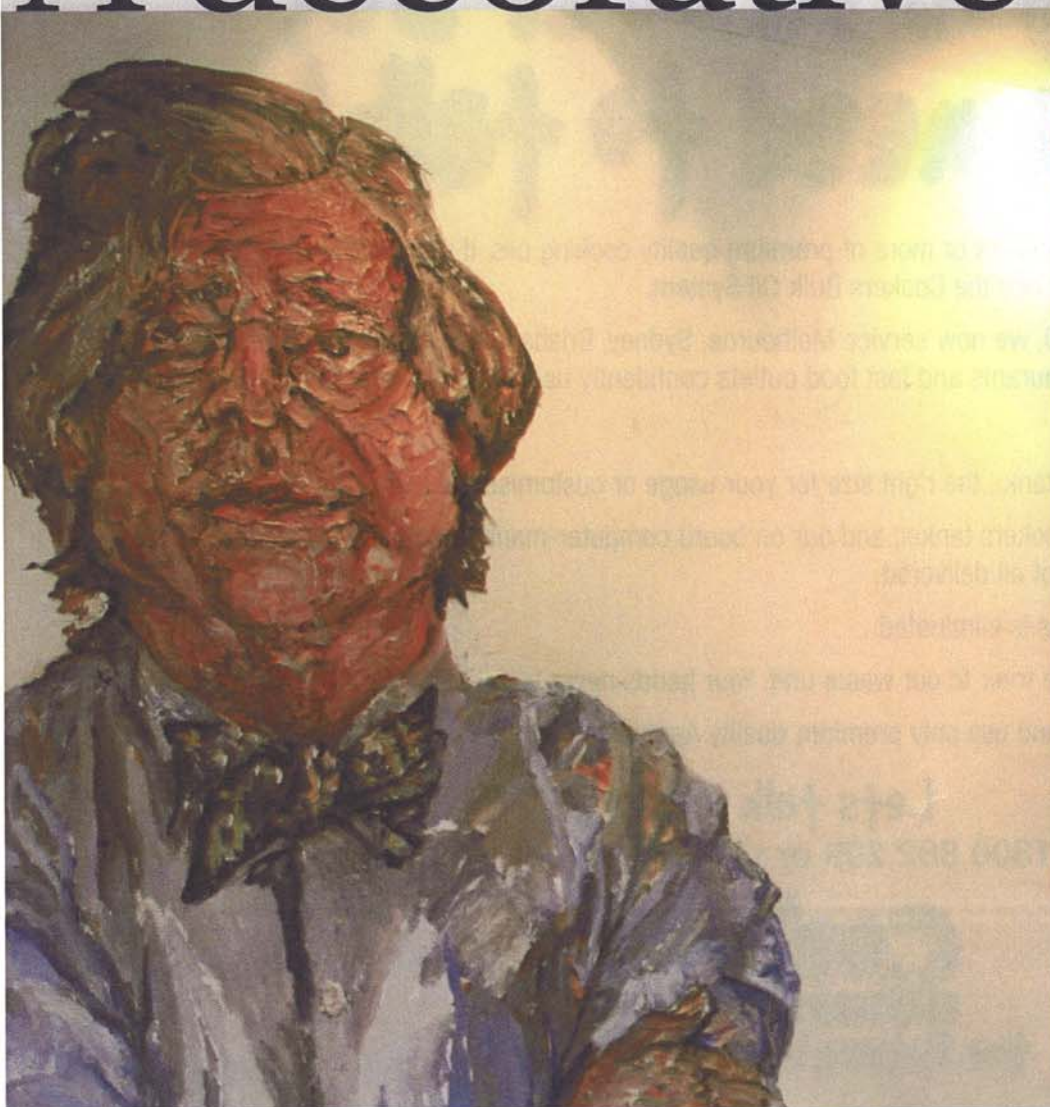




A decorative degus



Can art influence our perception of food?

Anthony Huckstep investigates the role of art in restaurants.

Most chefs would describe themselves as artists. The art of gastronomy requires a deft hand and a brave heart. Magic morsels created with flare, passion and precision see the light of day for mere seconds before they are dissected, demolished and digested.

For a painter or sculptor the process is somewhat similar, with perhaps a little less internal body movements.

In a sense the chef and the artist share similar goals, but can their creations work successfully together?

In a commercial sense, restaurant art must be weighed up as cost versus the space provided, with the return being repeat business.

If this is to be accomplished, then restaurant art needs to be more than simple decoration.

Enter retired Neurologist Paul Satchell.

In recent times Satchell has become a sculptor – a world far removed from the inner-workings of the nervous system.

In just a few short years Satchell has maintained regular lease arrangements for his 'moving sculptures' with numerous restaurants throughout Sydney.

