

DESIGN CONCEPTS AND AESTHETIC CONCERNS OF CORPORATE ART COLLECTIONS

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This paper will discuss design concepts and aesthetic concerns of today's corporate art collections, emphasizing art in the fiber medium. Before discussing current collections, it is worthwhile to briefly look at man's history concerning art in our environment.

Man's concern for art in his environment dates from about 2,500 to 10,000 B.C. with the prehistoric cave paintings of animals in the caves at Lascaux, France.¹ Throughout history examples are seen of art in the fiber medium used in the environment. "After 1400, tapestries from Arras, France were extensively used in the princely castles of both France and England to cover walls, to hang over windows and doors, and to enclose beds, or as partitions to subdivide large rooms for greater privacy."² During the Renaissance, Flemish weavers produced fine tapestries and under Louis XIV and his successors, French Gobelin tapestry weavers were given royal support.

The industrial revolution dramatically changed people's way of life. Manufacturers and merchants became tastemakers, determining what we include in our environment.³ After the industrial revolution, William Morris investigated tapestry and textile design and during the early part of the twentieth century, the Bauhaus explored textile design for industry under the direction of Anni Albers.

Today, one can walk through most corporation headquarters and/or offices and see how the glass, concrete and steel in architecture is visually warmed with the texture and color of art in the fiber medium.

In the United States the first firm to organize and collect corporate art was the Chase Manhattan Bank in New York City. The beginning date for this collection is broadly given as the 1950's.⁴ "During the Sixties, the vogue of corporate art spread, with companies like Forbes, RCA and the First National Bank of Chicago beginning art collections. Frequently a theme was chosen for the collection, such as RCA's focus on

contemporary graphics or CIBA-Geigy's emphasis on Swiss and American artists."⁵ Themes can also evolve from regional or area art or ethnic and historical textiles. "Even in the unpredictable economy in the Eighties, corporate art collecting has not slowed down. New companies are beginning collections, while older collections are being added to or diversified."⁶

Because of this widespread interest in corporate art, artists who want to sell their work to corporations need to know how art is used in corporate interior environments. The image of the firm is very important and is often reinforced by the art exhibited. The image of the firm to its clients and to its employees often has results in the dollars and cents on the corporation's balance sheet.

Artists need to know that architects and interior designers divide space two ways aesthetically: architectural spaces and decorated spaces. Architectural spaces are those spaces that are totally designed on floor plans and elevations. They are designed to stand alone and with nothing added as an afterthought. Floor coverings, wall coverings, planters, furniture, architectural elements, color and textured surfaces are all pre-specified to construction of the space. There is no room or place for any added element.

If art is placed in an architectural space, it is called site-specific. The art is designed for the space with pre-construction consultation between the artist, contractor, architect and corporate officers. An example of this is Gerhard Knodel's work in the Plaza Hotel, Renaissance Center in Detroit, Michigan.⁶ In this work, Knodel takes design elements from architecture, expresses them in woven form and suspends them in space. They work as an intermediary between the architecture and people. The woven forms also work to humanize the environment that otherwise would have only the coldness of glass, steel and concrete. Knodel says, "I'd like to think that my work is essential to architecture".⁷ Successful site-specific art is just that.

Another example of site-specific art is Helena Hernmark's work in the Dallas Center, Dallas, Texas.⁸ Hernmark designed two tapestries, each twenty feet by eleven feet, to hang in the lobby of the Dallas Center which was designed by I.M. Pei. Because of pre-construction collabo-

ration with the architect, developer and contractor, Hernmark was able to specify wall surfaces and lighting that complement the tapestries. The architect asked her to create an environment which would introduce people to a warm, human experience.⁹ The “Bluebonnets” and “Poppies” tapestries celebrate the wildflowers of Texas and humanize the large lobby space with their warmth, color and texture.

A decorated space can be any space that is not fully designed or specified on the original floor plan or elevation. Examples are: cafeterias, hotel rooms, conference rooms, lobbies, reception areas, spaces where high tech office systems are used, etc. Art is used for many reasons and in many ways in decorated spaces. Art can provide visual relief in areas where people work with computers for extended periods of time. Art can also create an ambiance. In an employee cafeteria, art that has playful forms and colors can enhance the idea that this is a place to relax and enjoy free time. Geometric forms in a tapestry can reiterate the geometric forms of furniture in an office space, but in a softer, more textural way. The use of historical textiles can give the image that the firm has a sense of appreciation of history and culture. Grid shapes in quilts and coverlets relate to steel beams and other architectural element, but humanize a space because of the textile element. They give human reference to the space.

Maintenance is a consideration in the choice of using art in the fiber medium in the work place. The projected cost of maintenance is part of the service that interior designers and architects give to their clients. Artists can include information and/or instructions on maintaining their work in a contract.

Designers and architects recognize the importance of art in our private and public spaces. “Not least among art’s new enthusiasts are architects and designers, who are incorporating art into their projects – and their own offices – on an unprecedented scale. In part they are responding to their client’s interests, in part exploring the ways that art can enhance their work and vice versa.”¹⁰ Because of the widespread phenomenon of corporate art collections, artists in the fiber medium have a big opportunity to sell their work. “Prices in crafts are still reasonable and crafts are very accessible. Sophisticated craft art is of-

ten better received by employees than something equally far out in the so-called fine arts. Also, as we proceed further into the technological age, people feel a greater need of things made by hand, from the human mind and spirit.”¹¹ As the work place increasingly becomes high tech, the need for a humanized environment increases.

Architects and interior designers use art as a design tool to make a statement about an environment. “Art is not only a design tool, but a business tool in the same way that design has become a business tool.”¹² Art of quality, integrity and innovation can imply the same about its environment.

Notes

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4. Wald, Ann H. *The art of business*, Northwest Orient, 14:2 (March 1983) p. 35.
5. Wald, Ann H. *ibid*, p. 35.
6. Olendorf, Donna *Gerhardt Knodel*, 5:6, Fiberarts, (November/December 1978) p. 44.
7. Olendorf, Donna *ibid*, p. 46.
8. Slavin, Maeve *Corporate art spotlight: Helena Hernmark tapestries*, Interiors, CXL:12 (July 1981) pp. 53-54.
9. Slavin, Maeve *ibid*, p. 54.
10. Harvie, Ashley E. *Artful design*, Professional Office Design, 1:4 (Winter 1985) p. 8.
11. Harvie, Ashley E. *ibid*, p. 12.
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