

Money

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Playing to the gallery

Corporate art collections can be more than just expensive status symbols. Chosen well, they can inspire workers and create a talking point with clients, discovers Giles Morris

Feel like your office could do with a bit of cheering up? How about installing a sculpture from The Empire Strikes Back in the lobby? You might, understandably, think that your boss wouldn't approve. And yet it is exactly what law firm Clifford Chance has done at one of its London offices - giving artist Nick Hornby what he describes as "a hefty award and the run of their rather enormous lobby for six months". And if a solicitors' firm can manage it, surely other companies can.

"Mine is a fun project," says Hornby. Along with the Star Wars piece, he has installed "a life-size slice of a Boeing 727" and "a Victorian table whose legs were turned using a Volkswagen Polo as a lathe".

But are such sculptures really appropriate for a legal firm? Don't clients want a bit of old-fashioned reassurance and respectability when they visit their solicitors? Not according to Nigel Frank, who curates Clifford Chance's collection of art. "Art provides an amenity to staff and visitors," says Frank. "It's about making the office environment interesting."

Employees seem to approve. Simon Fletcher, secretary to the Partnership Council at Clifford Chance, is a fan of Hornby's art: "They're very powerful in their statements," he says. "The day Nick was installing his pieces, I actually had some clients come into the office," Fletcher recalls. "He was there and it created a talking point. It helps you have a different kind of dialogue."



The firm backs up Hornby's showstoppers with a collection of 1,200 pieces of art - they've even loaned some to the Royal Academy for an exhibition - and an in-house art club for employees. "It's hugely popular," says Simon Fletcher. "The talks at lunchtime and gallery tours are always oversubscribed. We've had Peter Blake [designer of the Beatles' Sergeant Pepper album cover] and Sam Taylor-Wood [maker of the celebrated video portrait of David Beckham sleeping] come and talk to the firm."

So why are blue-chip employers such as Clifford Chance so interested in art? Clearly, it adds a bit of visual excitement to an otherwise soulless environment. "Clifford Chance employees spend hours and hours in these strange hermetically sealed and artificially lit glass boxes," says Nick Hornby, "so it's great to have a new body of sculpture to interrupt their routines."

Some employers are getting more adventurous in their choices, says Hornby: "Until recently, most art on the walls of large multinationals was drab rent-a-art, which disappeared into the generic-ness of limestone floors and rows of leather Barcelona chairs," he says. "But now Bloomberg, Deutsche Bank and many others have become extremely involved in the contemporary art debate."

Financial news company Bloomberg has its own gallery and currently sponsors the London-based art fair Art Futures; Swiss bank UBS is a long-term sponsor of Tate Modern, and Deutsche Bank holds what it claims to be the "world's biggest corporate collection" of art.

On one level it makes perfect sense for financial institutions to get involved in the art world. "Art functions as an investment," says London contemporary art dealer Richard Salmon. "You can put a piece of art in a warehouse and pay warehouse fees or people can enjoy it and also store it for nothing."

But there's also the glamour of art. "You have the association of mystery, wealth, creativity and freedom," says Salmon.

This is a relatively new development: "Thirty years ago, people would have thought you were completely mad if you said banks should get involved in art," he says.






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