He speaks of a post 'Prandial' state that our bodies pass into once the eating process begins that effects the way we experience our surroundings. 'Prandial' comes from the Latin 'prandium' meaning 'a late lunch'.

It is in this period of 'post prandial' the mechanics of the body begin the slow rhythmic movements of digestion. Our stomach, pancreas and the like begin slow motions and rhythms inwards and outwards.

Sound a little hard to swallow?

Well, Satchell believes this slow rhythmic motion should be emulated in art within the dining room. This can be achieved in numerous ways – slow moving sculptures, calm flowing paintings and even soft gentle landscapes.

The inference is that when we start to consume we transcend into a different state, our body almost shuts out any outside interferences. We delve into a barely communicative state of inward revelation of the senses and sensations. The theory goes that in this state of preoccupied self-absorption the initial 'wow' factor of the 'decorative art' is almost totally lost.

But what if art can interfere into the post-prandial?

Satchell's sculptures, with their slow rhythmic movements, aim to complement the digestion processes. Sculptures to adorn Sydney restaurants include 'Digestions' – originally named the 'Sphincter of od', 'Forking' and 'Can't quite put my finger on it'.

Can art alter the internal state of diners?

To get a better picture of the impact of artwork featured in the dining rooms across the nation, let us start in Melbourne's oldest dining room – Grossi Florentino.

ABOVE:
Painting by
Allan Wolf-
Tasker in the
main dining
room at the
Lake House.

Originally named The Florentino, the then owner Rinaldo Massoini commissioned Napier Waller between 1930 and 1932 to paint a series of works that appear in the restaurant's mural room.

An interesting part of this is the fact the paintings have been signed by four of Waller's students.

FAR LEFT:
Archibald
painting titled
Tony Bilson by
John Walker.

What role Waller had in the actual painting of these panels no one knows. However, we do know that the horse with Lorenzo de Medici riding through Florence was indeed painted by him despite the panels however have been attributed to Napier as his work.

The artwork has stood the test of time explains Melissa Grossi, of Grossi Fiorentino.

"The artwork in our upstairs fine dining rooms has not changed in perhaps the past 30 years and not for the past 70 years in the mural room specifically," she says.

The nine commissioned paintings that hang in the mural room depict scenes from Renaissance Florence. Founder of the Florentino, Rinaldo Massoni, wanted to recreate the joyous and festive nature of his hometown during its peak in a visual way for his clients.

The paintings feature famous artists, architects and buildings which are still admired today, including Michelangelo, Brunelleschi and Da Vinci.

"While the colours of the walls may change and kitchens get updated I think the customers still feel in awe of the size and the nature of the paintings here.

Grossi has no illusions about the important role the artwork plays at the restaurant.

"Slightly muted shades with figures in period costumes and the rolling hills of Tuscany combined with the long shape of the room and the wood panelling, one could almost imagine being in a Tuscan Palazzo and that I think was the intended effect."

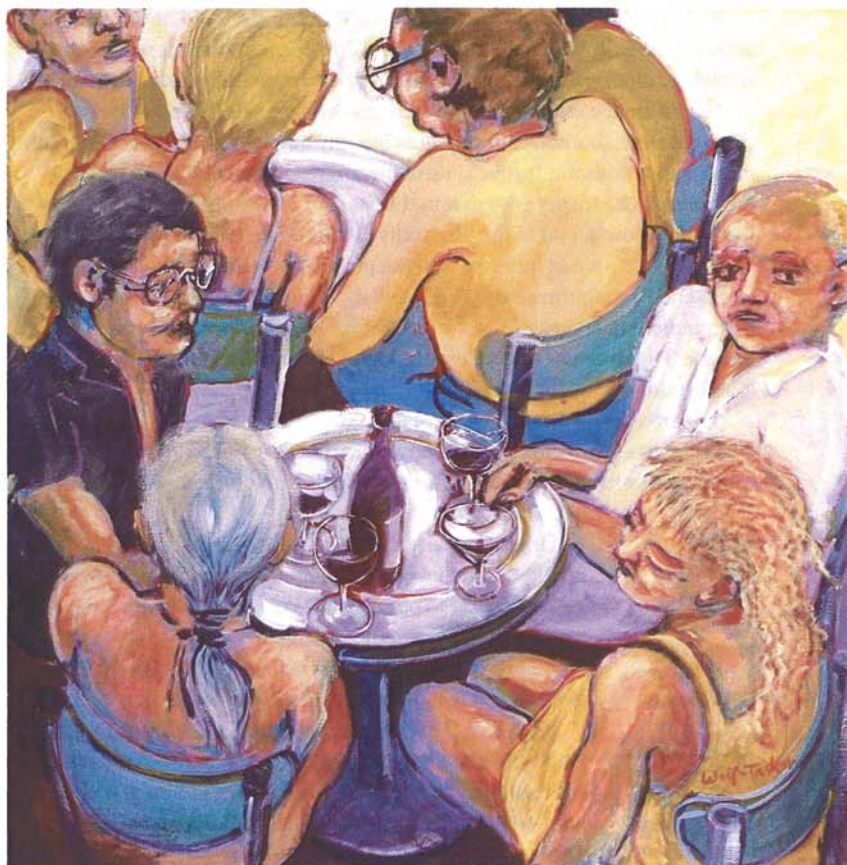
In an attempt to introduce some history and nostalgia to his restaurant, George Pompei, from Pompei's at Bondi Beach, recently acquired art based on the works of Augusto Lorenzini.

