

FOCUS ON:

**OFFICE FURNITURE
& DESIGN**

**Corporate art brings
elevated perspective
to world of business**

By Thora Qaddumi
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Art in the workplace offers sky-high possibilities, both in business and the creative world. In order for business executives to choose art for the office, they must conjure up the most important emotion involved in this kind of a deal — passion.

Independent art consultant Jacqueline Hamilton has put this credo to the test for the past 17 years as she advises businesses in their purchase of original paintings, sculpture, fiber art, photography, graphics and fine art posters.

“Great things come out of passion,” she says. “Companies grow and achieve by taking risks in their business and the same is true in their art choices. When companies are willing to take risks in art, they grow in terms of having better art and providing education for their employees. Those who want to pick safe art end up with bad art.”

Hamilton, who also advises private collectors, draws a line between “decoration,” which takes in memorabilia and mass-produced decorative items, and “art” — preferably original art.

The works need not be expensive, however, Hamilton’s purchases for clients have ranged from \$25 for an unframed piece to \$130,000 for a major work. She is also flex-

ible, sometimes choosing high-quality framed posters, reproductions or memorabilia.

“I get my way sometimes and the clients get their way sometimes,” she says, “and the end product is beautiful.”

SELECTING ART

With corporate art, she is often given considerable leeway in choosing and framing selections. The top executive is too busy running the business to be concerned, she says, and the person or committee delegated to the job tends to be more concerned with whether everyone will like a piece than whether it is good art.

“Art is an emotional issue,” Hamilton says. “People may say little about chairs and curtains in the office but, when it comes to the art, it’s like they’re going to kill.”

Instead of trying to please everyone, however, companies gain by investing in works that evoke strong emotions because, in Hamilton’s view, this is the sign of good imagery.

“The best art is controversial,” she says. “It stimulates intellectual, visual and emotional feelings. ‘Art by the yard’ evokes nothing. I like to work with clients who have a good eye and will take risks.”

She enjoyed, for example, advising in art selections for the law offices of Jan Fox, an attorney who made the unusual choice for her law library of window assemblage works by San Antonio artist Suzi Vogel. The artist, who later sold numerous similar works to board members of the New York Museum of Modern Art, combines old window frames with paper pieces between glass.

Hamilton remembers another client, a transplant from the East Coast who loved abstract art but asked her to buy something he thought his Texan colleagues and customers would like, such as a big painting of bluebonnets.

“That was years ago,” she says. “Now, I would urge him to buy where his passion is. I mediate between the business mind and the creative mind. When I consult with a company, I try to inspire them to see that art can do a lot more than decorate their space.”

The following are what Hamilton sees as some of the functions of art:

• **It reflects the personality of the company.** For example, working with Hamilton, AT&T Wireless Services branch manager Todd Morgan chose avantgarde framed posters by Wassily Kandinsky, Richard Diebenkorn and Jackson Pollock for the high tech company’s new contemporary offices in Greenway Plaza.

In contrast, office leasing broker Dan Bellow, president of The Staubach Co.’s Houston Corporate Services, wanted a more traditional feeling. Under Hamilton’s guidance, he chose works on paper with realistic imagery, including two Derek Boshier etchings, a western landscape by David Caton, a Charles Schorre etching, a charcoal by a new artist, Ginny Renfroe Skebe and a reproduction of a ship painted by a well-established artist, John Stobart.

• **Art can educate.** It can raise the art appreciation level of employees and office visitors.

• **Art can be a marketing tool.** A brochure with reproductions of the selections

and information about them can be effective in introducing the company.

- **Art can enhance community relations.**

A company can demonstrate community support and involvement by its purchases. "The best way to support art is to buy art," says Hamilton.

- **It even can affect the bottom line.**

Beauty in the workplace can have a positive affect on employees' moods, health and productivity, according to Hamilton. It also can make a difference in the responses of potential clients or customers.

One company official, debating with Hamilton whether to purchase an expensive piece of art, finally decided the issue by concluding. "If it wins us one friend, its worth it," she recalls.

INVESTING IN ART

Professional art consultants generally don't make "investment art" promises, Hamilton says. But properly framed and displayed art will hold its value and still be considered "good art" years later.

In recent years, Hamilton has been enlisted to resell the collections of an

increasing number of companies that, because of mergers and consolidations, find themselves overstocked with art.

"Good art has a secondary market," she says. If a company has bought 'art by the yard,' all you can do is dump it."

Most of the pieces she buys for companies are purchased from galleries, directly from artists and through distributors or auction houses in Texas and major art centers throughout the United States and in other countries.

A "good eye" for selecting art is a God-given gift, but one that can be developed through experience, she says.

She encourages companies interested in developing corporate art collections to enlist the help of professionals and to consider whether the consultant is working independently or is tied to a gallery or artists. There are fewer independent art consultants but they are more objective, she says, as they do not have an inventory they are trying to sell.

In addition to helping with selections, a well-qualified art consultant can provide vitally important advice for framing and

displaying the art works, Hamilton notes. When possible, the consultant meets with the interior designer while a new facility is still in the planning stages and calls in lighting and framing experts as needed.

Lighting is significant, not only in showing off the works but in assuring they are safe from damage that improper lighting can cause, Hamilton says. Improper matting and framing can invite a multitude of problems — most commonly, acid burns because wood pulp mats have been used rather than rag mats.

As a professional art consultant, Hamilton is also involved in appraising and insuring art works and testifies as an expert witness in lawsuits regarding art.

A public company's stockholders may consider the purchase of art an extravagance. Or a company may consider it a budget item that easily can be cut. But, it's hard to put a price tag on the true value of art, says Hamilton.

"I've seen companies terminate an art program when they're downsizing," she says. "But the need for beauty is like eating and breathing." ■