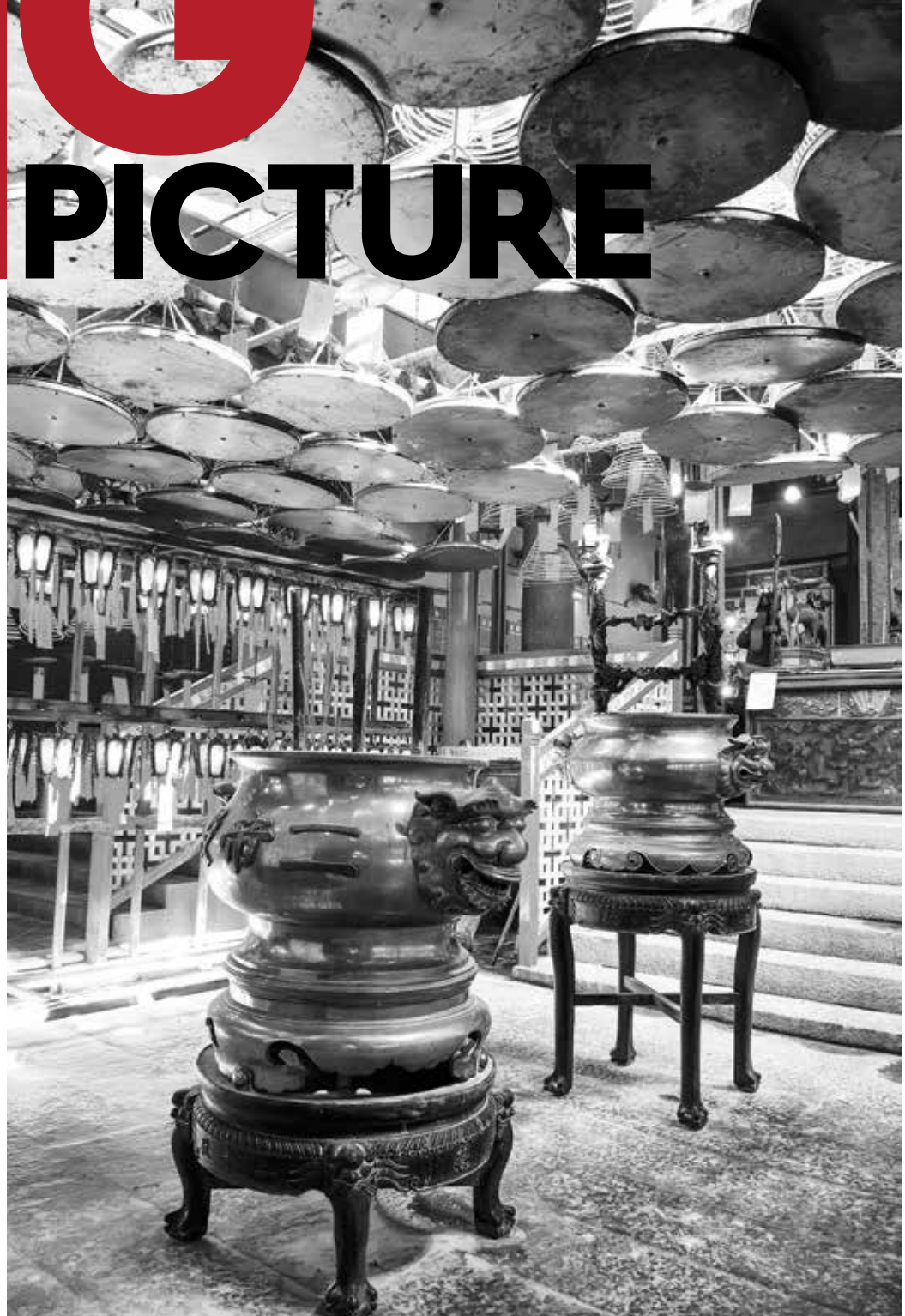


THE BIG PICTURE

You expect Hong Kong to have a lively food and shopping scene, but you might not expect it to be home to some of the world's best art. And you won't find it in galleries or museums.