"We sourced our work from The Historic Houses Trust of NSW who kindly allowed us to display the artwork in our restaurant," says Pompei.

Lorenzini was an Italian decorator/artist in Victorian Sydney and very little of his work remains.

"All of Lorenzini's work has been lost, destroyed or painted over so we consider it a great opportunity to

Another piece by
Allan Wolf-Tasker



“When we start to consume we transcend to a different state, our body almost shuts out any outside interferences.”

introduce our diners to this little known artist/decorator. And being Italian, I feel he has particular relevance. Our food is traditional Italian and we feel Lorenzini's work reinforces this aspect."

The notion that 'art' should embody the values or heritage of the restaurant seems to be a common theme amongst restaurateurs, journeying beyond a simple 'decoration'.

In Daylesford, Victoria, at the world-renowned Lake House, owned by gastronome Alla Wolf-Tasker and artist husband Allan Wolf-Tasker, local artists are showcased throughout the property.

"There are my husband Allan's paintings of course, but you will also come across Glen Mack and Don Wreford's beautiful glass pieces and a wonderful 'Cockatoo chair' made by Miriam Porter," says Alla Wolf-Tasker.

Lawrence Winder's bronze nudes also appear in the gardens.

Much of the work is on permanent exhibition, while others arrive on loan from artists looking for exposure to the guests.

At the Lake House they use what Alla refers to as a 'team approval' process for selection of artwork. The region is known for its many highly regarded artisans, artists, writers and musicians. Wolf-Tasker believes it is important that the restaurant represents the cultural richness of its environs. Add to this Alla's husband Allan's large canvases depicting images from the hospitality industry – many of which have been purchased by other restaurateurs for their establishments.

Alla confirms what many restaurateurs feel about 'art' in restaurant.

"Art needs to be relevant or integral to the place in some way – either the art is a predetermined part of the design or in some way the pieces of art relate to the restaurant and its philosophy."

Lucio's restaurant, set in a corner terrace of leafy Paddington, is perhaps Australia's most renowned 'art' restaurants.

In 1999 owner Lucio Galletto published "The art of food at Lucio's", which has since sold out in three re-prints.

The walls of Lucio's feature an extensive collection of many leading contemporary Australian artists.

"Over the years we have built an extensive collection of artists through the friendship that I have with them," says Galletto.

These include John Olsen, John Coburn, Tim Storrier, Michael Johnson, John Beard, Fred Cress, Salvatore Zofrea, Martin Sharp, Gary Shead, Charles Blackman, Colin Lancel, Ken Johnson, Robert Juniper, David Larwill and some younger ones such as Jason Benjamin and Luke Sciberras.

INSTANT AMBIENCE!

Just add
A&A Candle Lamps



- Australia's leading supplier
- The largest range of WAX FREE candle lamps
- Free sample service - try before you buy
- Exclusive Australian and imported designs

Visit
www.lamps.net.au
or phone 02 4283 7700



Galletto professes it all started back in '84 when he framed a scribble on the menu book by Sidney Nolan. So moved was Nolan that he then presented Lucio with a painting.

Since then another piece has passed into restaurant art folklore – John Olsen's doodle entitled "The day Lucio became an Australian" which depicts a creature half Lucio, half kangaroo.

For Lucio it is not so much about the philosophy of the restaurant, but more a reflection of his passion for art.

"Food and art for me is like the air that I breathe," says Galletto.

"I grew up in the family restaurant in Italy where we had an art gallery, so it has always been in my blood. So it is very important for me personally and also I think for our customers as well.

"The combination of great food, great service and great art on the walls is, in my view, one of the best dining experiences you can imagine."

Restaurateur Tony Bilson is another believer. He regards himself as a part of the arts community – featuring many Australian artists during his rich 40-year career as one of Australia's most influential chefs.

"I would never class myself as a collector, my self image is not so much as a collector but as a fellow artist," says Bilson.

He sources most of his artwork through Artbank, but being so involved in the arts community, he often finds pieces of interest in his travels.

"I see paintings in a gallery or a friend's studio and some are given to me as a gift. Some are suitable for a restaurant and others aren't.

"Artbank is a fantastic resource, I have used it a lot over the years."

