

Art collecting among corporations in the United States

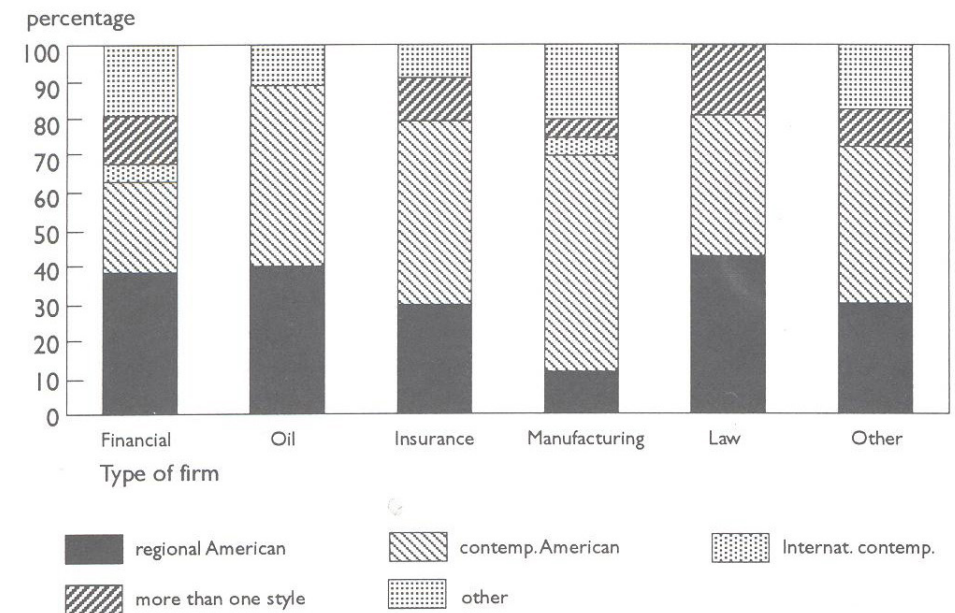
Rosanne Martorella Economic changes during the last twenty years have created enormous corporate wealth, and as firms grew and their services expanded, they relocated their offices – causing radical changes in personnel benefits, planning, and community affairs. The art that adorned the walls of these new offices came to symbolize, among other things, this change.

Introduction

Over 90 percent of the collections were begun after World War II, and almost 80 percent since 1960. Undoubtedly, the time frame in which acquisition occurred determined the artistic styles within the collections. All forms of contemporary American styles were collected. Collections exceeding six hundred works were probably developed at a time when offices were relocated and expanded into new corporate headquarters. Elaborately designed interiors have become the norm within the last decade, with few limits placed on fixed-asset budgets of corporations who view their headquarters as symbols of their development and future. These buildings have radically altered city skylines and suburban landscapes, and their architects have assumed unyielding power to define and control the interior and exterior environments.

Over the last ten years, major industrial, manufacturing, oil, and financial companies in all large cities in the United States have commissioned well-known architects to design their headquarters. Often firms commissioned well-known artists as well, to create sculptures for their lobbies, urban plazas, or suburban parks – works becoming ‘logos’ for the corporations and expressions of the images they wished to convey to their public. Painting and textiles had to be carefully selected or commissioned for highly visible areas such as lobbies, plazas, and executive dining rooms. Well-conceived spaces used to entertain high-status clients became the norm, employing the latest textiles and materials. Art, like other components of space design, had to reflect corporate policy.

Chart 1



Size of the collections and firm type

Corporations have had larger budgets than many museums over the past fifteen years. The majority of corporate collections, however, have fewer than six hundred works, and 49 percent have fewer than three hundred. Overall, there are approximately one thousand corporations collecting art; 60 percent are Fortune 500 companies with a combined worth in excess of \$2 billion (Art & Auction, 1988). Usually the largest collections, located in California and New York, include the works of nationally recognized artists and have the greatest historic value, but there are a number of very small yet significant collections held by private companies across the United States.

