

DOWNTIME

SIMON CONSTABLE



Beyond Blending In

Smart firms take their office art seriously.
How they match it up to their own business.

It's an oil painting by 17th-century Flemish painter Anthony van Dyck, the kind almost any museum would proudly display. Only this one is hanging in a slightly different location: a conference room of a wealth-management firm.

Or at least it could be. While everyone from clients to office workers may give it scant notice, most companies tend to treat office art fairly seriously. After all, aside from the money they may spend on it, the art alone can help business, serving as an icebreaker, for example. "It is difficult to get people to start talking about their money immediately," says Annelien Bruins, CEO of the Tang Art

Advisory in New York. For their part, hedge funds may use artwork to signal financial success.

Of course, the vast majority of firms aren't putting fancy paintings on their walls. We've all seen, say, an industrial company with photos of its factories adorning hallways. "It's kind of a fine line" between quality and extravagance, says Karen Boyer, founder of Elements in Play, a Miami- and New York-based art advisory. So how do firms manage that balancing act? It turns out, according to experts who advise companies on office art, that each industry seems to have its own rules. Here's what the pros told us:



Technology companies. “At tech firms, people are showing up in jeans and shorts. The last thing they want is a stuffy painting of a landscape,” says Loren Friedman, president of Chicago-based Friedman Fine Art. So, forget seeing a John Constable landscape. Far more likely it’ll be street art, a.k.a. graffiti-inspired work, such as those by Hebru Brantley or Banksy. Such works, like the tech industry itself, are often vibrant and edgy.

Industrial companies. Friedman says he worked with a large gas utility in Chicago that hired a local photographer to take beautiful photographs of workers on a gas pipeline. “The pictures were thematic for the work that they do, although they did have some original abstract artwork on the executive floor,” he says.

Hotels. Firms in the hospitality business, such as hotels, are increasingly important in the corporate art-buying field. “Some will buy original art,”

says Friedman. “Others can get giclée prints of major works, such as a Monet.” That’s how a hotel displays valuable work on the wall.

Hedge funds. “Their collections tend to mimic the managers,” says Boyer. “Usually the work would be [by] flashier, better-known artists.” But that wouldn’t include pieces by Jean-Michel Basquiat. “They typically trade for \$20 million to \$30 million,” she says. Work by New York-based artist David Kramer might fill the bill.

Law firms. “They often use photographs,” says Boyer, noting that such pieces would be of things rather than conceptual work, and not controversial such as some of the photos by Robert Mapplethorpe. Think scenes of the local city. The idea is to help give the atmosphere of a trusted advisor with taste. One Chicago law firm supplements its photo collection with original works by local artists such as René Romero Schuler. ▀