



Vik Muniz, *Cleveland Clouds*, 1994.
Fiberglass, dimensions variable.

The Art of Corporate Collecting

by Daniel Grant

Add the Progressive Insurance Company to your list of “cool” places to work. “We have a highly creative workplace environment that fosters concepts like risk, learn, and grow, and one of the most visible signs of [that] is our company art collection,” says Kristin Rogers, Progressive’s manager of art education. “The art collection is the poster child for our workplace culture.” Progressive began collecting art back in 1974 (starting with prints but expanding to a diverse range of works), and it currently has a collection of 7,800 pieces, growing at the rate of 200 or 300 new purchases per year, including sculptures by Jude Tallichet, Petah Coyne, Sharon Loudon, Vik Muniz, and Beverly Semmes. Seventy-eight hundred pieces is a lot of art, but it’s spread around, with some in Progressive’s headquarters in Mayfield Village, Ohio, and the rest in the company’s five call centers and 350 offices around the United States.

Rogers manages art education for Progressive’s employees, who are given 90-minute, small-group tours of the collection and “encouraged to write about their responses to the artwork.” Special exhibitions may be created on certain themes, such as “Making the Right Choice” (2008–10), which was designed for the Compliance and Ethics department and focused on art dealing with ethical dilemmas. Having an art collection—and one of considerable importance—is a selling point for the company, Rogers claims, noting that one employee, who did not want to move to a cultural wasteland, “told me that he came to work for Progressive because of the collection.”

Progressive is a bit anomalous these days. Other corporations with art collections have been more inclined to get rid of them than to add to them, and fewer companies have been building new ones, according to Shirley

Reiff Howarth, editor of the *International Directory of Corporate Art Collections*. “There are fewer corporate art collections in the U.S. now than in 2000,” she said; while the 2000 directory listed 900, the 2014 edition has only 500. Formerly a symbol of cultural appreciation and involvement, corporate art collections are seen—in the U.S., though not in Europe, Howarth clarifies—as a wasteful extravagance in times of lay-offs and hiring freezes. Stacy Sklaver, an art advisor in Maryland who assists corporations and nonprofits in buying art for their offices, noted that expensive art may adversely affect an organization’s image: “Clients don’t want to come in and see their billable hours up on the wall.”

“The 1980s was the high point in corporate art collecting, but the crash at the end of the ’80s started the process of killing it off,” said David Galenson, a professor of economics at the

University of Chicago and author of *Conceptual Revolutions in Twentieth-Century Art* (2009). “Company executives found out that the art market could be a very volatile thing that they didn’t want to be part of.” And it wasn’t just market volatility.

Prices for top-flight art have been rising to astronomical levels, and the type of art that is expected to appreciate in value “costs money to maintain, in terms of storage, climate control, and state-of-the-art facilities in which to display it,” explains Mary Lanier, former director of the Chase Manhattan Bank art collection and now a private corporate art advisor. In addition, “shareholders get no value from the art collection and are irritated by it,” according to Princeton University economist Orley Ashenfelter. “Firms, especially when the economy starts to sour, recognize their need to stick to their core business.” Ongoing mergers, acquisitions, relocations, and changes in leadership can also make an art collection burdensome. Finally, in the 1980s, the Internal Revenue Service decided to enforce its rule that artworks cannot be depreciated along with office furnishings and equipment.

Many of the top auction houses in the U.S., including Christie’s, Sotheby’s, Heritage Auctions, and Freeman’s now have separate corporate sales departments, largely to help companies sell their objects. “We’ve been selling a lot of art from corporate collections,” said Heritage’s vice president and managing director Ed Beardsley. Often the company



Above: Petah Coyne, *Untitled #788, #790, #795, #796, #799, #800, #804, 1993-95*. Wax, candles, steel, wire, silk flowers, and ribbons, dimensions variable. Below: Beverly Semmes, *Rhonda Lavonda Yolonda Chiffonda, 1995*. Organza and crushed velvet, 31 x 32 x 1 ft.95

selling the art is not identified, although sometimes the provenance is cited. At Freeman's, which is based in Philadelphia,



COURTESY THE PROGRESSIVE CORPORATION

corporate collection deaccessioning is “an area in which we are promoting ourselves increasingly,” according to vice-chairman Alasdair Nichol. Freeman's held a series of sales from the collection of the bankrupt Lehman Brothers, as well as for Avon and pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline.

Despite widespread skittishness about buying and displaying art, some companies continue the practice, most notably healthcare facilities and law firms. “The healthcare industry is growing, and hospitals see the value of art and creating spaces that are more pleasant,” said Talley Fisher, a sculptor in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, who has been commissioned to create large installations for the Mount Nittany Medical Center in State College, Pennsylvania; the Williamsport Hospital in Williamsport, Pennsylvania; the Eisenhower George and Julia Argyros Health Center in La Quinta, California; the Johnnie B. Byrd, Sr. Alzheimer's Center and Research Institute in Tampa, Florida; and the Reid Hospital in Richmond, Indiana. The Mount Nittany Medical Center, in fact, has an endowment to fund art acquisitions. Fischer noted that she does not promote herself directly to these healthcare facilities but directs her marketing efforts at art advisors, who are usually brought in to help institutions find artworks for new or renovated spaces.

