

## Hanging around

Art consultant Jacqueline Hamilton has made a business of helping companies and individuals nail down the art that's right for them

BY CHRISTIE TAYLOR

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For international art consultant Jacqueline Hamilton, the writing was on the wall.

When Hamilton launched her business in 1979, very few art consultants worked in Houston. To Hamilton, that meant opportunity.

So far, Hamilton's instinct has served her well.

Her first year in business, Hamilton turned a \$12,000 profit after borrowing \$1,000 against a life insurance policy to serve as the seed money for her company. Each year, her business grew steadily, with annual revenue hitting \$375,000 in the mid-1990s. Despite an unplanned hiatus in 1999 and 2001's economic downturn, clients continued to call. For this year, Hamilton expects to double 2004's revenue.

The art expert advises individuals and corporations on everything related to purchasing, caring for and selling works of art. She knows what to buy, when to sell — even how to clean canvases ridden with dust. When clients want to spruce up their space — or sell everything off — Hamilton is ready to hang pictures, haggle in auctions or simply talk about what's happening in the world of art.

Still, her company's success is closely tied to a healthy economy.



CRAIG HARTLEY/HBJ

**Art consultant Jacqueline Hamilton: 'If there's a hiccup in the stock market, art collectors get skittish.'**

"If there's a hiccup in the stock market, art collectors get skittish," Hamilton says.

The entrepreneur must know not only the value of particular works and how selling them fits into international economic trends, she must also know how to assuage collectors' fears and encourage them to purchase original works that might appreciate.

Because she has no inventory and is not connected with a gallery, Hamilton says she offers an objective point of view. She increases her business

by building relationships with clients and by educating herself on trends in the art world.

"One of my planned strategies was to learn more about the decorative arts, so I made a list of museums around the world that I wanted to visit, and started attending conferences in those places," Hamilton says.

After completing graduate work at Stockholm University and spending time in Europe, she visited other countries to increase her areas of expertise. Since 1996, Hamilton has been to Cuba, Egypt, China, Turkey and India. Next, she will visit Japan.

"Traveling and visiting different countries pulls together travel, world history and art history more than what you can

### JACQUELINE HAMILTON

BUSINESS: Art consultant

FOUNDED: 1979

FULL-TIME EMPLOYEES: 1

WEB SITE: [Jacquelinehamilton.com](http://Jacquelinehamilton.com)

get out of books or photos or even the Internet," Hamilton says.

## PICTURE THIS

Hamilton's services range from appraising pieces of art to deciding which lighting is best for showcasing them. She advises on framing, conservation and the best way to transport valuable pieces. Some of her clients buy collections of reasonably priced posters; others have six-figure budgets to spend.

Hamilton's fees vary, but her minimum charge is \$1,000 for taking on a new project. She relies on a network of assistants and subcontractors for expertise on hanging and transporting art.

During busy times, Hamilton hires interns to help, but she mostly works independently. The businesswoman also has no inventory, allowing her to follow her passion when choosing great art.

"When I'm working with clients, it is so clear to me that buying better art, original art, is a better investment for that company," Hamilton says.

She also emphasizes taking care of it.

In 1981, Hamilton was asked to work on a team acquiring art for Arthur Andersen's offices on 12 floors in downtown Houston's Pennzoil building.

She scoured local artist's studios, galleries, art publishers and art distributors to find the art, then worked with an architect to select the pieces that went into the building's common areas, as well as in the offices of managers and partners.

Hamilton insisted on using archival materials when framing the pieces, explaining that it would help maintain their value if the firm ever decided to sell the artwork. Andersen was initially resistant, Hamilton remembers, insisting that the art would never be sold. But in the end, the company took Hamilton's advice.

Smart move.

In 2002, following the collapse of Enron Corp. and the subsequent dismantling of Andersen, Hamilton was called in to be part of the team that de-accessioned Andersen's collection from its offices in San Jose, Calif.; San Francisco and Houston. Her original advice helped

the pieces sell.

## DECK THE WALLS

Fred Whitty, senior property manager at Four Oaks Place, sought Hamilton's expertise when one of the four office skyscrapers he managed was being renovated. Hamilton had helped the president of the company that owns Four Oaks, Giorgio Borlenghi's Interfin Cos., choose art for the space in 1987. That selection included two Willard Dixon landscape paintings.

Two other commissioned paintings by artist Charles Schorre had already been chosen and were installed into an indentation in the lobby's granite wall. Hamilton feared that removing the paintings during the building's renovation would damage them, or that perhaps they wouldn't be put back correctly. So she recommended that boxes be built over the paintings so they would be protected until they could be cleaned after the renovation.

Hamilton's work on that project led to a job selecting art for the building's nine floors.

Whitty subsequently spent \$7,000 with Hamilton, buying posters for the building's common areas, with the goal of saving enough to eventually buy original works for those floors.

"I do a lot of things myself, but I'm not going to select a piece of art myself," Whitty says.

He also relied on Hamilton's expertise for hanging the pieces.

"In one case, I knew something wasn't exactly right, but I couldn't tell what it was," Whitty says.

So Hamilton rehung the posters, which Whitty says changed the entire feel of the common area — for the better.

## IT'S IN THE MAIL

Because Hamilton's work often comes from referrals, the consultant always makes calls on potential clients when she travels.

Hamilton finds new artists through her extensive network of art dealers and galleries — and she pays attention to every piece of mail that comes across her desk. Although it might take hours to sort through piles of pictures of paintings,

Hamilton realizes that her next big discovery could be waiting for her in a stack of mail when she gets home from a trip.

A boon to Hamilton's business actually came when she took a step away from it in 1999, having been approached by William Weibel, artistic director of Opera in the Heights, who was looking to expand that young arts organization and build its profile.

Hamilton, an avid opera fan, studied voice for 12 years, so she accepted the challenge of chairing Opera in the Heights' first gala. Within months, she had raised \$100,000 for the organization, spending less time buying and selling art, but considerable time calling on clients and friends such as developer Gerald Hines, philanthropist Carolyn Farb, actress Julie Andrews, actress Linda Ellerbee, producer Blake Edwards and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to serve on the gala's honorary committee. She also convinced heart surgeon Dr. Denton Cooley, a client, to serve as the gala's honoree. The process helped Hamilton reestablish business contacts while also building her profile in the community.

Hamilton credits her late father, Jim Hamilton, with passing on a natural sales ability that has helped increase her business. Her father worked in sales for American General Financial Group, and in May, 1995 was that company's top producer, selling \$7.2 million in life insurance in one month. He was also active in the community, building business relationships indirectly through community service work, a method Hamilton has since adopted.

Meanwhile, Hamilton's mother, Nina, championed the arts, another philosophy that was contagious.

Hamilton's most successful strategy, though, has been following her passion while building a business — as well as valuing each relationship that she forges.

"Business is people and people refer people," she says. "I never regard any relationship as a waste of time. My calling is to help the arts." ■

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