Although the largest collections report important holdings and lend such works for exhibitions, all collections include a disproportionately large share of prints and

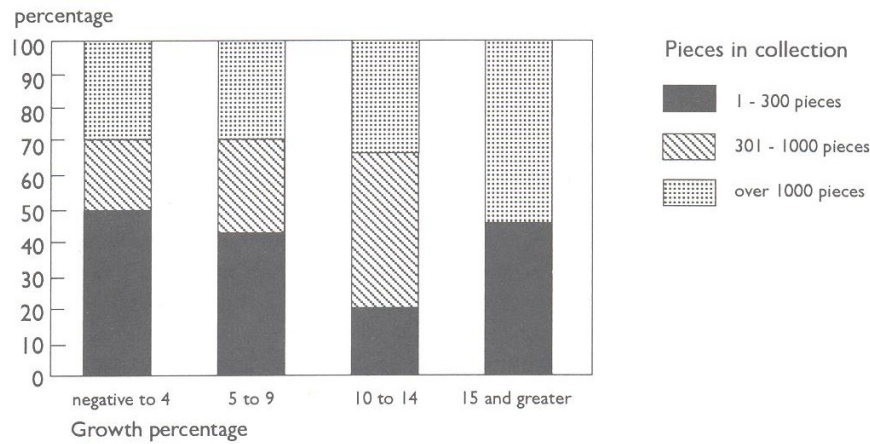
posters. Original works by unknown artists abound; when works by nationally recognized artists are available, they are displayed in more important areas of the office. These valuable works generally represent less than 5 percent of any collection.

Chart 1, using chi square (at the .01 level of significance), reveals that the style of art preferred varies with the type of the organization. Regional banks and small law firms express slightly more interest in collecting regional art than do the larger firms in those areas. In contrast, the large oil, insurance and manufacturing firms choose contemporary American and international artists.

Economic Trends

Among the most active corporate collections, 80 percent are owned by Fortune 500 companies,

Chart 2



including the leading banking institutions in the nation, show steady growth rates, with many corporations in my study boasting over 15 percent for the ten-year period from 1975 to 1985. Last year alone, companies allocated over \$300 million toward new purchases or toward the maintenance of their art collections. Undoubtedly, the expansion of these programs has been contingent on favorable economic conditions and huge profits, which allow for the purchase of expensive art.

Growth rates on eight-one Fortune-ranked manufacturing and financial companies for 1986 show that sixty-nine of them report growth of at least 5 percent for the period 1974-1984, and that almost half of them report above 15 percent growth. These firms are the wealthiest in their industries (see Chart 2).

The largest collections are among companies showing 15 percent or greater growth rates, and the tendency is for these firms to show consistent rates of acquisition. Firms with lower growth rates appear to allow their annual

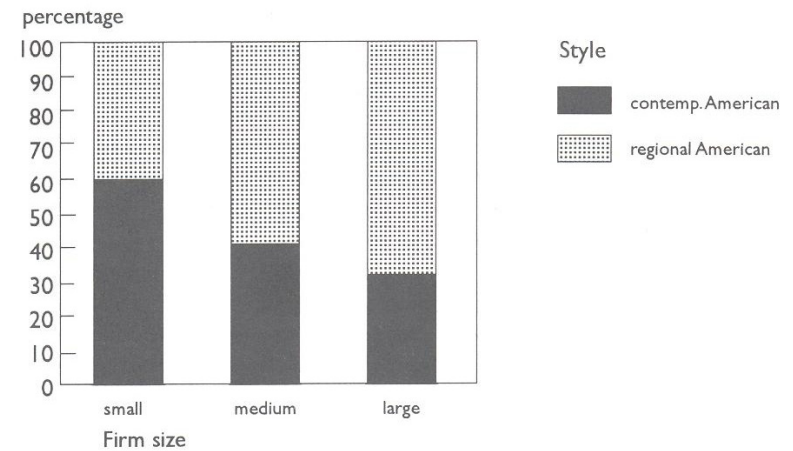
earnings to be reflected in their art purchases; this is dramatically illustrated by slowing their purchases during slack profit periods.

Chart 3 reporting 'firm size', reveals a direct relationship between size and stylistic preference (.01 level of significance).

Larger companies, especially those employing over fifteen thousand people, collect more works by nationally recognized American artists or by the European avant-garde; smaller companies prefer the works of local artists – 61 percent of small, 42.8 percent of medium, and 28.4 percent of large firms show preferences for regional art. In contrast, 38.4 percent of small, 57.1 percent of medium and 71.5 percent of large firms show preferences for nationally recognized artists.

