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A gallery opened this spring to commemorate Ludwig Bemelmans's 125th birthday.

VIEW WITH A ROOM

Artist in the House!

At Ocean House, in Rhode Island, a new gallery and suite celebrate the life and times of Ludwig Bemelmans

BY MARCIA DESANCTIS
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Ludwig Bemelmans is closely associated with the Carlyle hotel, thanks to the bespoke murals he painted in the 1940s at the bar that still bears his name.

But decades before, upon his arrival in New York from Austria, in 1914, he had an entirely different relationship with another grand New York hotel. As a 16-year-old immigrant from a family of hoteliers, Bemelmans was a bellhop at the Ritz-Carlton on Madison Avenue at 46th Street. He rose through the ranks to become an assistant catering manager before quitting to become a full-time artist, achieving stardom with the 1939 publication of *Madeline*.

Bemelmans at work in 1945.

In 1951, the Ritz-Carlton was demolished to make room for a new high-rise, and *Town & Country* magazine hired Bemelmans to commemorate the sad occasion with a collection of ink drawings. *Adieu to the Old Ritz,* as Bemelmans's series was called, honored the waiters, staff, chauffeurs, and habitués, all of whom he knew intimately.

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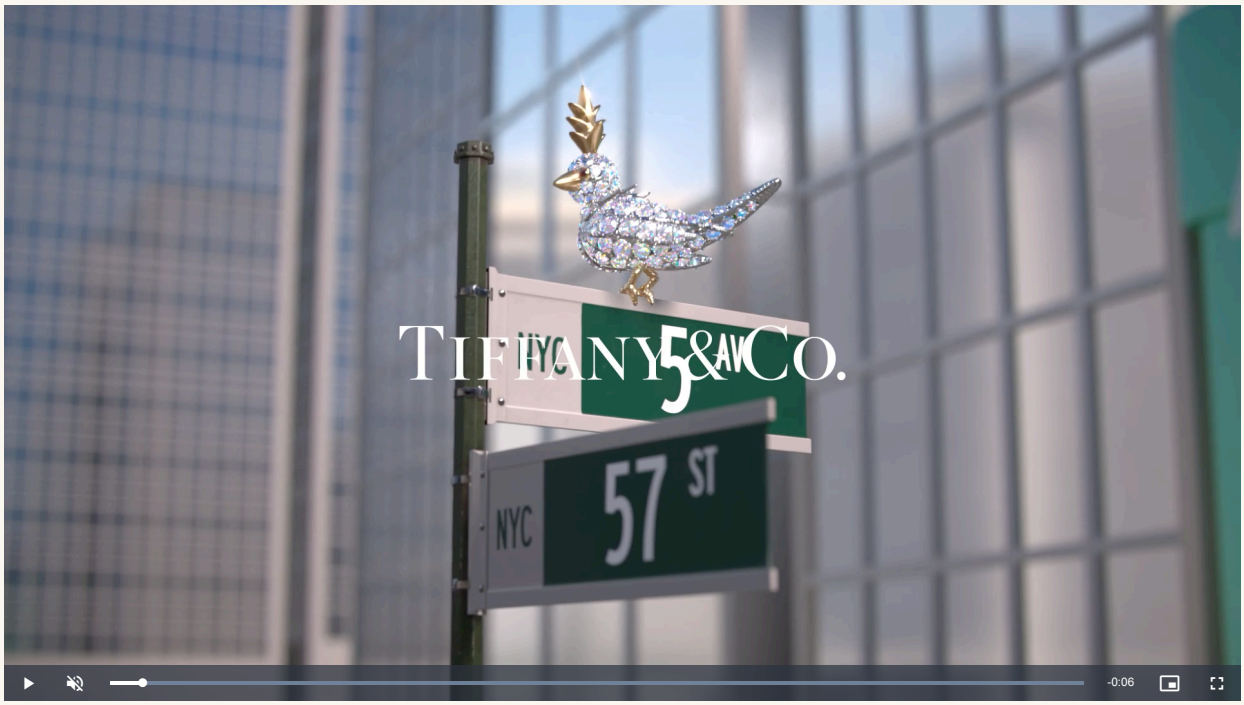
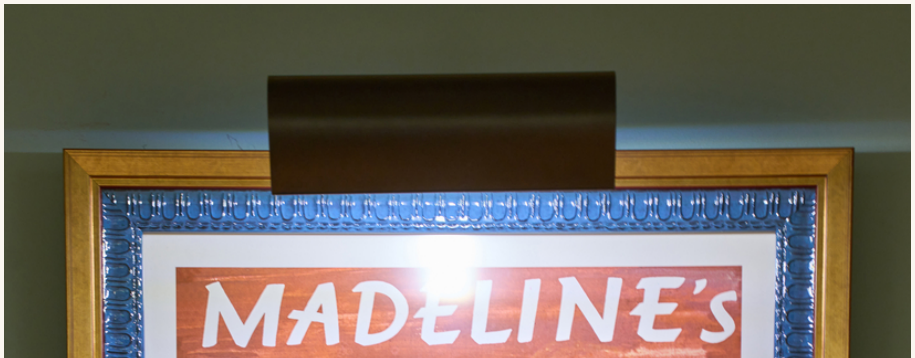
A charming, penetrating, and insouciant look at the characters, staff, and life behind the scenes, the illustrations—all done on graph paper—were eventually purchased by mutual-fund magnate and hotelier Chuck Royce. Today, the *Adieu to the Old Ritz* drawings hang in a newly opened, permanent gallery at Royce's Ocean House hotel, in Watch Hill, Rhode Island. It was inaugurated this spring to commemorate the artist's 125th birthday.

