

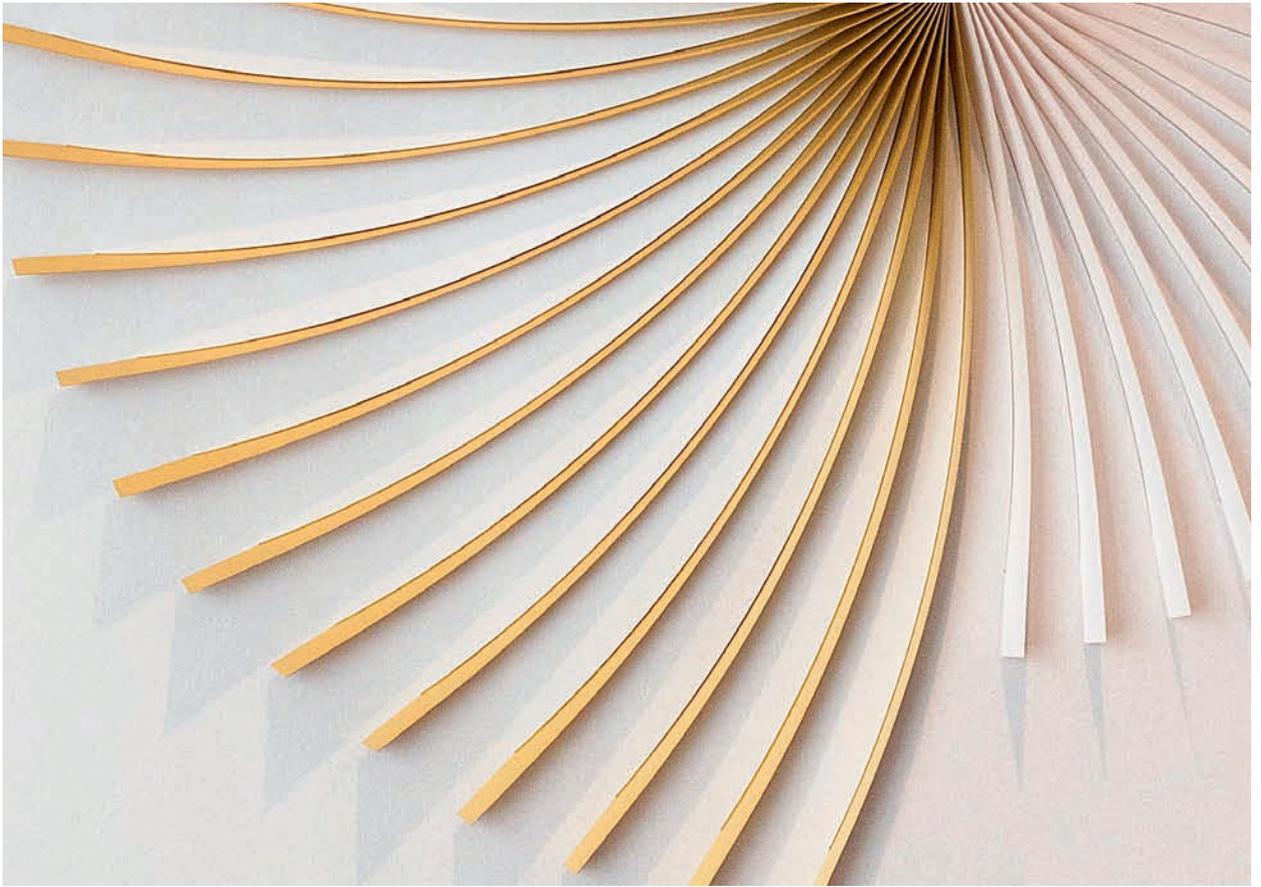
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The new storytellers

For art consultancy Visto Images, paintings and sculptures represent far more than just decor: together, they can evoke a visceral response and open windows into a whole other world

Words

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Questions about how people inhabit and interact with specific public places have occupied Alex Toledano for a long time. As he explains, when studying for a PhD in history, focused on the 20th century story of a particular neighbourhood in Paris's 10th Arrondissement, he spent a lot of time looking at a single street corner, watching how people responded to it: how fast they walked, where they stopped, which posts they leaned on.