Undoubtedly, firm size and growth rates are indications of the economic health of a corporation, its position within its industry, and its ability to express itself by building a headquarters in which it houses its art collection. The size and type of the firm are

Chart 3



better indicators of stylistic preferences than is the variable growth rate, and confirm the important role of the art program in performing non-aesthetic functions, such as highlighting a company's image, or fulfilling marketing objectives.

Styles preferred and the support of contemporary art

Many corporations have purchased several hundred or even several thousand works of art to display throughout their offices; much of what they have collected represents reproductions and works on paper by well-known artists. These form a small part of the collection, with the bulk of collections comprising works by affordable local artists. Data reveals that over 70 percent of corporate collections include contemporary American works of art. Twenty-seven percent of corporations prefer to purchase works by local artists. Only 3 percent acquired early-twentieth-century American, international contemporary, or nineteenth-century European works. Nevertheless, some companies assisted

by professional curators have been able to amass a collection of as many as three hundred works with a budget of \$250,000 to \$500,000, much to the delight of employees and board members.

Within these types of artworks, preferences for realistic and representational styles is clearly indicated by my data. This style is represented in 46 percent of all art collected. The abstract expressionist styles represented 21 percent of corporate art, especially works on paper by 'color-field' artists. Figurative artists claim an equal number of abstract expressionist works, with figurative/traditional artists having slightly more of the figurative genre, which includes numerous portraits of chief executive officers, company presidents, and trustees. Pattern, minimal, pop, photorealist, and neoexpressionist styles are least represented. Survey responses also indicated a low representation of pattern works, yet on-site observations confirmed the presence of a large number of such works.

Uses and meanings of corporate art

Corporate selection of both important works of art and mass-produced works conforming to the requirements of interior design come to symbolize a particular view of the individual and the nature of society and become the basis for a corporate taste culture. The imagery contained within all art displayed in the workplace both disseminates and reinforces a corporate ideology which, in emphasizing color, form, and design, taken collectively deprives art of its aesthetic, historical, or political significance.

There is in corporate collections a predominance of serene paintings of landscapes, portrayals of middle-class lifestyles, and colorful geometric designs. The smaller or more serious collections, found primarily in corporate gallery areas adjoining executive suites, maintain greater aesthetic integrity. Works of art displayed in corridors, cafeterias, and lobbies lose their importance as aesthetic objects, taking their meaning from the immediate milieu. Consequently, the function they serve within the workplace redefines them, and they are seen as 'décor'.

The proliferation of landscapes and still lifes inspired by the everyday and leisure activities of the middle class suggests more than a familiarity with this theme or its subject matter. Countless canvases, watercolors, photographs, and works of fiber art capture our lives in every detail and activity, but always in terms of our surroundings, ourselves and our possessions as objects of reality. Even when the human figure is present, it appears as an object.

Many critics of corporate patronage are suspicious of the corporation's ability to co-opt the political role of the avant-garde and firmly believe that modern works change their

meaning within the work setting as they become objects to be manipulated. Employees who accept abstract-styles in the workplace take these artworks for granted and treat them as ordinary decoration rather than as the embodiment of social, political, or aesthetic messages.

Ideologically, art in the workplace could undermine the reality of an economic condition of mass production that encourages sameness and conformity rather than the individuality fostered by the creative process. This process of co-optation is further enhanced by recent developments in the economy that encourage the short-term profiteering that predetermined corporate collecting.

With the passage of time and the possible over bureaucratization of an art program, a routinization of tasks may occur as acquisition is completed, a company president loses interest, and the program drops off in prestige within the company. Original goals will be altered, with less-aesthetic and more 'functional' goals for the program taking precedence.

Undoubtedly, a prosperous economic climate has ramifications for all segments of an economy, including the segment that deals with the production, dissemination, and consumption of art. Since only companies that have experienced rapid expansion are presently seriously involved in collecting art, any sudden shift in the economy (such as the crisis within the oil industry of the early 1980s or within the stock market in 1987-1988) will have traumatic effects on the future of corporate art collecting and the maintenance of collections within those sectors. Not only will acquisitions cease, but deaccessioning of artworks can be anticipated both as a result of a downturn in

the economy and the realization that the large volume of works purchased haphazardly during construction booms will not keep their aesthetic value over time.

I hope this material raises further questions and provides an empirical background for verifying assumptions about the development of corporate patronage, the nature and content of styles found within the workplace, and the power of executives and consultants.

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