

The New York Times



A 29-foot-long playground sculpture by Tom Otterness in a new park adjacent to two apartment developments on West 42nd Street. Credit Marilyn K. Yee/The New York Times

REAL ESTATE | SQUARE FEET

In the Loftiest of Buildings, High Art Still Finds a Home

By JANE L. LEVERE DEC. 29, 2009

The practice of adorning New York real estate with major sculptures and other artwork stretches back at least as far as the 1930s. And even during today's tough economic times, the tradition is holding up. A number of major works of art have been installed in Midtown Manhattan in the last few months.

In October, for example, the Cohen Brothers Realty Corporation hung a 5,000-pound rotating sculpture from the ceiling of the atrium of 805 Third Avenue. On the other side of Manhattan, Silverstein Properties has bought a 29-foot-long playground sculpture by Tom Otterness for a new park adjacent to two of its apartment developments on West 42nd Street.

At Lever House, the landmark International Style skyscraper by Gordon Bunshaft on Park Avenue, Aby Rosen, a principal of the building's owner, RFR Holding, has offered a quarterly show of art in the lobby and courtyard since 2003. And Park Tower Group recently agreed with Christie's to regularly display sculptures, which would later be auctioned, in the lobby and outdoor plaza of 535 Madison Avenue, a 37-story office building.

According to Mary Ann Tighe, chief executive of the New York region of CB Richard Ellis and a former deputy chairwoman of the National Endowment for the

Arts, the Rockefellers were among the first New York real estate developers to use outdoor sculpture to beautify their buildings, installing works by Paul Manship at Rockefeller Center and by Jean Dubuffet at One Chase Manhattan Plaza.

Such art “has always been the mark of a Class A developer and property,” she said. “The Rockefellers set the pace in the 20th century.”

For a noteworthy Class A office building, art can “provide the right image,” said Lisa Austin, a Miami-based corporate art consultant. “If you’ve got a really beautiful piece of architecture, the art can be the final exclamation point.”

Joel Straus, a corporate art consultant in Chicago, said that sculpture can also add a “human element.” He added, “Often in New York, buildings are overscale; sculpture can bring the scale down.”

Studies done by the Urban Land Institute, a real estate research group, show that “amenities count, and these can include public art,” said Maureen McAvey, executive vice president for the institute’s initiatives group. “This is true for both residential and office buildings.”

“There’s always the caveat that the art has to be well done and well thought through,” she added.

Cohen Brothers spent \$330,000 to acquire and install a 5,000-pound sculpture, made by Christian Eckhart from aluminum, steel and mirror stainless steel, that hangs above the three-story retail atrium at 805 Third Avenue as part of a \$14 million renovation of the atrium and adjacent office lobby. There was no art in the atrium before.

The bronze Otterness playground sculpture — a giant figure that is 30 feet wide, 29 feet long and 19 feet high, with slides going down one arm and both legs, and 25 six-inch figures crawling over its body — sits in a new quarter-acre park behind One River Place and Silver Towers, two apartment buildings that occupy the south side of West 42nd Street between 11th and 12th Avenues.

One River Place opened in 2006. The first stage of Silver Towers opened last June, and it is to be finished next spring. The park, which initially opened in 2000,

was closed in 2006, when construction began on Silver Towers; it will reopen in the spring.

Larry A. Silverstein, chief executive of Silverstein Properties, said the price for the Otterness sculpture was seven figures, but he would not be more precise. Another person with knowledge of the purchase valued it at \$1.2 million.

Michelle Isenberg, a corporate art consultant in Hollywood, said in an e-mail message that the Otterness work “reinforces a brand. A building with a Tom Otterness playground piece is an intelligent, whimsical experience, which goes beyond the usual plastic, metal and wood equipment that might be presented as part of a family-friendly development.”

Mr. Otterness said that the sculpture also “marks the building. There will not be another building in New York with that in its footprint.”

Installed in early December, the newest exhibit in the Lever House art collection was created by Richard Woods, who wrapped columns at the base of the building with plywood and covered them with strips of vinyl decorated with various textile patterns; the work was bought for \$300,000.

Mr. Rosen said he began the Lever House art collection to gain recognition for the building, on the west side of Park Avenue between 53rd and 54th Streets. “Park Avenue is usually very corporate and boring,” he said. “We wanted to create an interesting environment for people to come and visit.”

Mr. Rosen owns the Lever House art collection with Alberto Mugrabi, an art dealer. Although Mr. Rosen said he had no commercial motive in starting the art collection, he stands to gain financially if works in the collection appreciate.

Perhaps the most unusual art display, from a business perspective, involves the arrangement recently struck by Park Tower Group and Christie’s. The developer is exhibiting sculptures at 535 Madison Avenue, an Edward Larrabee Barnes building at the northeast corner of 54th Street.

The artwork, which Christie’s will later auction, will change regularly and be on display in the building’s newly renovated 2,250-square-foot lobby and its 4,870-

square-foot plaza. No money is changing hands between Christie's and Park Tower Group.

The sculpture "is a great amenity for the building and for the public, with the plaza," said Alfred D. Bradshaw, executive vice president of Park Tower Group. He said the collaboration gives Christie's "a different venue for displaying art."

According to Marc Porter, president of Christie's Americas, the Park Tower Group arrangement is Christie's first with a real estate developer. He said the auction house hoped to adopt the concept in other cities.

In the first exhibit, which ran for six weeks in the fall, Christie's lent Park Tower Group four sculptures by François-Xavier Lalanne and Claude Lalanne, including a bronze elk that was displayed in the plaza. The sculptures were auctioned this month in Christie's 20th-century decorative art and design sale.

All of the sculptures that had been displayed were sold at prices above Christie's estimates. The elk, for example, had been estimated to sell for \$100,000 to \$150,000, and actually went for \$266,500.

Mr. Porter said Christie's arrangement with Park Tower Group let "experienced buyers who had already been collectors see the art in a distinguished urban setting. It galvanized their interest in the objects."

One possible risk of the arrangement, Ms. Austin said, is potential "damage to works of art owned by other people." Mr. Porter said Christie's would insure whatever art is displayed.

Some art and real estate professionals said they were not surprised by developers' continued interest in buying art, even during a recession. "If the developers have money and are interested in art, they are going to spend it," Mr. Straus said. "These guys do it because they have a passion for it."

Art is "depressed in price like every other asset class," said Frank Liantonio, executive vice president of capital markets at Cushman & Wakefield. "Smart developers are taking advantage of the market for art, and combining it with their real estate holdings to give their buildings a slight edge," he said.

But, he went on, “one might say, in this economy, who cares about sculpture or art? Just give me the cheapest rent out there.”

A version of this article appears in print on December 30, 2009, on Page B5 of the New York edition with the headline: In the Loftiest of Buildings, High Art Still Finds a Home.