The connection wouldn't have been apparent at the time, but Toledano's interest in the details of how people experience space is something he now regularly puts to use - in considering how people will react to the artwork his consultancy, Visto Images, selects for some very high profile places. Co-founded with his childhood best friend, Seth Rosenbaum - who holds a PhD in literature - Visto's academic credentials are not unusual for an art consultancy. However, the pair's ability to think about a space in its broad historical and cultural context, and to find art that can sit within an overarching, site-specific narrative, has set them apart for major hospitality and real estate players.

With offices in Paris, Cyprus, the United Kingdom and the United States, and a modus operandi of supplying individually curated art

collections to some of the most prestigious international hotels and property developments, Visto's world is ostensibly one of glamour and elegance. Delving deeper into the company's story doesn't necessarily remove any of that veneer or exceptionalism, but it does become clear that a readiness to ride with the rhythm of construction and large-scale renovation projects is key to their work. What is perhaps most apparent, though, is that this is very much a cerebral, ideas-driven enterprise; where the intention is to link spaces with the places where they are situated, and to create a narrative that can engage and stimulate the people who experience them.

Having completed dozens of high-end projects in a period of only a few years, Visto's portfolio encompasses apartment buildings in Hong Kong and New York, and shopping malls in the Middle East. The company is best known, though, for its work in hotels - with its services usually engaged during a moment of construction or major renovation, when the funds to spend on an identity-defining art collection are more likely available. Rather than loaning the work, clients buy each piece outright, with Visto exploiting every avenue of the global art market, often including commissioning new work, to build the collection. Key hotel projects include creating

Facing page
Top to bottom:
At the Fairmont Rey Juan Carlos I in Barcelona, Visto aimed to create a dialogue between art in the city and the hotel; 'Portrait of Mary Spencer' by Follower of Godfrey Kneller hangs at The Lanesborough



Above
Seth Rosenbaum
(left) and
Alex Toledano,
co-founders of
Visto Images
Image by
Christopher Lim

Facing page
Top to bottom:
Picasso's 'Femme
au Tablier Rayé
Vert' catches eyes
at the London
Model Apartment;
over 2000 pieces
were sourced for
The Lanesborough

collections for The Lanesborough, London – Visto's first large-scale project, completed in 2015 – and 25Hours Hotel Paris Terminus Nord, recently dubbed the “coolest new hotel in Paris” as a result of Visto's input.

What Visto does, Toledano says, is “curating, but with a view to permanence rather than temporary impact.” A crucial consideration is always how to communicate the curatorial concept to the people who will ultimately use or experience a space after the artwork is installed. As Toledano explains: “In a hotel, you have to show someone, show a guest, that there is something to look at.” As he says, people don't normally “walk into a hotel expecting to learn something or to have a special experience looking at art.” Rather, the expectation is that, if there is art, its job is to

be decorative. The challenge for Visto, Toledano continues, is around “trying to... create meaning. Even if we do an amazing job and an entire collection that we've put together is curated to the same level of detail of a gallery or museum exhibition, people don't expect it, so they won't look for it. So the question is: how do you show someone that there is something to look at?”

The answer to Toledano's question includes not only selecting the right pieces in the first place, but also the careful consideration of where each piece is placed and how people will approach and interact with them. Pathways through a space are taken into account, so that a narrative can form as people view work in a certain sequence, or so that a painting viewed in a guest's bedroom can trigger a connection to a statement piece positioned in the lobby. Even so, more complex concepts can sometimes prove a particular challenge. In the case of the Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park, for example, the collection was based around artists who engage with the environment and nature, but through the use of new technologies: in reference to the greenery of the park, as well as the Great Exhibition held there in 1851 to celebrate technical innovation. A nice concept, but not, Toledano acknowledges, an obvious one. Visto's solution was for the hotel to leave cards in guests' rooms each evening that briefly introduce an individual artwork and explain its connection to the collection's concept. As Toledano says, “It only takes a small cue and a few seconds to trigger a connection... to engage people in the narrative.”

Visto projects in the pipeline include the Mandarin Oriental Ritz, Madrid and a water-themed collection for the planned Fleming's Selection Hamburg. What keeps them motivated, Toledano says, is the opportunity to work on developments “where the stakes are high: where the buildings have interesting stories and great architecture, and to enhance that with the artwork... Those are the projects that we want to do more of, where people want the art to do something special, to shape the building's identity and transform the experience of people who use the space.”

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Visito Images