Words REBECCA HADDAD



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Guandi, the god of war, is a prominent figure in Chinese art history. The 17th-century depiction I gaze upon now is of particular interest: a figure on horseback, immortalised in bronze and especially rare for the fact that the horse is in

a walking, rather than standing, position. Whether you're an art aficionado or a complete novice, the piece is something to behold.

Guandi shares space with several other highly prized examples of Chinese art — gilded wood carvings documenting historic moments dating back to the Han dynasty; a similarly dated glazed vase depicting scenes of hunting; an early Ming-dynasty celadon jar. If you're ever in Hong Kong and want to see these incredible works for yourself, you should note that you won't find these pieces in a museum, but rather the lobby of Hong Kong's iconic Mandarin Oriental hotel, located in the heart of bustling Central.

Hong Kong's art scene, like the city itself, bursts with the surprising and the unexpected. Eclectic boutiques sit on ground floors of run-down apartments; Buddhist temples steeped in history share real estate with gleaming office towers veiled in bamboo scaffolding — Hong Kong is charmingly unapologetic about its juxtaposing characteristics.

From the trendy cafes that embrace the street corners of bohemian Sheung Wan to historic temples, shining luxury hotels and high-end restaurants — art is omnipresent in the city. And they are the very places to discover Hong Kong's true modern identity.

When the world-renowned Art Basel fair added Hong Kong to its global itinerary in 2013, the move all but cemented the city's place as an international player in the world of art and design. And with such an impressive art collection of its own, it's unsurprising the Mandarin Oriental is the official hotel partner of the annual event. It's a role the hotel takes extremely seriously, transforming its already art-laden lobby into a pop-up gallery of rotating exhibits every year, and even commissioning the chefs of its Michelin-starred Pierre and Mandarin Grill + Bar to create special dishes inspired by the festival's theme and specific works of art.

The Mandarin isn't the only hotel in Hong Kong to moonlight as a cultural institution. A few MTR stops down in Causeway Bay is J Plus Hotel by Yoo, where the entire premises is a canvas — literally — for local and international contemporary artists. The hotel is immediately identifiable by its striking portrait of a woman across its facade gazing out over the street. The mural is the work of UK-based collective, Graffiti4Hire, and is a play on Renaissance-style portraiture.

PREVIOUS PAGE, FROM LEFT Man Mo Temple; the Mandarin Oriental's Michelin-starred restaurant Man Wah. **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** A woman worshipping in Man Mo Temple; a jackhammer was used to create this incredible artwork on Bibo's wall; Chinese lanterns; Hong Kong streets bustle with life and energy. **BELOW** This vanilla cream and crème brûlée dessert was created by chefs at the Mandarin Oriental, inspired by René Magritte's *The Son of Man*.



In 2014, J Plus Hotel had a sleek and sexy refurbishment and was rebranded under the stylish Yoo Hotels group. The interiors are a tribute to its original designer, the legendary Philippe Starck (also the founder of Yoo Studio), with Starck-inspired furnishings adorning the lobby, and industrial-chic light fixtures and bathroom fittings in the small yet cosy guestrooms. But the true star here is the ground-floor lobby, which doubles as Art@JPlushk — an exhibition space for local art collectives to showcase their works to Hong Kong's local and visiting audiences.

"It provides an opportunity for our hotel guests to interact with the local art scene," says the hotel's general manager, Vivian Chau. "There are so many local and international creative talents gathered in Hong Kong. However, under the fast-living and commercial-driven atmosphere here, there is very limited space [for exhibitions]." It is certainly refreshing — and quite the luxury — to wander down to breakfast and gaze upon selections from Hollywood Road's Cat Street Gallery, a hot coffee and red bean bun in hand.

