

Art speaks volumes at association offices: How groups

By Lori Sharn

As CEO of the U.S. Grains Council, Tom Sleight knows a lot about corn, sorghum and barley.

Contemporary art? Not so much. “I know what I like, but it’s not my field,” Sleight said.

So when the trade group was preparing to move to new offices in 2012, it faced a challenge common to many associations: how to choose art that complements both the space and the mission.

Working with an art consultant, Sleight and a small committee selected photographs that fit with the group’s codeword for the build-out—quiet quality—and projected professionalism and modern American agriculture. Two collages were created from the photos.

“We wanted to show the growth of agriculture but we did not want to get trapped into trite, overworked images like a red barn,” Sleight said, noting that the Grains Council hosts many international teams. “We wanted an image of progressive, bountiful, U.S. agricultural production with respect to the past.”

What associations hang on the walls or place in their lobbies sends a message to the groups’ members, employees and visitors. Jack Devine, principal at Artists Circle Fine Art in North Potomac, Md., said the trend among his association clients is toward more branding and theme-driven artwork. Photographs and imagery of Washington, D.C., also appeal to groups who want to emphasize their mission and location.

Most often, decisions about art are made when moving to a new space or renovating existing offices.

“I say this to all my clients: Art is the first thing you see when you walk in the door, and it’s the last thing you see as you walk out the door,” said Stacy Sklaver, president and founder of ArtMatters in Glen Echo, Md. “It should leave an impression.”

Sklaver worked with Financial Services Roundtable to select a painting that stops people in their tracks and starts conversations. It’s an image of the U.S. Capitol made entirely of hundreds of tiny people—all doing different things—painted in black on a neutral background. In the upper left corner, a red figure and a blue figure walk together toward the building.

“We just like it a lot,” said Eric Hoplin, executive director at FSR. “It’s a reminder that government is of the people, and we play a role in shaping legislation in this country.”

What associations spend on art and on con-

sultants depends on many factors, including square footage of the space and the prominence of the location, Devine said. Some groups reframe and rehang existing collections or purchase relatively inexpensive prints. Others buy original artwork or even commission pieces. A bare bones budget might be \$3,000 to \$5,000 and an upper range might be \$50,000 or \$80,000 or more, he said.

The Association of American Medical Colleges decided early on to include original art in a new \$170 million headquarters in Washington, D.C., which includes a learning center and conference facility for members. The collection includes two works commissioned by the AAMC: A three-story glass painting in the building’s prow—where it is visible from the street—celebrates the cycle of human life. Hand-forged steel screens in two multi-floor stairwells highlight the role of plants in medicine.

Mark Wood, director of real estate and facilities at AAMC, said the budget for art was modest, “especially for what we got.”

