

THE LOOKER

STARING DOWN CITY STYLE



The Toast of Japantown

A NEW HOTEL IN AN OVERLOOKED NEIGHBORHOOD IS INSPIRED BY AGE-OLD JAPANESE TECHNIQUES AND 12-YEAR WHISKY.

BY LAUREN MURROW

LAURE JOLLET



WHEN DESIGNER Nicole Hollis was hired to envision the former Hotel Tomo as the Buchanan, a new Klimpton hotel in Japantown, she knew what she had to do. “I said, ‘We’d better start drinking,’” she recalls. A novice Japanese whisky enthusiast, she sought to incorporate the spirit’s bottles and aging barrels into the hotel’s design. “My design team looked at me like I was insane,” she says.

But Hollis has never been what you might call a sober-minded designer. “We’re not interested in doing a hotel if it’s presented to us as ‘This is our standard side table; this is the bedspread we always use,’” she says. “We want to give the property a soul.” For the Buchanan, she subtly blended contemporary art by local artists with traditional Japanese design elements. In contrast, Hotel Tomo had been anime-inspired: googly-eyed stuffed animals on the beds, neon furniture, and cartoons swirling across the walls. Hollis opted for something a little less, well, trippy.

She started by toning down the high-octane color palette, swathing the lobby’s walls in a deep shade of indigo and swapping the candy-colored seating for a leather banquette sofa. The feature wall is covered with wood reclaimed from charred whisky barrels. Overhead, hundreds of glass bottles—inspired by Nikka’s Taketsuru 12-year pure malt whisky and From the Barrel whisky—gleam in a light installation by ELA Lighting. Artist Kelly Ording created the entry mural, which incorporates Japanese illustration techniques; the boardroom art by woodworker Aleksandra Zee references shibori dye patterns.

Upstairs, 131 guestrooms are decked with shibori pillows, indigo-dyed fabrics, and handmade Asian pottery. “We have to be practical in hospitality, but we still want the room to feel original,” says Hollis. “I’m not interested in perfection.”

The made-over hotel opened last month, but the six-month design process briefly derailed Hollis’s whisky-tasting sessions. “My husband called me out,” she says. “He was like, ‘I don’t think you like whisky tasting as much as you like looking at the bottles.’ And it’s true! Japanese packaging is amazing.” For a certain sort of designer, the liquor bottle is as intoxicating as what’s inside it. ■



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1. The lobby of the Buchanan Hotel. “In my studio, we’re the client,” says Nicole Hollis. “We design places where we’d want to stay.” 2. Julie Coyle Art Associates sourced the prints in the guestrooms and the lobby. 3. The platform beds, headboards, and case goods were custom-designed by Hollis. 4. Sonoma furniture designer Louise Mann of House of Mann created the sculptural wooden chairs. 5. Hollis struck a moody tone in the boardroom with fixtures by Tech Lighting and a shibori-inspired piece by woodworker Aleksandra Zee.

LAURE JOUET