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Art and the law: more than just a good investment

By Alex Wade

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LAWYERS and artists enjoy a symbiotic relationship that might surprise the uninitiated. Patronage, of course, has been with us since the Renaissance. Its primary motives then were piety, prestige and pleasure. Piety is perhaps unlikely to loom large in the thinking of the modern firm, but prestige and pleasure certainly exist. To be a firm with a serious art collection is a sure way to garner prestige, as well as bestowing no little pleasure on clients, employees and, increasingly, the public.

Miriam Davies, head of library information services at Norton Rose, also heads the City firm's art acquisition committee. The conference rooms display art work by Ed Hodgkinson and Grazia Toderi, among others, and Davies explains the rationale behind the purchases thus: "The firm's values provided the starting point when we sat down to decide what art to acquire. There were a number of factors that we could have focused on, but ultimately the firm is about people.

Hence we bought work that reflects the firm's core belief that people are paramount. For example, Hodgkinson's work is comprised solely of faces, which are very expressive despite their apparent simplicity. His paintings, as well as those by Toderi, evoke a strong response and generate comment among clients."

Clients will not be the only group able to view the paintings once Norton Rose relocates to new, landmark offices in 17 months. Davies — whose passion for art led her to take an MA in art history eight years ago — says that when the move is complete the firm will consider occasional open days for the public. In this, Norton Rose would be emulating perhaps the trailblazer among law firms with art collections — Simmons and Simmons.

Stuart Evans, corporate finance partner, began collecting art for Simmons and Simmons 15 years ago. The collection reads as a *Who's Who* of the contemporary British and American art scene, with works by Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Howard Hodgkin and Paul Graham as well as Turner Prize nominees Michael Raedecker and Wolfgang Tillmans. “The rationale is to support young artists early in their careers by acquiring significant work,” says Evans, whose interest in contemporary art dates to boyhood visits to the Laing art gallery in Newcastle.

Deciding which art to acquire is down to Evans alone, and he is unequivocal in his belief that “good art is neither tame nor tameable”. His passion for art can be witnessed by the public on open days. Evans admits that there are times when his colleagues are not so sure about his choices: “Some of the partners thought I had gone completely over the top when they first saw two of Paul Graham’s beautiful Television Portraits. I was accused of hanging enlargements of my family snapshots.”

Law firms contemplating their own ventures into the art world need not despair if they do not have the likes of Evans or Davies on their books. The burgeoning lawyers’ art market is serviced by freelance art consultants such as Bridget Brown, who has advised the London Stock Exchange as well as various legal practices. Brown’s work entails a crash course in absorbing a firm’s culture. “When I am retained my first task is to understand the firm’s history, its values and its aims,” she says. “Law firms are not collecting as an investment but as a way of conveying their identity.”

Brown will also advise on a firm that wishes to change its existing collection. As with developing a collection from scratch, the task necessitates a fine and subtle appreciation of firm culture. “Time and thought are required to get a collection right,” Brown says. So, too, the background in art and passion for painters evinced by Brown, Davies and Evans, for albeit that good taste is indefinable, we know what it is when we see it.



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