

## Bellingham Herald

Estimated printed pages: 4

November 20, 2002

Section: Lifestyles

Page: 1C

### **CORPORATE CULTURE; Businesses turn walls into gallery spaces**

*Kie Relyea*

*Staff*

BY KIE RELYEA

THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

If you want to gaze at fine art in Bellingham, you can go to the Whatcom Museum of History & Art and the galleries sprinkled around the city.

Or walk into the law firm of Adelstein, Sharpe & Serka and the office buildings owned by Barkley Co. to appreciate some of the finest corporate collections of Northwest art around.

"We get a lot of comments from people who like looking at the artwork and even the people who work here. It helps the environment. It makes it a more pleasing place to work," explains attorney Phil Serka of his law firm in downtown Bellingham.

The show begins soon after walking through the front doors - from the Tom Wood painting hanging behind the receptionist's desk to a Guy Anderson woodblock print done in 1964 on a side wall.

"What he would do is give these out at Christmas to his best friends," Serka says while pointing to the piece.

Serka, an art collector who began building his personal collection 30 years ago, is known as the office "curator." He's the one who goes out searching for art, via galleries, the Internet or estate sales who speaks with knowledge and enthusiasm about the artists and the pieces in the collection who is putting together a book about the art gracing its walls.

It's an enviable collection:

Guy Anderson, Kenneth Callahan and Mark Tobey - three of the four artists catapulted to fame when a Sept. 28, 1953, article in Life magazine crowned them as the up-and-comers out of the Pacific Northwest.

Serka's law firm also boasts the work of the Bellingham Three - Susan Bennerstrom, John Cole and Tom Wood, all of whom are celebrated artists. (The business' brochure features the art of Wood, Cole and Jay Steensma.)

Then there's watercolor by Edgar Forkner, pottery, and their latest addition of a large painting by Fred Okada, which Serka found at an estate sale.

"Their art has become kind of the signature for their" business, says Linda Gardner, director/owner of the Lucia Douglas Gallery in Fairhaven.

WHAT ART SAYS

Beyond creating a more welcoming work environment and supporting regional artists, such collections also have other benefits.

"The art that's on the walls of a business gives you information about who they are and what they value," explains Wade Marlow, co-owner of Blue Horse Gallery in Bellingham.

[http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p\\_action=print&p\\_docid=0F7743FB3987A...](http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?p_action=print&p_docid=0F7743FB3987A...) 4/6/2005

Adds Irene Mahler, a Seattle-based art consultant: "It can help interpret the culture of the company. For instance, if a large number of people within that company are involved in the environment and the outdoors, the artwork can express that."

Mahler's clients include Safeco Field in Seattle and Frank Russell Co. in Tacoma as well as Barkley Co. in Bellingham. She helped gather some of the food-themed pieces displayed in the corporate headquarters of Haggen Inc., a Bellingham-based grocer that's set up house in one of the Barkley buildings.

She also connected the company with Seattle artist Ann Gardner, who recently completed a mosaic sculpture for its Arch Talbot Building on Rimland Drive.

That piece was hoisted 13 feet into the air and placed into the atrium, which was created specifically to accommodate art.

"Buildings need to be more than ceiling and walls and a floor," says Matt Hammatt, vice president of Barkley, of the development company's commitment to collect art.

Down the hall from the sculpture is an area with sloping walls and track lighting, an area designed to be an exhibit space Lucia Douglas rotates the featured artwork. Across the street, in another Barkley building sits a stunning painting by Callahan, another sculpture by Gardner and the work of a myriad of other artists.

The semi-public pieces would make any art lover's heart pound.

And while they compile the pieces out of a desire to tout local talent or to create a pleasant work environment, it's also clear they do it out of sheer love of art.

(Gallery owners and consultants say art is not a sure-fire investment. "In terms of dollars, you're better off with a savings bond," Marlow says. And it most likely can't be used as a tax write-off.)

Serka, whose personal art collection leans toward American Impressionism, seems happy as can be discussing the complexity of Okada's brush strokes and how they build texture with partner Steve Adelstein.

For Serka, the collection isn't about dollars. "That has never been a motivating factor for me," he says.

Nor is it about a secret life as an artist.

"I'm a terrible artist," he confesses with a laugh. "Even a terrible artist can develop an eye. I know what's good. I can't draw it, though."

Take a stroll and see for yourself.

PHILIP A. DWYER HERALD PHOTOS

UNOFFICIAL CURATOR: Attorney Phil Serka collects art for display in the Bellingham law firm offices of Adelstein, Sharpe and Serka. Behind him is a Thomas Wood painting called "Two Cabins." Below: A painting of Seattle's waterfront by Seattle artist Edgar Forkner.

MODERN CLASSIC:

"David Playing the Harp" by Mark Tobey is part of the collection of Bellingham law firm Adelstein, Sharpe and Serka.

Copyright (c) The Bellingham Herald. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.