

The Connaught Hotel in London is the first hotel I ever fell in love with.

I could not afford to stay there, as a student cruising through Europe on a train pass, but I made a pilgrimage. I wish I could explain why I fell so hard. Certainly it had something to do with my love of English literature; Edwardian-era writers have always been among my favorites—Virginia Woolf, J. M. Barrie, Arthur Conan Doyle, E. M. Forster. The hotel seemed, in its full Edwardian dress, to have perfectly captured, and then kept alive, another time, one that, as far as living well goes, has much to teach us about comfort and lively, imaginative, intelligent elegance.

The thing I remember most vividly about my first encounter with the Connaught is the feeling of being enfolded in rooms that shut out the world with layer upon layer of pattern and texture. It actually took a few moments for my eyes to adjust once I entered, as everything was in shadows. Only gradually did the gemlike colors of the heavy Persians on the floor appear; only quietly did I catch a glint of light on a mahogany banister burnished with years of old-fashioned wax, applied by hand. The curtains were swags of heavy, velvety fabrics; and the air, even at noon, was laced with a heady and magical fragrance of cigars and whiskey.

Years later I finally had a chance to stay at the Connaught. It was everything I had hoped it would be: marbled bathrooms, thick curtains, fine hardware, extravagant linen sheets, eccentric furniture in the hallways, butler bells by the bed, a vivid, patterned carpet running the length of the huge center staircase, the cozy bar full of leather Chesterfields and writing desks. I went out for a dinner, which ended late. It must have been around midnight when I got back to the hotel. Its massive doors were locked. I rang the bell. By the time a haughty butler came to the door, I was distraught. Not the most welcoming service, but in keeping with the hotel's air of superiority. I knew I was unworthy.

Over the years, the hotel's decor became frayed. I'm not one for letting things go to seed (well, actually, I am one for that, but I can understand why it isn't a smart business move). With a grand hotel like the Connaught, a little refurbishment goes a long way. It was a shock, therefore, to learn that the Connaught had been shut down for renovations so radical that the entire building had to be swathed in bandages. There could be nothing left of a patina that took a century to achieve. More frightening, though, was the notice on the Web site, informing us that the hotel would return as "a modern interpretation" of the legacy.

I nearly wept, scrolling through the Web display of the rooms to come. These modern interpretations are a recent design trend that I find deplorable. Great beauty and personality are gutted in the interest of—well, what, exactly? Younger guests? Business travelers? These interpretations are safe and predictable, so as not to offend. But they bore, and they don't age well. Sanitized decors will look out of date, dull and drab, within a few years. Modern interpretations seem to be confined to a palette of beige, gray, and cold. The rooms could be in New York, Los Angeles, or Atlanta.

When I'm in London, I want to feel what is quintessentially British—and that can be modern, of course, but it has to be rooted in something. Claridge's has succeeded admirably in retaining its fizzy, swellegant Art Deco feel—and the same design firm is doing the Connaught, so there is always hope. Some face-lifts work; you immediately recognize the taut version of the old visage. But they seem to be the exception. Remember when Brooks Brothers dismembered its classic Madison Avenue flagship? Most of the gorgeous old glass-fronted mahogany display cases were ripped out and replaced with modern tables. The store lost its cachet. It was depressing. It was the same as any mall version of itself.

Let's hope things are better than the photos of the bedrooms promise. Part of the appeal of a classic style—whether it belongs to Kate Hepburn or the Connaught—is that it is not easy to replicate, but it gives you something to aim for, something you hope you can someday attain. It makes you think: how did that happen? How can those colors work together? Why is that arrangement so pleasing? The Connaught Hotel was a classic. It had an enduring appeal. A classic beauty doesn't worry about whether or not the young or ignorant will recognize its allure. A classic is a generative force; it inspires on down through the generations. Great style at any age turns heads of any age.

Beauty of any sort is fragile, I suppose, at the mercy of so many destructive forces. We have much to learn from those before us, if we would only stop and think about what we have been bequeathed. Or, as E. M. Forster wrote, if we would "only connect."



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