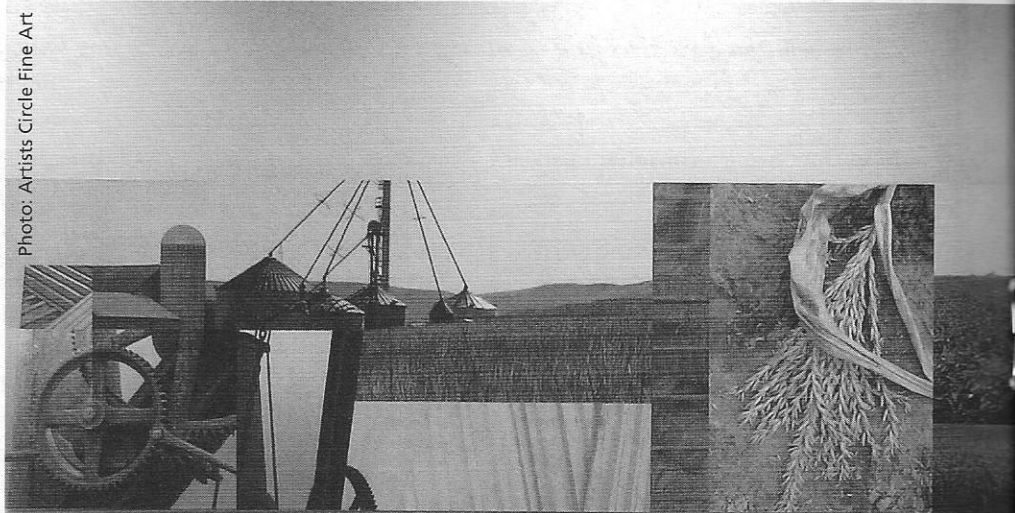


Photo: Artists Circle Fine Art

U.S. Grains Council

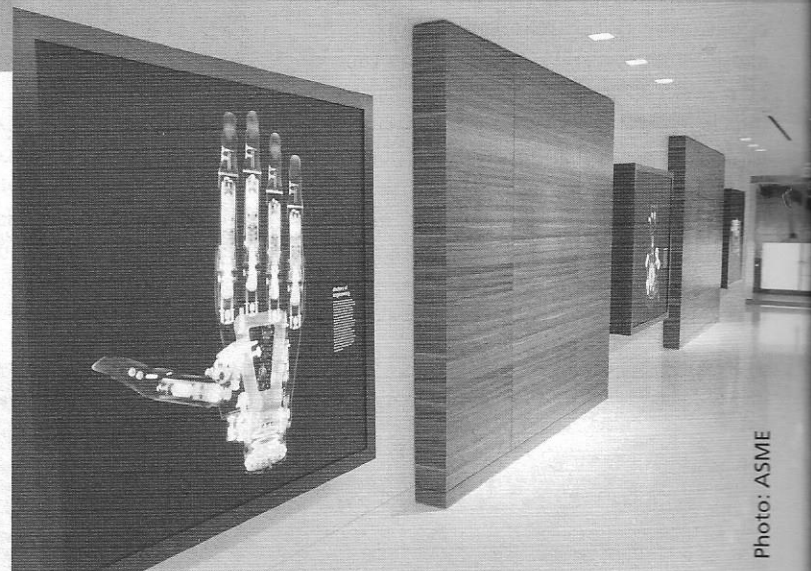


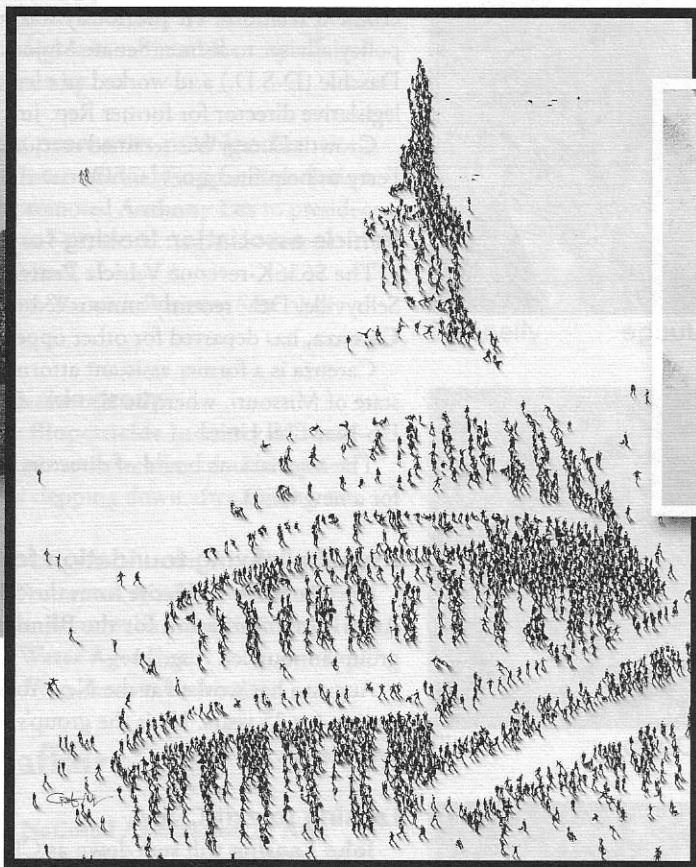
Photo: ASME

American Society of Mechanical Engineers

AAMC hired an art consultant, Lisa Austin & Associates in Miami Beach, Fla., and formed an internal committee of staffers and senior executives with an interest in art. One of the building’s six “social hubs” is reserved for rotating exhibits of art created by AAMC staff.

The American Society of Mechanical Engineers used art and design to reflect its mission to “champion the excitement and impact of engineering” at its new 100,000-square-foot headquarters at Two Park Avenue in New York City. “A walk through the halls of ASME tells a story rich in professional pride and human endeavor,” said Executive Director Thomas Loughlin via an email. Senior staff worked with volunteer leadership on every aspect of the new space, he said.

choose artwork to enhance environment, stay on message



Financial Services Roundtable



Photo: CEO Update

Inset showing detail at FSR



Photo: CEO Update

CEO Kevin Keller at CFP Board

ASME commissioned 5-foot square X-ray photographs of a prosthetic hand, typewriter and other objects to show how engineering contributes to everyday life. The entry corridor wall is covered with engineering equations. An interactive exhibit highlights key milestones and breakthroughs in the field.

Interior architects often work with associations to design artful feature walls and other elements, as part of the build-out or remodeling. A river of pennies zigzags between floors along the staircase wall at Certified Financial Planner Board of Standards. More pennies cover the wall behind the main reception desk—42,000 pennies in all.

CEO Kevin Keller said the penny feature was included in the builder's allowance for CFP Board's recent move to new space in its existing building.

"We wanted to make the space inviting," Keller said. "We are very proud of the space and we think it represents financial planners and the profession well."

Art advice for associations

- Ask what will go on the walls early on when planning a renovation or a move and include it in the budget. Interior architects and art consultants can provide a preliminary estimate. "A lot of times artwork is considered a leftover," Sklaver said.
- Decide what the group wants to say to members and other visitors, and think about how it could be expressed visually.
- Think big. The trend toward open offices and glass walls means fewer places to hang art. Clients are choosing one large piece rather than a series of smaller works, Sklaver said.
- Don't throw anything away—yet. Existing art and memorabilia might be refurbished or reframed, and presented in a fresh way as individual pieces or as part of a collection.
- Pay attention to detail; members will spot mistakes. When the American Road &

Transportation Builders Association commissioned a mural to show its industry at work, the group's senior vice president for safety made sure each figure wore the proper safety equipment.

- Include some non-themed art, such as abstract pieces and photographs. "Too much message can become noise, and art can be a relief," Devine said.
- Involve staff to the extent possible. "You want to get people excited about it," said Mark Wood of AAMC.

SEE MORE ART ONLINE

Go to CEOupdate.com for a slideshow of artwork at more than a dozen associations.