Looming over the Atlantic, Ocean House's history dates to 1868.

Ocean House, a magnificent, clifftop Victorian pile built in 1868, was so synonymous with high society that *American Aristocracy,* a 1916 silent film starring Douglas Fairbanks, was filmed there. (Though equally patrician, Watch Hill is considered the discreet counterpart to showier Newport up the coast.)



Royce had long ago planted roots in Watch Hill and, together with his wife, novelist Deborah Goodrich Royce, shared the community's concern over the fate of the hotel. One of the last of its breed, it had declined into decrepitude. "It would have been horrible to lose this historic grande dame," says Goodrich Royce. The Royces bought it, salvaging moldings, fireplaces, and fixtures before demolishing the property in 2005. Five years later, it reopened; the entrance, lobby, and restaurant are exact replicas of the originals.



A book cover from Bemelmans's most celebrated series.

Today, Ocean House has returned to its former grandeur and glory. It overlooks a private beach, the steel-blue waters of the Atlantic, and, on the neighboring bluff, Taylor Swift's $17.75 million mansion, which was once owned by the Standard Oil heiress Rebekah Harkness. (Swift paid tender tribute to the local eccentric in her 2020 song "The Last Great American Dynasty.")

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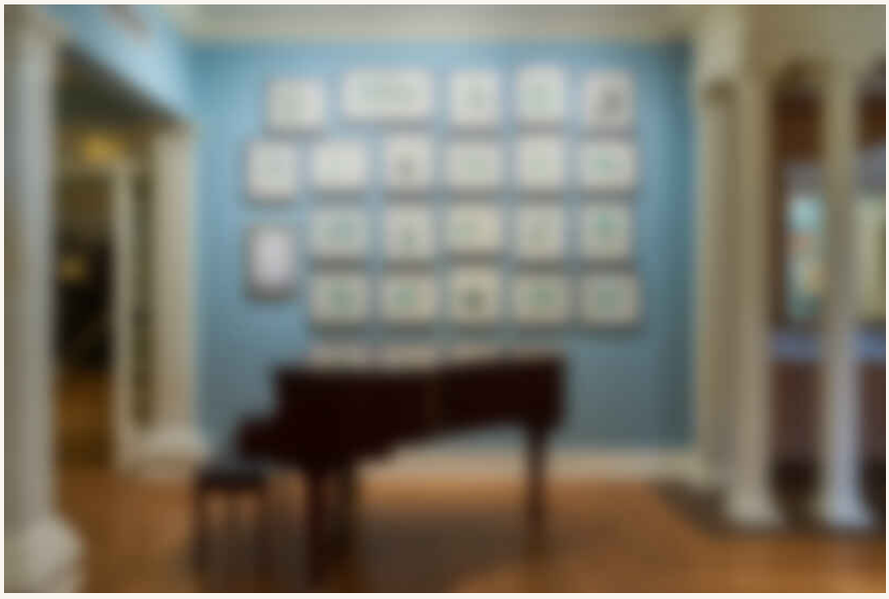
The art that is now on display there reflects both the high-society history of the hotel and the owners' passion for illustration, an art form that often portrays social structures and gatherings. Besides the Bemelmans works, the Royces also own a collection of unpublished *New Yorker* covers and pen-and-ink self-portraits of actors, writers, and artists drawn over decades at the Strand Book Store.

