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Microsoft's art collection grows up

- Microsoft HQ home to 4,500 pieces of contemporary art
- Microsoft's art collection began in 1987
- Collection includes a two-story wall drawing by Sol LeWitt
- Curator wants to raise Microsoft's profile in the art world

REDMOND, Washington (AP) -- Leah Erickson let out an exasperated growl when she spotted a banner advertising "Microsoft System Center Essentials 2007" crookedly thumbtacked above a row of photographs framed and lit with museumlike care.

Erickson, the archives manager for Microsoft Corp.'s art collection, enlisted a colleague to help yank it from the designated "art wall." Earlier, the two hoisted a cardboard Windows Vista sign from in front of a painting and shoved lobby chairs away from a sculpture.

Hanging in the halls of Microsoft's sprawling corporate campus are 4,500 pieces of contemporary art, some by such artists as Chuck Close, Takashi Murakami and Cindy Sherman. The software company spends just a sliver of its billions on art, so full-time curator Laura Matzer is working with what she's got to gain respect for the collection in the art world, while balancing the quirks -- like those ubiquitous posters -- of working within a 76,500-person global corporation.

"I know my place here. Microsoft is first and foremost a software company," Matzer said.

Microsoft's art collection began in 1987 to brighten the walls of what was then a six-building campus. Before then, financial institutions that wanted to project a "forward-thinking" image were the main corporate collectors of art, according to Susan Abbott, a consultant and author of "Corporate Art Collecting."

Deutsche Bank AG and Progressive Casualty Insurance Co. have two of the best-known corporate collections today. Among the 50,000 pieces in Deutsche Bank's collection are works by Pablo Picasso and Gerhard Richter; Progressive owns a Mao serigraph by Andy Warhol.

By the late 1970s, companies started buying art to stimulate employees sequestered in office parks. Around the same time, government money for the arts was on the downswing, and museums turned to blockbuster shows with mass appeal to boost attendance, Abbott said.

"Wherever you looked, it became fashionable to be knowledgeable about art," she said. "That's when the whole corporate art collecting really went crazy."

At Microsoft, a committee of employee-volunteers oversaw new acquisitions until 1999, when the company hired its first full-time curator, New York gallery owner Michael Klein.

"It was time to turn the day-to-day operations to a professional team, like every other part of the Microsoft organization," Klein said.

To keep costs down, he chose works by emerging and mid-career artists instead of established stars. To reflect the company's global footprint, he bought objects from around the world, while continuing a tradition of supporting Northwest artists. He acquired photos, prints, paintings and sculpture, but ruled out the overtly political, religious and sexual to avoid offending employees from different cultures.

One highlight of his tenure was the commission of a two-story wall drawing by Sol LeWitt, whose works have been shown in the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

When asked why Microsoft collects art, Klein answered, "Because they can. And they should. They are involved in culture. Technology is culture. And the art informs the culture."

Matzer, who joined Microsoft's staff from the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, emphasized that the company doesn't buy art as an investment. She said the collection hasn't been appraised as a whole, but did say prints by Jacob Lawrence, a well-known 20th-century American painter who spent his later years in Seattle, had quadrupled in value since their purchase. Klein said the prints were originally bought for a few thousand dollars.

Microsoft, Matzer said, collects as a benefit to employees. Her aim is to spark creativity and to give workers, who spend so much time in the plastic environment of phones and computers, access to contrasting, tactile objects.

Nicholas Dodge, a software tester on Microsoft's Web search team, said that when he moved into Building 88 in December, there was no art on the walls.

"It felt kind of industrial," he said. "Now it feels more lived in, just kind of more alive."

He strode through the mazelike hallways of the building one recent day, proudly pointing out his favorite works. "This one right here is really cool," he said of "Night Landscape #2," a small painting by William Johnson from 1990. "It's nice and dark."

After succeeding Klein in 2004, Matzer continued to use his guidelines as she sought out new works. She's also interested in artists who use technology in interesting ways. She recently bought "Easeful City," by Japanese artist Satoru Aoyama, who rendered a decaying cityscape with delicate embroidery stitches.

When she's not out scouting new artists, or at home reading about them, Matzer is focused on raising Microsoft's profile in the art world. The collection's first annual report is in the works, and she's hoping to publish a catalog of the objects by 2010. She speaks at museum conferences and joined the year-old International Association of Corporate Collections of Contemporary Art.

But working inside Microsoft presents challenges most museum staff won't encounter. For one thing, the geography is daunting: Matzer is in charge of curating mini-exhibitions in 80 buildings around the country plus Japan and Denmark.

Unlike the typical museum, which hangs less than 10 percent of its collection at a time, Microsoft keeps only a small percentage of its works in a climate-controlled vault. As a result, Matzer's budget is constrained by how fast Microsoft expands in any given year. (Matzer declined to give specifics about her budget, but Klein said during his last year he spent about \$1.2 million.)

Matzer has also become savvy in arcane technical details -- the pros and cons of different types of halogen bulbs, for example. The LED lights she'd prefer to use for conservation reasons cost more up front than Microsoft wants to spend, so she's compromised on a certain halogen bulb to illuminate the art.

Then, of course, there are the employees.

"The main difference is that, when you're in a museum or a gallery, you're interacting with people who have actively sought you out," said Meagan Hatcher-Mays, public programs manager for the collection.

An internal company Web site lists tours, artist lectures and panels on art collecting, but the handful of employees approached on campus for this story didn't know it existed.

Another problem: Only 200 pieces are accompanied by extended background information.

"Some people may come in either not understanding, or feeling antagonistic toward the piece," said Matzer.


A group of employees was particularly grateful for an explanation posted a few weeks after a giant painted plywood hot dog by New York-based artist Cary Liebowitz appeared in their building.

One told Hatcher-Mays that "not everyone liked it, but at least they understood what it was about."

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