Fortunately, first-time visitors needn't stray too far from the well-worn tourist track to experience Hong Kong's endearing artistic juxtapositions. Man Mo Temple, on Hollywood Road in Sheung Wan, is one of the oldest in the city and is, quite literally, a shining tribute to Chinese art and Buddhist culture. Built in honour of the god of literature (Man) and god of war (Mo), the temple is resplendent with statues, beautiful Chinese lanterns and giant incense coils suspended hypnotically ➔



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from the ceiling. Shadowed by towering offices and high-rise residential apartments, this temple remains a cherished part of Hong Kong's history, and a brilliant example of art's powerful religious depictions of Imperial China.

From there, it's just a hop, skip and window-shop past the antique boutiques of Hollywood Road to restaurant-cum-gallery, Bibo. Upon crossing the threshold, it's apparent that every surface is a canvas for creative expression, from the dinner plates decorated with hand-painted illustrations to the walls filled with street art. "It is a nightmare for any professional museum art curator," admits its eponymous owner — and legendary street artist — Bibo. "It is chaos. But out of this nonsense, beauty emerges."

Indeed, Bibo has fast become a must-visit art hub in the city, with visitors keen to gaze upon works from artists such as JR and Banksy and tuck into equally impressive French fine-dining fare (think seared foie gras, *l'oeuf de poule* served with a caviar crown, and steak tartare). "I wanted also to pioneer the idea that art should not be only an individualising experience but a socialising one," says Bibo. "At the crossroads of different cultures, the city is starving for mental simulation through art and gastronomy."

In a city that veritably shines from the light of some 90 Michelin stars, it's little wonder the food in Hong Kong is treated with artistic reverence. It's fair to say from the traditional noodle and dim-sum houses to the fusion fare consumed in elegant dining rooms with Victoria Harbour views, Hong Kong's chefs have storytelling through food well and truly nailed.

In this part of the world, it's hard to separate culinary innovation from the name Alvin Leung, a British-born chef best known as the man heading up the kitchen of Bo Innovation, revered for inventive cuisine prepared with incredible creativity and precision. The restaurant is appropriately located in Wan Chai, a neighbourhood that has long shed its seedy reputation to

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT This Mandarin Grill + Bar dish was inspired by Jackson Pollock; fresh oysters at Mandarin Oriental; Man Mo Temple artworks; the Sheung Wan neighbourhood.

DETAILS

Bibo 163 Hollywood Rd, Sheung Wan; www.bibo.hk.

Bo Innovation 60 Johnston Rd, Wan Chai; www.boinnovation.com.

The Cat Street Gallery 222 Hollywood Rd, Sheung Wan; www.thecatstreetgallery.com. **J Plus Hotel**

By Yoo 1-5 Irving St, Causeway Bay; www.jplushongkong.com.

Man Mo Temple 124-126 Hollywood Rd, Sheung Wan.

Mandarin Oriental Hong Kong 5 Connaught Rd, Central; www.mandarinoriental.com.

emerge as one of Hong Kong's hottest nightspots. Here, the self-proclaimed 'demon chef' takes classic Cantonese recipes and revamps them with French and Japanese cooking methods, with a dash of molecular gastronomy.

Bo's *xiao long bao* burst with the classic flavours of steamed dumplings, but are surprisingly served as a gelatinous ball. Even the renowned egg waffles, famously sold at street vendors throughout the city, have made their way to the table, in lieu of a starter bread basket. The dining experience is a roller-coaster of flavours and textures and — in true Hong Kong style — explodes with creativity.

When you consider Bibo's conviction that art and social interaction go hand in hand, you should expect that an artistic tour of the city will take you far from the well-trodden halls of its museums. That's not to say they aren't well worth a look, but, as Bibo points out: "Experiencing art outside of an aseptic museum, I think, [is] a key experience in enjoying and understanding artistic creation." 🍷

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