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Sep 27, 2012

Can Art Make Workers Happier?

by [J. B. Wood](#) (/users/bradleyjmoore?pw=1#thc-profiles-account-settings-form)



I decided to spruce up my drab office with a colorful and enigmatic modern art print. It wasn't anything notable, just a little something to add some flair to my everyday work environment. I imagined it would also make an important statement, alerting co-workers to my sophisticated and distinctive taste.

"What the heck IS that?" inquired one of my more forthright colleagues, cocking his head this way and that trying to make sense of the multi-patterned swirls. He plopped down into a chair and nodded his head towards it. "That is one of the most ridiculous, pointless things I have ever seen."

I counted this a solid victory, further validating my

astute selection of artwork.

Some businesses are tuned in to art and beauty as an important corporate value, expressed with bold colors, funky architecture and plentiful displays of art gracing the walls. Others, like my lug-headed colleague, not so much, unless you're talking about the occasional \$6.99 **motivational**

poster (<http://www.allposters.com/gallery.asp?>

[aid=1023741760&c=c&search=12920&DestType=12&Referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Egoogle%2Ecom%2Fack%3Fsa%3DI%2](http://www.allposters.com/gallery.asp?aid=1023741760&c=c&search=12920&DestType=12&Referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Egoogle%2Ecom%2Fack%3Fsa%3DI%2)

Last month I had an opportunity to get a private tour of **SEI Investments**

(<http://www.sei.com/enUS/index.htm>), a company so committed to art, the entire office campus doubles as an art museum.

Seriously.

SEI is in the business of running back-office administrative platforms for investment funds, headquartered in a series of buildings located in a sleepy suburb outside of Philadelphia. Under the leadership of founder Al West, the company has grown to become the top player in its industry.

Upon arrival at the corporate lobby for my tour, I was asked to sign in and was then promptly greeted by the curator.

Wait, what?

Yes, there is a full time curator on site, which tells you this is more than just an eccentric entrepreneur's hobby. Here at SEI resides **the West Collection**

(http://www.westcollection.org/West_Collection/Home.html), co-existing right alongside the company's 2,500

employees. Pieces of contemporary art are thoughtfully displayed throughout the corporate offices—on walls, in stairwells, at drinking fountains, hanging from ceilings, sneaking up on you in intermittent spaces—in the midst of the buzz of office workers coming and going about their business.



Vik Muniz, 2003, Self Portrait (I am Too Sad to Tell You, After Bas Van Ader), c-print, 40 x 50

Mr. West was interested in more than just hanging pretty pictures around the offices. He aspired to develop a collection of provocative images that would challenge and generate discussion. He asked his daughter, Paige West, an art historian, to develop a collection. It now counts over 3,000 pieces, focusing on emerging artists who are breaking new ground. “The collection’s intent is not to aesthetically please, but to make one think,” says Mr. West. To him, the purpose of art is to act as a catalyst, a means to challenge, inspire, and perhaps even bother the viewer.



Norm Paris, 2005, Michael Jordan, Save The World, Forton MG sculptures, kite string, casein, variable dimensions

It was slightly disorienting for me at first, this odd mash up of corporate business and of-the-moment contemporary art. I tried to imagine working in such an inspiring environment, surrounded by such creativity, such beauty and whimsy and intrigue at every turn. I wondered, do the workers here even appreciate it? Do they lose the wonder and magnificence after passing by the same old piece for the hundredth time?



Peter Callesen, 2007, Cut To The Bone, 255 x 95 x 147cm, 120 g. paper

I've heard that when under pressure or a deadline, something as simple as walking outdoors and staring at a tree can re-calibrate your brain neurons to alter perspective and reduce stress. Is the same also possible with art? Sometimes I can look into a painting and get lost in the color, drown in the infinite possibilities of shapes and angles, become hypnotized by the nuanced and layered textures. What better way to recharge at work?

Well, whatever. I don't care what the researchers say. Judging by the results, it's certainly working for SEI, which continually secures a spot on Fortune's "100 Best Companies to Work For." And as for my own office, let's just say that I'll try to set the tone for making my art as challenging as my business.

Go ahead, workers, get your art on.

