

EXPERTS HELP HOSPITALS COMMUNICATE THROUGH ART

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Northern California's health care providers have been on a building binge lately, and their need to brighten up all those new hallways, waiting rooms and lobbies has helped keep a handful of professional art consultants busy despite the soft economy.

Just like Sacramento's public buildings, the area's newest health care facilities feature plenty of original artwork, chosen by people with a practiced eye and time to search for art en masse.



Kira Stewart of Art Consulting Services positions a pair of photo images printed on glass at Kaiser Permanente Walnut Creek Medical Center. Stewart's company helps health care facilities choose appropriate works of art.

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"If they're looking for something that's really distinctive, they're going to look toward an original art source," said Beth Jones, an art consultant since 1991 and co-owner of the Jay Jay gallery in east Sacramento. "Not just something that's a pretty picture."

Sacramento-area art consultants also work with banks, doctors' offices, law firms and the like, but their mainstay is in large-scale medical construction. Jones and her gallery partner,

Lynda Jolley, are currently vetting thousands of photos, paintings, sculptures and other works of art as prospects for the new 700,000-square-foot Kaiser Permanente San Leandro Medical Center.

The project will need 600 to 700 pieces of art, and brings to 100 the number of projects Jones has done for the health care giant over the years.

Meanwhile, Kira Stewart of Sacramento-based Art Consulting Services spent a full day last week overseeing the installation of Plexiglas-mounted photography and whimsical glass critters in the pediatric unit on Kaiser Permanente's Walnut Creek campus.



Designer Michelle Claudio, above right, and Kira Stewart position artwork on the pediatric floor of Kaiser's Walnut Creek facility as installer Butch Johnson and designer Cathy Kleckner look on.

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Stewart is also in the thick of planning artwork for the \$750 million Sutter Medical Center expansion at 28th and L streets in midtown Sacramento. The Anderson Lucchetti Women's and Children's Center, which will replace Sutter Memorial Hospital when it opens next year, will feature more than 360 pieces of art – from “macro” photography to light metal pieces, as well as several of local artist Gerald Silva's signature “Steamy Windows” panels.

Stewart and her full-time staff of four present most of the contending artwork. But in the case of the Women’s and Children’s Center, for instance, final selections are made by a sizable committee of hospital and Sutter Medical Foundation staff, physicians, the project architect, the lead interior designer and several others.



A row of cheerful ducks decorates the hall of the children’s floor.

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“Instead of (Stewart) coming back with four options and maybe we like one, she usually comes back with four that we like,” said Sutter Health’s Larry Maas, who is overseeing the medical center expansion. “I don’t know where she finds all this stuff. Her judgment and intuition is very good.”

Stewart, herself an artist, studied art in college, then spent several years in sales, customer service and management. She returned to her own painting as a sideline, and began exhibiting at the Elliott Fouts Gallery. That, in turn, led to her first consulting job. She opened up her own firm nearly seven years ago. Many of her referrals – like those to Jones – come from architects and designers, as well as commercial real estate agents

and developers.

“Every single space presents a new opportunity, a new challenge,” said Stewart, who estimates that corporate clients spend anywhere from \$1 to \$6 per square foot of construction space on the artwork. “Our stuff has to play well with the brand, all of the existing elements in the space, and communicate and achieve what they’re asking us to do with their company.”



Kira Stewart, foreground, and Michelle Claudio of Art Consulting Services position playful pieces of art in a hallway at Kaiser Permanente’s Walnut Creek Medical Center.

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Stewart said art consultants generally make their money the same way galleries do: They buy art at wholesale prices and charge a markup to their clients. Sometimes, though, they bill for designer hours in a manner similar to interior designers.

To prepare for the new Rideout Cancer Center in Marysville, Stewart and her crew took note of dozens of details, from floor plans and traffic flow to wall colors, finishes, even the placement of waiting-area TVs. The center wanted to mix local and national artists, as well as showcase the visual beauty of the

area's rivers and farmlands.

The facility, opened in January, included fabric collages by Sacramento's Merle Axelrad, color photography of area farms and – the pièce de résistance: three massive clusters of almond blossoms, each 7 feet by 10 feet, created by a Colorado artist from metal, silk and resin tubing, and suspended from the ceiling of the main chemotherapy infusion room.

Most major health care projects include at least a few such wow-factor pieces. For Jones' San Leandro hospital project, the two major commissions include an abstract glass-and-metal sculpture representing the biological diversity of the Bay Area, and a six-story mosaic of the migration of the monarch butterfly (which traverses Alameda County) for an inner courtyard.

The physical installations can be tricky, but working with a client on something as subjective as art is usually a bigger challenge, Jones said. "You can't just think, 'I'm an art consultant. I'm just going to give you what I think is really, really great.' The communication has to be really thoughtful," she said.

Jones worked several years ago on a hospital project in Modesto and was asked to find quilts as part of the art collection. She drew on her fine arts training rather than her own taste to do the job.

"I don't own any quilts in my house. I don't really like quilts. But if we're looking at 50 quilts, I'm sure we will find you the best ones."

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