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## Before the Met Gala, Mingling at the Mark

By Dan Stapleton



The Mark Hotel on 77th St. is a popular spot for celebrities to get ready just before the Met Gala. Here, Karen Elson. Credit Kirsten Luce for The New York Times

“Fashion people and celebrities feel liberated here,” said Izak Senbahar, the owner of the Mark hotel, as attendees of the annual Costume Institute Gala mingled in his lobby on Monday afternoon. “They feel like they can be themselves.”

Mr. Senbahar appeared to be correct. On one side of the room, Usher cracked jokes with his entourage and greeted industry insiders. Near the front door, Uma Thurman blew kisses to friends and acquaintances as they passed by. In a quiet corner, Bill Nighy pored over a script.

Even the few noncelebrity guests who had managed to secure reservations at the Mark on gala day seemed comfortable; in the middle of the lobby, a Japanese tourist had fallen asleep in an orange chair designed by Paul Mathieu.

Although the Mark is not officially affiliated with the Met Gala, in recent years it has become the preferred accommodation for many of the event's high-profile celebrities — including the Vogue editor Anna Wintour, who reserves one of its largest suites — as its location on East 77th Street and its proximity to the Metropolitan Museum of Art make it a practical option.



On Monday, the crowd ebbed and flowed throughout the afternoon as guests excused themselves to go upstairs and get dressed. A little after 3:30 p.m., André Leon Talley, Vogue's former editor at large, appeared. He was wearing a Ralph Lauren Purple Label suit and seemed flustered.

"Where is my coat?" he asked no one in

particular. "I don't know where they've put it." Mr. Talley sat down on a banquette, exasperated.

The costume designer Catherine Martin and her husband, the film director Baz Luhrmann, pulled up outside the hotel at about 4.

"We live downtown, but we stay here every year for the gala," Mr. Luhrmann explained as they walked inside. "The staff is very good at handling all this," he said, gesturing to the fans and photographers gathered by the entrance.

The rapper and actor Common entered wearing a light-blue denim shirt, sweatpants and sneakers. He paused by the banquettes to say hello to Mr. Talley.

"You'd better get upstairs and change," Mr. Talley said, tapping an imaginary watch on his wrist, and Common winked at him.

Finally, two men emerged from an office adjacent to the lobby carrying Mr. Talley's coat, a red-silk couture number by Tom Ford. Mr. Talley was visibly relieved. "I'm going up to Anna's room now," he said.

At about 5:30, fully dressed guests began making their way out front to waiting cars. Ms. Wintour and the Chinese actress Gong Li were early departures. Mario Testino, the fashion photographer, was on hand, taking casual shots for Vogue.



“It’s such an honor to be snapped by you,” the actress Kerry Washington said as Mr. Testino trained his lens on her.

The English model Jourdan Dunn and the singer-songwriter James Bay paused in the lobby as members of their styling team took photos of the pair on iPhones. Ms. Dunn, a regular visitor to the hotel, said that she had been cocooned in her room for hours.

Did she have a favorite item from the room service menu? “I like the Champagne,” she said dryly, then refocused her attention on Mr. Bay while an assistant used a cigarette lighter to fuse her waxed and braided hair into uniform strands.



Standing nearby, the actress Hailee Steinfeld overheard the conversation. “I’ve ordered everything off the kids’ menu,” she told Ms. Dunn.

Karen Elson, the model and musician, was one of the few guests to enter the lobby via the stairs. Her Dolce & Gabbana dress consisted of a figure-hugging, gold-plated corset and an exceptionally long red tulle train that may not

have fit inside the Mark’s petite elevators.

A friend asked Ms. Elson if she felt weighed down. “I do, but I can breathe — just,” she said.

“It’s real gold,” she went on, gesturing to the corset, “so the metal expands.”



The hotel's executive chef, Jean-Georges Vongerichten, appeared briefly, smartphone in hand. "I would never miss the departures," he said. "Everyone is at their best."

Mr. Vongerichten was in a philosophical mood. "I think food and fashion are very similar," he said. "They're both about layers and colors."

Then he grinned. "I'm a fashionista at heart," he said.

By 7, most of the high-profile guests had left. A young publicist who was attending the Met Gala for the first time asked Mr. Senbahar if he had any advice for the night ahead. "Take a Xanax," he told her.

The publicist paused. Around her, the staff had begun rearranging furniture for the Michael Kors after-party. A young man carried a pot of tea to the concierge's desk.

"Maybe I could just stay here instead," she said.