Post by **J.B. Wood**. (<http://shrinkingthecamel.com/>)

Image by **Patrick Hoesly** (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/zooboing/>). Used with [permission](#). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>) Sourced via [Flickr](#) (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/zooboing/5094605245/>).

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Share  Favorite ★**ShonJaw** · 2 years ago

Thank you for this article, it has me thinking about the offices at my place of employment. I have tried to create sort of an oasis in my office with a fountain, sandbox, and soft music playing in the background. Visitors are often taken aback and question why, but more often than not I have observed them sitting and really relaxing or playing in the sand. I think I will add a few pictures to this and see what happens. I love the idea!!

^ | ▾ · Share ›

**Loren Pinilis** · 2 years ago

In my experience, art is really impactful at first but then it becomes just part of the background. It can be somewhat beneficial if one intentionally views and re-views the art, but I wonder if it's a better strategy to put new art in rather frequently?

^ | ▾ · Share ›

**Tim Miller** · 2 years ago

i work from home - and my wife and 4 daughters are artists - so the house is constantly filled with art and drawing and painting and in my case photography. i think all the art on our walls is our own!

^ | ▾ · Share ›

**Tim Miller** · 2 years ago

here is some information about the art piece displayed at the top of this article

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/z...>

This seamless artwork was illustrated by Patrick Hoesly, a Kansas City based illustrator specializing in architectural illustrations and graphic design. This texture is released under the Creative Commons Attribution license. If you like this image, please mark it as a favorite and feel free to leave a comment. Thanks!

What is Seamless Art?

Seamless art is a special illustration, where one side of the art exactly matches the opposite side, so that the edges blend into each other when repeated. See for yourself by making it your desktop wallpaper.

About Patrick Hoesly:

I'm a illustrator, specializing in architectural illustrations, and graphic design. I create 3D models, renderings and fly-around animations for Architects to understand and communicate their designs.

Check out my Blog at www.zooboincreview.blogspot.co...



^ | ▾ · Share ›

**n davis rosback** · 2 years ago

I'm going outside for a re-calibration.

^ | ▾ · Share ›

**Guest** · 2 years ago

I was just discussing this with someone recently, how little my office does

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I was just discussing this with someone recently, how little my office does in terms of aesthetics, much less provocative, thought-provoking art. It's all cubicles and filling cabinets, arranged haphazardly (actually, "arranged" might be overstating it). There was a framed Ansel Adams piece that hung on the wall for months with a giant crack. I had to look at it every day and just shake my head. I THINK I would be motivated and inspired by a beautiful work environment, yet how can I expect my employer to make that kind of investment in this economy?

I took a couple of pieces of art I created and hung them in my cubicle. Maybe that's a start?

^ | v · Share ›

THE
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David Rupert · 2 years ago

My office has framed stamp art....which reflects my organization. It's actually very good, but I'm wondering about finding something a little more abstract.

The one above, with the skeleton on the floor, however, might be pushing things.

^ | v · Share ›

THE
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Anon. → **David Rupert** · 2 years ago

I work at SEI, and one of the downsides of art in the workplace can be having a large, "thought provoking" piece in front of your desk. SEI does not have cubicles or offices, so everyone has a view of the walls. What SEI has done is put "controversial" items in a separate area that is a bit "off the beaten track" and has invited anyone to make comments on the art. If there are complaints from employees about a specific piece, it will probably end up in that separate area. A creative solution which still meets the business' needs.

^ | v · Share ›

THE
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dukeslee · 2 years ago

You are so good. You make me laugh and think and wonder, all in the space of 500 words, or thereabouts. :)

I got to thinking about my own home-office workspace as I read this wonderful piece. Mine is filled with the art of children -- drawings and paintings Scotch-taped and thumb-tacked here and there. Often, when I'm working, my youngest is right behind me, painting with watercolor on her easel. I don't get a whole lot done during those moments, but still ... :)

^ | v · Share ›

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monicasharman2 · 2 years ago

This is absolutely fabulous. The answer, say I, is YES YES YES.

^ | v · Share ›

THE
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guest

n davis rosback · 2 years ago

☆☆☆☆☆

Art in corporate spaces is good.

However I have something to add to this that might connect workers even more with their creative side, thus becoming productive in a way that is needed for the future of businesses.