Dick Watkins and John Anderson's pieces in Bilson's dining room are both through Artbank.

"The reason I love that Anderson piece is that I used to live at Eltham. It's the sort of

painting that looks like Eltham in the 1930s, but put in the contemporary context with the falcon. It's just one of those paintings that grows on you and I am very loathed to pass it on," he says.

The selection process for Bilson combines his taste with a sense of viability in a restaurant setting.

"Sometimes I am wrong and the art just doesn't work in the restaurant, but I think that is okay. I'm not trying to present an image of the restaurant with the art. It's more a case of images that I find interesting, rather than as a marketing tool.

"But I guess if you analyse it, if it was a marketing tool, the artwork represents, in an obvious and subliminal way, my values."

One of the main features in the dining room is the paper chandeliers designed by Inge Maar. The papers are replaceable allowing Bilson to create just about any ambience in the room.

"On one occasion we used photos from the Sydney Morning Herald, which were printed on this thin semi-transparent paper. We did that because this used to be the Fairfax building. So we incorporated the photos from the 1930s into the restaurant context."

The current design reflects Bilson's excitement over the rise of cottage truffle farms in Australia.

Then there is the striking birthday card by John Walker [for Bilson's 60th birthday] that adorns the north wall of the restaurant.

"It's a sort of narrative, it's a great juxtaposition for the room with a raunchy nude saying happy birthday and ripping her bra off. Ha ha, it's just fantastic.

"He also did the one for the Archibald," adds Bilson.

The painting which stands at the entrance came excruciatingly close to claiming the prize but was pipped at the post by the portrait of John Bell.

Bilson's Dining room boasts a rich tapestry of different works, but getting it right isn't that



The John Walker birthday card for Bilson's 60th birthday that adorns the north wall of Bilson's.

Impeds
Sunnyside

Australia's finest and most diverse
 range of IQF fruits and specialty
 vegetables, purees, pulps, frozen
 juices and concentrates plus a
 range of exciting mixes and fillings

Lychees

Free Pouch Pack

Cocktail Onions

Sunnyside
 500GR PUREE
 POUCH PACK

product processed and
 audited under externally audited
 HACCP criteria

years of solid, continuous family
 operation and experience

IMPED FOODS

10th Road, KIRRAWEE NSW 2232
 Tel: 02 9521 5384 Fax: 02 9542 3164
 enquiries@simpedfoods.com.au

easy. Bilson believes a lot of restaurateurs get it wrong.

"Yes they do [get it wrong], because a lot of the time they are using commercial crap rather than something original. Most good people like Lucio Galletto understand how art can make an impact in a restaurant."

Damien Pignolet has that wonderful black and white mural by Michael Fitzjames, and Michael's artwork has been part of the branding of Bistro Moncur.

"Our Fitzjames' here are completely different to the Damien's."

"Essentially, I think it states where a restaurant sits from a social point of view."

This notion is reflected in Shannon Bennett's three-hatted Vue De Monde in Melbourne, which has been the benchmark for good eating in the Victorian capital for a number of years now.

Bennett has worked extensively to ensure the dining room represents and maintains this benchmark through a range of largely Australian artists.

"We view art as an important investment for the restaurant and as a significant factor in the ambience of the dining experience," says Bennett.

Vue de Monde works in conjunction with the Anna Schwartz Gallery in Flinders Lane, Melbourne sourcing works from artists such as Dale Frank, Jenny Watson, Daniel von Sturmer, Tom Samek, Stieg Persson, Emily Floyd, Christine Borland and John Young.

Bennett says the role of the artwork is to complement the 'art' created in the kitchen.

"Aesthetically, artwork is vital in creating warmth and atmosphere in the dining room," he says.

"We believe that other elements of the dining experience are forms of art – from the food on the plate and the plates themselves and the floral arrangements on the tables, to the beautiful glassware and decanters and our restaurant business cards.

It is not so much about the philosophy of the restaurant, but more a reflection of his passion for art.



ABOVE: Paul Satchell, *Digestion*, recycled junk, 2005

BELOW: Florentino's Mural Room's centre panel *Lorenzo the Magnificent*, attributed to Napier Waller painted 1930-1932.

"We strive to provide an experience that is a 'feast for all the senses' and the visual component of this is the starting point. Our show plates were individually crafted by Tasmanian artist Tom Samek and we are currently working with Anna Schwartz to create another range of these working with a local artist."

There is little doubt that when it comes to art in restaurants that the values of the chef or restaurateur are a big driving force behind the selection of artwork. A serious restaurateur is after a lot more than decoration and aims to acquire art that enhances the whole experience.

But are there boundaries or guidelines when it comes to restaurant art?

Hmm, artistic license versus commercial viability, it's definitely something to ponder. ●

Courtesy Australian Art Review magazine – first published in issue 12 November 2006 – February 2007

