

Wowed by the W Boston's redesign

By **Linda Clarke** Globe Correspondent, December 15, 2016, 10:00 p.m.



Antonio Mora's Extreme Wow Suite portrait mural in the hallway. LINDA CLARKE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

If there is any beauty in destruction then it is found in shou sugi ban. This traditional Japanese method of weathering and preserving wood by charring became trendy in America over the past couple of years, and falls in line with a desire for aged decorative elements. But shou sugi ban's rumpled black tarry finish has an element of chaos — something violent happened to this wood — and a mysterious Gothic quality. A good example of shou sugi ban is seen in the newly

finished charred wood walling in the lobby lounge of the W Boston. Paired with granite columns, it is raw and earthy, yet suavely playful.

The newly added charred Japanese wood, along with the new “welcome pods” — a.k.a. the check-in desk — are the first elements guests see of the W’s recent renovation program. Higher up, in the guest rooms, beauty and destruction come together in a more dramatic scene.

The focal point of the hotel’s renovations is the Wow Suites. If something is named Wow, then it needs to elicit that response. But if it’s already wow, then how does it become more wow? That was the problem facing the W’s design team when it came to updating the Wows, but they found the answer in Spanish artist Antonio Mora’s mysterious, mystical portraits.

On the hotel’s 15th floor, the appropriately named Extreme Wow Suite — or E-Wow in W speak — is the equivalent of a presidential suite and the hotel’s largest guest room. The expansive pied-à-terre has wrap-around window walls that stretch through to an amazing bathroom overlooking the Theatre District and onto Chinatown. Guests can laze in the egg-shaped bathtub and gaze skyward. Still, amid the splendorous wowness, it’s an amber and gray colored mural that commands attention: A perfectly pretty female face is enveloped in flames. Who is this mysterious muse rising out of chaos?

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“It’s not so much about who she is,” says Krystle Louie, W Hotels’ senior designer who heads the brand’s worldwide design team. Louie is based in Manhattan at parent company Starwood’s cutely named Starlab. “She’s a blend of the angelic and the powerful. It’s hauntingly beautiful. Antonio has this dreamlike approach; he transforms the face into an abstract portrait. You can get lost in his images.”

This face, or rather this gaze, is something akin to Twiggy’s beautifully blank and narcotized stare on the cover of David Bowie’s “Pin-Ups” album. The face, or one similar, is repeated in E-Wow’s hallway and also in portraits. In the smaller suites, she is enveloped in smoke or she gazes out from a hat of black feathers. The smoke and flames represent the Revolutionary War, and feathers represent Boston-born Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven,” a theme that’s picked up in a wire chandelier, too. Local being a big design element for hotels these days, the design team wanted to tell a Boston story: For instance, the cushion is a tea bag and the throw on the bed is decorated with tea plates, one of which is smashed asunder. They represent the Boston Tea Party.

“We partnered with graphic design company Design Solidarity in Vermont for that,” notes Louie. “We took a look at Boston’s history and we saw this rebellious nature: from the Tea Party to Aerosmith. Each element is an opportunity to tell another part of the story; it’s a layered approach.”

There is a faint rock ’n’ roll and Mod edge to the bespoke chairs and furniture, but it is the murals that pop. Given that sleeping underneath one in a Wow suite commands a wow of a price (rates start at \$1,999-\$2,999 a night, depending on Wow level), it isn’t surprising they aren’t the most booked rooms and now do double duty as rented entertainment suites for private and corporate events.

“Our brand attracts a lot of fashion launches and book events, and other launches that are not suited to conventional meeting rooms,” says Louie. “Our Wow suites have DJ capability: The

W Amsterdam has a DJ console that unfolds from under the television. The Wow's central bar is paramount to being an event space, either as a breakfast bar for early morning meetings or for cocktail events. We've had great success with W Times Square. The Times Square E-Wow was rented out for something like seven days per month before the entertainment suite promotion. Now, on average it's rented for about 15 days per month, just for events."

W Boston opened in 2009, transforming the Theatre District with its glassy tower and snazzy club-y attitude. But W has morphed and matured over the years — albeit subtly — and Boston's is following suit.

"The way the brand has evolved over the last couple of years, it's now more about cocktail culture than clubbing; more about artists telling stories. I'm not saying we're not a social brand; we absolutely are," Louie adds. "That vitality is a core part of W's DNA. But travelers want to feel they are where they are. The room should not be generic. People at W Boston want to wake up and say, 'Hey, I'm in Boston.' "

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