One of the healthcare industry's largest collectors is the Cleveland Clinic, with locations in Ohio, Florida, Nevada, Canada, and Abu Dhabi. A seven-member art team is responsible for acquiring art in all media and styles to fill wall and atrium spaces. To find art, Joanne

Cohen, executive director and chief curator of the art collection, “go[es] to art fairs—the Venice Biennale, Miami/Basel, Frieze, the Chicago Art Fair, the Armory Show, and some others—and to gallery and museum exhibitions all over.” For the facilities in Abu Dhabi and Las Vegas, Cohen and her staff worked with art advisors to find appropriate works, but otherwise they pick works on their own. They are “deluged with mail and e-mail” from dealers and artists who want the Cleveland Clinic to purchase their work, and they file all of these submissions and review them when they need to install new work.



Left: Talley Fisher, *Constellation II*, 2012. Anodized perforated aluminum and stainless steel bead chain, 18 x 12 ft. diameter. Above: Talley Fisher, *Susquehanna Reverie*, 2012. Anodized perforated aluminum, chrome-plated aluminum, and stainless steel bead chain and grids, 32 x 75 x 20 ft.

The art team at Cleveland Clinic has no fixed acquisitions budget. Money is allotted when a construction project is underway, in the manner of a percent-for-art program. The more than 5,000 works in the collection—including large-scale sculptural works by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, Jaume Plensa, and Alyson Shotz—represent a substantial investment, but “the cost of art is overwhelmed by the cost of the equipment and buildings,” Cohen says. “An MRI machine is so expensive.”

The clinic’s collection is of such note that tours are offered (in Arabic, English, and Spanish), and those with no health concerns but an interest in art “come here before the Cleveland Museum of Art is open.” The principal beneficiaries, however, are the patients and visitors, who comment on the clinic’s surveys that the art environment

“helps with healing...reduces stress levels and the experience of pain.” Cohen adds that “patients who feel less pain may be more motivated to get out of bed, possibly because they want to look at the art.”

“Art in offices enriches the lives of the people who work there,” says Laura Solomon, an art advisor in New York City who not only helps her clients purchase art, but also installs pieces, rotates works around offices, and even puts together special exhibitions. Solomon, like many advisors, has taken on the role of outside curator, since fewer and fewer corporations have in-house staff devoted exclusively to buying and managing art. Many companies, in fact, prefer using outside consultants, finding expertise through the Association of Professional Art Advisors, for instance, as a cost-saving move.



Above: Jaume Plensa, *Whispering*, 2007–08. Stainless steel, 14 x 16 ft. Right: Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, *BlueBerg (r11i01)*, 2007. Anodized aluminum, rapid-prototyped ABS, and USB drive, 361 x 260 in.

A number of Solomon's clients are law firms, which tend to want "not a high-budget collection but a high-energy collection," a desire that she fulfills by focusing on emerging and mid-career artists. One client, Bijan Amini, a partner in the Manhattan law firm Storch Amini & Munves, noted that he has never "spent more than \$100,000 for anything. Most of the pieces are in the range of \$5,000 or \$10,000." He doesn't know what his employees think about the art that decorates the offices (he's never asked), although the firm's controller "tells me it's a big waste of money. I don't think so. I think the art helps productivity, and it keeps the place from looking drab. Many of my clients own private jets, and they expect to see works of art. They want to feel it's an expensive office, so I think the art helps the business. Plus, I get pleasure just from

looking at the art, and that's worth something."

So how does an artist get his or her work into one of these collections? Generally, it's a matter of knowing whom to contact and how to contact them. While a top executive (or appointed committee) may make the final decision concerning what to buy and where to place it, usually someone more accessible has the task of finding possible candidates for consideration—and that's the advisor. "Corporations like the idea of a professional arm's-length acquisition, so they look for someone like me," said Emily Nixon, a Chicago-based art advisor who was instrumental in building numerous corporate art collections, including that of accounting firm Arthur Andersen. (That collection of 2,000 works by contemporary artists was sold in its entirety, principally by Nixon, after the

company filed for bankruptcy in 2001.) The artists of greatest interest to her "should be in a gallery and have had numerous sales." It doesn't hurt if these artists have already sold work to other corporations, although that is less significant than gallery representation.

Companies most likely to be in the market for art are physically expanding, building a new facility, relocating, or just redecorating. "Offices show the thinking of the corporation," says Miami art advisor Lisa Austen. "If the artwork is old, clients think, 'These people haven't changed their thinking in 30 years, and probably not just about art.'"