My idea is to make artistic workshops available IN the workplace. And perhaps an incentive of some kind, for a job well done, could be a BONUS of an ART retreat at a place such as...ohhhh...say... Laity Lodge for instance.

^ | v · Share ›



jbwood Mod → n davis rosback · 2 years ago

Nance, funny you should say that, because SEI does indeed offer artist workshops to the employees. I don't think a bonus is involved, but they offer sessions where the artists come in and teach everyone to create something that they can take home with them.

1 ^ | v · Share ›



n davis rosback → jbwood · 2 years ago

Very interesting. I wonder what kind of workshops they have chosen.

^ | v · Share ›



Laura Boggess · 2 years ago

This makes me happy, Jim. For me, working in a beautiful space encourages my own creativity. It sounds like an interesting tour. This is one of the things I found so inviting about Laity Lodge--the little surprises of poetry and beauty that are tucked away in surprising places. Thanks for this.

^ | v · Share ›



jbwood Mod → Laura Boggess · 2 years ago

Yes, I think we could say Laity Lodge exemplifies this idea, building beauty and art right into its architecture and landscape. Can't wait to go back!

^ | v · Share ›



S.Etole · 2 years ago

The artwork displayed in the Mayo Clinic at Rochester, MN, keeps one's mind engaged on something positive. Tours are offered for those who are interested in learning more. It covers a wide range from glasswork by Chihuly to paintings, sculpture, and displays from other nations. It is a welcome diversion from sometimes discouraging situations and times of waiting.

^ | v · Share ›



jbwood Mod → S.Etole · 2 years ago

That's a wonderful idea to incorporate artwork into the health care setting. Hopefully provides some positive associations, like you say, in an otherwise anxious environment. You have to give credit to the administrators who care about these artistic touches.

^ | v · Share ›



glynnyoung · 2 years ago

My company doesn't have anything that could be called a "collection," but it does have various pieces of art in conference rooms, the conference center, lobbies, etc. And it's original art - not prints -- and connected to the industry we're in (except for the two pieces in the executive office area that are Southwest pueblo-type works). For most of us, the artworks have become part of the office landscape,. But there are several that I find absolutely fascinating, particularly one that could be either a field of autumn wildflowers or a prairie fire. When I need to clear my head of the daily busy-ness, I go look at that painting.

^ | v · Share ›



jbwood Mod → glynnyoung · 2 years ago

We are not much for original artwork here, although there are a few pieces (mostly prints) here and there. I'm glad to hear that you go and look at the painting. Glynn. That's what I would do!

and look at the painting, crying. That's what I would do.

^ | v · Share ›



Agrigirl · 2 years ago

I love businesses that appreciate aesthetics! Plants too! There is great research around worker productivity and plants and I wouldn't be surprised if it extends to art.

^ | v · Share ›



jbwood Mod → Agrigirl · 2 years ago

Of course, plants! Our company does a great job with outdoor landscaping, but not a lot of plants around here. One funny thing at SEI they told me that bringing in and keeping plants healthy becomes a community effort there. So I think the plants followed the art.

^ | v · Share ›



Maureen Doallas · 2 years ago

Some corporations have incredible art collections; lucky are those employees who get to have the art on their walls. The SEI collection looks amazing.

More power to you for setting the tone. Art works (as the NEA tagline goes).

^ | v · Share ›



jbwood Mod → Maureen Doallas · 2 years ago

Art Works! I like that. Maureen, you would have loved this tour. I did think of you.

^ | v · Share ›



Sam Van Eman Mod · 2 years ago

I have a friend who, as a Residence Hall Director years ago, was struck by the decor in the men's dorm where he worked. First-year students are known to be destructive. But this school had lined the hall and common areas with paintings. The idea was to foster respect. And, according to my friend, it helped.

Thanks for sharing your experience. I wish I could have joined you on the tour.

^ | v · Share ›



jbwood Mod → Sam Van Eman · 2 years ago

Amazing to think that freshmen guys in college would actually figure out how NOT to destroy something! That requires a great deal of trust. Same thing at my daughter's high school (private school) that has some Andrew Wyeth originals hanging on the dining area walls. Parents can't believe it upon first visiting, but then you realize that it's the respect thing, in action.

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