Chuck and Deborah Royce

Bemelmans was a keen observer of human nature, and everywhere he went was fodder for his work. He was a master of expressing empathy and mining human depth in the simplicity of a line drawing, but the new gallery, with 90 original works, goes further, integrating color and other phases and formats.



Works from *Adieu to the Old Ritz*, a series of ink-and-watercolor drawings on graph paper.

A sequence of bright, bustling frescoes and oil paintings created for La Colombe, the Paris café he bought in 1953 (and quickly sold), are the first in the exhibition, with a daffodil here, a tip of the hat there. Most prominent in the gallery are two richly hued murals from *Madeline's Rescue,* commissioned by Aristotle Onassis for his yacht *Christina O*, hung alongside photos of the shipping magnate and his daughter.

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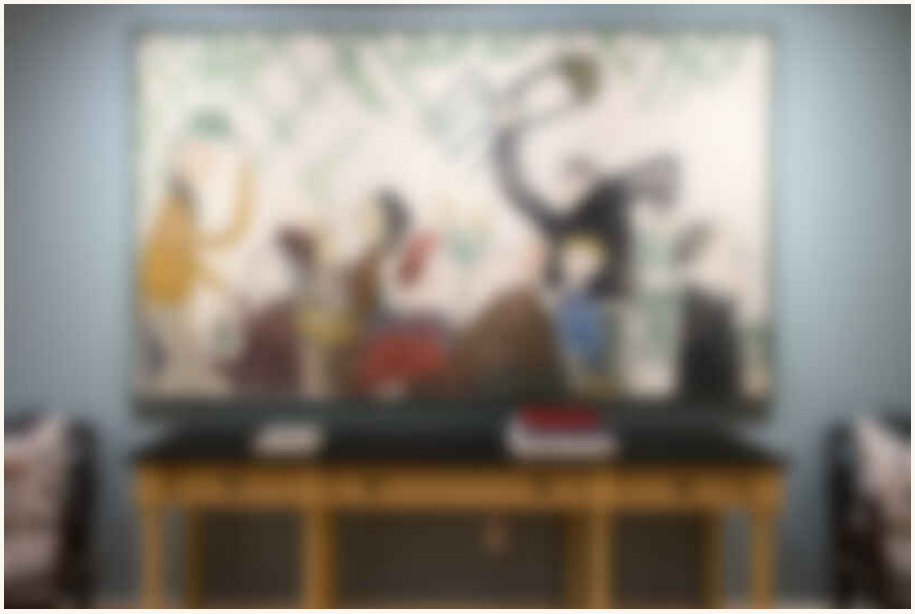
"My goal for the gallery was to create a storybook that unfolds as you walk through the space," says Hilary Pierce Hatfield, curator of the Bemelmans Gallery. "Playful, whimsical, comforting, engaging, and fun." From the early *Hofbräuhaus*, evoking nostalgia for his Austrian roots, through ephemera from his advertising work for Tabasco and Jell-O, the exhibition spans the arc of Bemelmans's long career. The tour completes with a grouping from his final children's book, *Marina,* whose story unfolds upon the seashore.



A mural from La Colombe café, in Paris, painted in 1953.

The hotel has recently completed a new suite, designed by Iliana Moore, to evoke the essence of the artist. In addition to letters, photos, and drawings, there are fabrics, wallpaper, and lampshades featuring illustrations by Tug Rice, who, in full-circle serendipity, has also done artwork for the Carlyle. The two landmarks, 140 miles of coastline apart, are country-city counterpoints in Bemelmans's witty, sophisticated legacy.

Marcia DeSanctis is a Connecticut-based writer. She recently published her second book, a collection of travel essays called A Hard Place to Leave: Stories from a Restless Life

Courtesy of Ocean House (gallery, exterior, cover, drawings, mural); Walter Sanders/The *Life* Picture Collection/Shutterstock (Bemelmans); courtesy of Ocean House/*Rhode Island Monthly* (Royces)

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