedish North Sea ferries TOR BRITANNIA and TOR SCANDINAVIA on which the ship owner, Christer Salén lavished an art budget of three million Swedish kronor. These vessels displayed works ranging from murals and sculptures by famous Swedish artists throughout the public rooms to hundreds of children's felt tip drawings which were framed and one hung in each cabin. Thus, wherever one went on board, there was art of some sort to be enjoyed, the costliest pieces in the most prominent locations where they could be widely viewed while cheap but charming pieces by school children were in less observed parts of the ship.

Nowadays, the strategy employed by International Corporate Art when spending a given budget to install art on board a ferry or cruise ship is very similar. In cabins, mass-reproduced framed prints can cost as little as be-

*The smoking saloon onboard Det Bergenske Dampskips-Selskap's VENUS, following post-war rebuilding.*



*One of Aage Stoirstein's 1938 murals re-installed aboard the 1966 BLACK PRINCE.*





PHOTOS: BRUCE PETER COLLECTION



Artworks on Tor Line's TOR BRITANNIA and TOR SCANDINAVIA of 1975-76.

## COLOURFUL ART

I first encountered the work of International Corporate Art in 2007 when I sailed on the recently-introduced Color Line cruise ferries COLOR FANTASY and COLOR MAGIC between Kiel and Oslo. From the outset, I was very impressed by the fact that an art catalogue was available at each ship's reception desk, meaning that passengers could use it as a guide while they walked around. On a 20-hour crossing, taking an 'art tour' was well worth the effort. There were many pieces to examine and most were well-chosen and arranged. Some were particularly witty and, with the aid of additional background information from the ship's art catalogue, passengers could hopefully understand or even learn to appreciate some of the more challenging selections. A photograph by Elspeth Diedrix of a Harley-Davidson motorbike parked on sand, but covered in Barbie pink powder, raised gender studies issues as the pink negated the subject's initial macho intention. Elsewhere on board, what at first appeared to be reproductions of Dutch 'Old Masters' in gilded baroque framing depicting sixteenth century merchants and noblemen in period costume were actually TV screens showing films of

carefully dressed and made-up models, meaning that their subjects occasionally winked, smiled and moved their heads slightly as one viewed them; these delightful and engrossing pieces were by a San Francisco-based artist, J.D. Beltran.

Artworks of this kind can intrigue, perhaps amuse or confound expectations while also inviting viewers to ask questions of themselves and of their surroundings. An obvious starting point when faced with any artwork might be 'how was this made and why?' Next, one might ask what the pink dust-covered motorbike infers about our relationships with 'desirable' consumer goods, more specifically about the gendering of objects and the ways we use them to promote certain images of ourselves to the world. The re-makes of the Dutch paintings as short films could possibly pose questions about relationships between the past and present, as well as the slightly absurd vanity of posing in costume for posterity. Or, viewers might do no more than delight at finding that what they at first thought was an inanimate representation actually looking back and smiling slightly. The most interesting and engaging art doesn't tell you what to think but acts as a means to stimulate speculative thought and liberal debate. It is open to possibility, as opposed to presenting a pre-ordained totalitarian vision. It is also very rarely found in commercial hospitality environments, where works selected are all too often depressingly anodyne, yet grandiose and chosen glibly to re-enforce a corporate brand identity. Having been on numerous large ferries either with only a very few dreary artworks that are 'corporate' in the worst sense, or none whatsoever, the thoughtfulness of the selections on COLOR FANTASY and COLOR MAGIC came as a very pleasant surprise.

## FJORD LINE'S CHOICE

Since then, International Contemporary Art has worked on numerous other ship-board commissions, consisting mainly of cruise vessels, but Fjord Line's new STAVANGERFJORD and her forthcoming sister ship, the BERGENSFJORD, are among its few recent projects for ferries (perhaps this is because hardly any large ferries are presently on order, or because the industry as a whole is culturally unadventurous).

The project to select artworks for the STAVANGERFJORD was carried out by ICART's former Artistic Director

tween 70 and 90 dollars apiece, while a large sculptural work for a cruise ship's atrium might cost upwards of half a million dollars. As part of the selection process, it is necessary to consider the tastes and aspirations of the wide diversity of passengers likely to view these works and also the image and style of the shipping company commissioning them. Of course, the starting point is the available budget which must be divided up in such a way that enough suitable works can be acquired to fill the spaces identified by the interior designer. ICART effectively operates as a 'turn-key' supplier, liaising with the interior designer and ship owner, but otherwise spending its budget to acquire, transport, prepare and install all of the art required for each project. The installation work usually takes place at the very end of the outfitting process, just before a vessel is delivered, but sometimes it can be necessary to bring large sculptural pieces on board during a ship's initial construction phase before the only means of access – a big hole in the deck-head – is welded permanently shut.

