



## ARTISTE D'HOTEL

When Claridge's opened its doors to the illustrator **David Downton**, it was the start of a very stylish relationship



**Martini man** David Downton (above) at 'his' table at the Fumoir bar at Claridge's (top), where guests such as Christian Louboutin (centre) and Laura Bailey (top right) sat for their portraits

Good things happen to good people, but I was never this good. In February 2011, Paula Fitzherbert, the public relations director for Claridge's, called and suggested a meeting with the hotel's general manager, Thomas Kochs, with the vague notion that we might "work on something together". After a martini or two in the Fumoir bar, an idea began to take shape: what if I were to be appointed the first ever artist-in-residence (or more specifically, given my background, fashion-artist-in-residence) at the hotel?

It sounded good, but what did it mean exactly and how would it work? We didn't know. Clearly it was not going to be a precise science. But the central idea was simple; instead of photographing the hotel's illustrious guests – as had happened in the past – we would ask them to sit for a drawing. There was a lot to live up to: images of Jackie O, Winston Churchill, Audrey Hepburn and the Queen stand sentinel in the

lobby, reminders of a time when glamour went with gravitas and the world looked better in black and white. Over the coming months we made a list of potential sitters, which quickly became the fulcrum of debate. (More martinis.) Being famous was not enough; it was the connection with the hotel that counted. Most of these high-profile guests were juggling schedules that would give a cabinet minister pause, which meant that persuading them to pose for a portrait might be an uphill struggle. But that would come later. First my job was to get to know the hotel.

Let's just say that I took my research seriously. I stayed in the dazzling new Linley suites and in the room once occupied by the previous manager's dog. I addressed the hotel's quarterly staff meeting. I sat in the lobby and watched the passing parade. I haunted the halls. I propped up the bar. And the conclusion I came to is that Claridge's is Claridge's and everywhere else is everywhere else. There might not be an outside



space, a helipad on the roof or even a swimming pool (they are working on the pool), but what Claridge's has is something you cannot buy or replicate: a sense of wellbeing. Push through the revolving door and up the steps – there are three – and by the time you are halfway across the black-and-white chequered floor, I doubt that you will remember what you were worrying about.

If you watched the BBC documentary *Inside Claridge's* (and millions did), you will know that, in addition to the elegant Kochs, who was the lynchpin of the film, the hotel's other secret weapon is its staff. The service at Claridge's isn't seamless; it is delivered with brio by a cast of characters who combine humour with discretion (and a dash of hutzpah) and give every impression of loving their jobs. Robots need not apply.

Given the time I spent shooting the breeze with the lift operators, the butlers and the doormen, it seems unfair to single out anyone in particular, but how can I resist mentioning Martin Ballard who, after 30 years at the concierge desk, knows not only where the bodies are buried but who fired the fatal shot? Or the gentlemen barmen of the Fumoir (step up João, Lucasz, George, Maurizio and Charlie): my best friends in a bow tie.

When the time came to begin the drawings, the first

## CARMEN DELL'OREFICE PERCHED IN A BATHTUB, DAPHNE GUINNESS POSED LIKE A SPIDER, AND DITA VON TEESE WAS DRAWN NAKED

person to sit, fittingly enough, was the fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg, who designed a number of suites at the hotel. "We'll go Orientalist!" she announced, piling on gold chains and posing amid her signature clash-and-clang prints. Alber Elbaz, the creative director of Lanvin, had only 15 minutes to pose while guests gathered for the unveiling of the Christmas tree he designed last year. Sarah Jessica Parker, whose relationship with the hotel predates *Sex and the City*, was the calm centre of a Mexican wave of mobile phones all taking pictures in the lobby. Modelling super-legend Carmen Dell'Orefice perched in a bathtub (the tiles went with her Philip Treacy hat).

Paul Smith was briskly and charmingly efficient. Daphne Guinness posed like an elegant Louise Bourgeois spider on the black-and-white floor, and Dita Von Teese, feeling she didn't have anything spectacular enough to wear, suggested she be drawn naked. Did I mention the job was fun?

In parallel with what might be called the "Hall of Fame" drawings, I began another series, in colour this time, using the Fumoir bar as a location. I had become quietly obsessed by this darkly confessional space with its velvet banquettes and original Lalique glass, where noon felt like midnight and midnight could stretch until noon. I asked people I admire to join me at "my" table (No 4, since you ask) where they gamely submitted to being both drawn and interviewed. I raise a glass to Erin O'Connor, Stephen Jones, Laura Bailey and Christian Louboutin, among others, for being such willing guinea pigs.

The role of artist-in-residence certainly fascinates people. I have done interviews in New York and in Hong Kong, in Eastern Europe and in the Middle East. I have been quizzed about it on breakfast television in Sydney and on local radio in Perth. I suppose what it comes down to is that everyone envies me. But the truth is, I envy myself. Spencer Tracy famously said that, when he died, he didn't want to go to heaven, he wanted to go to Claridge's. I'm ahead of the crowd.

TIM PETERSEN



**Strike a pose** Clockwise, from bottom: David Downton at work on a portrait of Daphne Guinness; his drawing of Lanvin's Alber Elbaz; the hotel's grand lobby; and the fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg



### 5 OTHER ART RESIDENCES

#### The Savoy, London

Claude Monet was the first artist-in-residence here in 1901, painting Thames views from his top-floor room. Since last year, the British artists Stuart McAlpine Miller and David Downes have been invited to follow in his footsteps – the latter using the lobby as his studio, to the delight of guests ([fairmont.com/savoy](http://fairmont.com/savoy)).

#### Corinthia, London

The second year of its artist-in-residence programme sees the Look Left Look Right theatre company perform "immersive theatre" with guests, from March 18 to April 14 ([corinthia-air.com](http://corinthia-air.com)).

#### Pfister Hotel, Milwaukee

This historic American hotel has a large collection of Victorian art. For the past three years, it has run a studio in which a chosen artist can work and exhibit ([thepfisterhotel.com](http://thepfisterhotel.com)).

#### The Swatch Art Peace Hotel, Shanghai

Based on the premise that "The real luxury in life is art", this Shanghai hotel invites up to 18 international artists to stay – in return for a piece of art from each ([swatch-art-peace-hotel.com](http://swatch-art-peace-hotel.com)).

#### The Gershwin Hotel, New York

A room and a studio are offered to artists ranging from film-makers to dancers, for up to two months ([gershwinhotel.com](http://gershwinhotel.com)).