Tone Dalen, whose background is in set design and dressing for the film industry, visual merchandising, retail design and project management. Nowadays, she works as Art Adviser and Project Manager.

Dalen worked closely with the interior architect Finn Falkum-Hansen to choose artworks to enhance the vessel's interiors. As is typical of fine art on ferries and large cruise ships, the most valuable original pieces on the STAVANGERFJORD are installed where they are secure and can be appreciated the most – in the restaurants, where either the doors are locked or there are crew members to supervise. The STAVANGERFJORD's Commander Buffet restaurant forms an elegant backdrop to three different artists' work. Outside the entrance, there is a large textile collage by Londoner Natasha Kerr, whose studio is in Hackney and who creates what she describes as 'biographical textiles', mixing panels of antique linen with old photographs. Appropriately enough, the centrepiece of her panel is a photograph of a ship's captain, who stares out from a scene captured the best part of a century ago into the STAVANGERFJORD's interior and at her passengers as they queue to dine at the buffet. Inside the

restaurant, the buffet counter is flanked by two impressive glass sculptures in the Nordic figurative tradition by the well-established Swedish sculptor Lars Widenfalk. Producing these large and weighty pieces required great skill as first the artist made them in clay, then gesso moulds were produced into which the glass could be poured. This was done at a specialist workshop in the Czech Republic, where there is a long

tradition of casting glass. The cooling process took two months in controlled conditions to prevent cracks from appearing – and the results are magnificent. Contrasting sharply with these figurative pieces are a series of wall-mounted abstract coloured glass bas-reliefs in the tradition of the Concrete movement by the German photographer and glass artist Andreas Lutherer; they perhaps represent the opposite extreme



*The entrance to the STAVANGERFJORD's Grieg Restaurant.*



*The STAVANGERFJORD's buffet restaurant, featuring Lars Widenfalk's sculptures.*

PHOTOS: MIKE LOUAGIE

Karl Hansen's photo mural in the Grieg Restaurant.



PHOTO: MIKE LOUAGIE

of what can be achieved in glass. Some might interpret them as being like signal flags, while others may enjoy how their character changes depending on the ambient lighting conditions.

In the small Grieg a la carte restaurant, next to the buffet, the British artists Malcolm Martin and Gaynor Dowling made two sculptures in gilded lime wood. The restaurant's main feature is a long photo collage by Karl Hansen, featuring Grieg looking towards a large group of famous and notorious pop and rock musicians, including Rod Stewart (twice). This artwork could be described as 'memorable.' Facing it are comparatively demure screen prints by Marius Martinussen.

The STAVANGERFJORD's mid-ship staircase ends with a large atrium with a skylight, below which there is space for a decorative panel. Here, the Norwegian Terje Roalkvam has made a composition of objects shaped from stone, timber and aluminium that have been gathered from all over Norway. In some senses, this is reminiscent of the late American conceptual artist Robert Rauschenberg's site/non-site pieces in which he displayed boxes of soil from other locations in a gallery. In a similar manner, Terje Roalkvam's 'pieces of Norway' travel overseas with the ship. They are, however, arguably too small to make a convincing impact in the space allocated for them. On STAVANGERFJORD's sister ship, BERGENSFJORD, the equivalent space will feature a large mural panel by the famous Norwegian muralist Per Krogh, rescued from the 1956 trans-Atlantic liner BERGENSFJORD and this will most likely be very effective.

In the STAVANGERFJORD's foyers and stair towers, extensive use has been made of large-scale prints of touristic photographs and images of social interaction between glamorous First Class

*Throughout the STAVANGERFJORD's hallways and staircase landings, there are a variety of framed photographs and photo murals installed.*



passengers from the 'golden era' of liner travel.

To ensure consistent print quality, in 2007 ICART established a subsidiary company called Spitting Image for large- and small-scale in-house printing on broad ranges of materials.

The outside cabins and suites all contain framed prints of works by the Dutch artist Marcel Schellekens whose style is appropriately soothing. The smaller inside cabins show distant horizons thus increasing the impression of the cabins' size and cleverly making the smaller inside cabins feel less claustrophobic.

The STAVANGERFJORD represents a tremendous leap forward for ferry travel to Western Norway. In many



*Pieces of Norway, arranged by Terje Roalkvam, in the upper foyer.*

places, her interiors are striking and thoughtfully detailed – and ICART's selections of artworks add a further layer of visual richness for passengers' enjoyment. ■

