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Abstract

This case study looks at the Safeco Art Collection from its beginnings in 1973 to its donation to the Washington Arts Consortium in 2010. For over 35 years, Safeco, an insurance and financial corporation, collected contemporary Northwest art in a way that uniquely encapsulated the region’s visual art from the 1962 World’s Fair through the turn of the century tech boom. This study illustrates how a corporate art collection became a portrait of Seattle and a cultural gift for the Pacific Northwest.
Seattle in the 1970s

Seattle entered the 1970s in an economic downturn and slowly recovered over the next decade. Airplane manufacturer Boeing, the largest employer in Seattle at the time, had laid off 86,000 people by 1971—known as the Boeing Bust (Kershner, 2015). State unemployment hit 14 percent and two real estate agents put up the now infamous billboard next to I-5 that read, “Will the last person leaving Seattle turn out the lights?” (Lacitis, 2018). Yet the 1970s had also set the stage for a period of growth in the arts. The Seattle Arts Commission, now the Office of Arts and Culture, had just been established (Blecha, 2013). The Linda Farris Gallery, featuring work by University of Washington graduates and nationally known contemporary artists, started a trend that helped turn Pioneer Square into Seattle’s art gallery district (Hackett, 2005). The first Northwest Folklife and Bumbershoot Festivals were held on the World’s Fair grounds, now the Seattle Center (Seattle Center, 2017). Organizations such as the Pilchuck Glass School (Pilchuck, 2019) and the Pacific Northwest Dance Association (now Pacific Northwest Ballet) were founded (Pacific Northwest Ballet, 2019). Both Seattle and King County passed ordinances allocating one percent of capital improvement project budgets for art in public facilities (Stein, 2013).

Safeco’s New Headquarters

“One percent for the arts” was an inspiration when Safeco Insurance rebuilt its headquarters on the corner of 45th Street and Brooklyn Avenue near the University of Washington in 1973. The Safeco Tower was designed by local architecture firm NBBJ with spaces throughout the building specifically intended for artwork. Nationally renowned Seattle sculptor George Tsutakawa was commissioned to create a bronze fountain for the plaza, the first
official piece of the Safeco Art Collection (Reynolds, 2003). The 22-story Safeco Tower remains the tallest building in Seattle outside of downtown to this day (Iwasaki, 2006).

**Milton Trafton’s Leadership**

In 1979, Milton Trafton, was named CEO of Safeco. An ardent Northwest art collector and supporter over multiple decades, Trafton had served as a board member or trustee of several cultural organizations in the area, including the Seattle Art Museum, the Seattle Opera, the Corporate Council for the Arts, the 5th Avenue Theater Association, and the Pacific Science Center (Tu, 2010; Hutta, 1985). He believed the arts were good for business:

> We have the challenge of attracting high-caliber people to work with us here in Seattle. [They want to know whether] we have a symphony, theaters, opera. They ask about educational opportunities. [Do] we have major league sports? We have to have the right answers if we want to attract and keep good people from other metropolitan areas. (Hutta, 1986)

Trafton was eager to get the art collection going after the first few slow years at Safeco Tower, so he appointed an arts committee to the task of growing the collection. In an exit interview in 2003, art committee member John Reynolds recounted an early incident when an executive had brazenly moved one of the few pieces of artwork in the building closer to his own offices. After a bit of passive aggressive tug of war, Trafton called the executive, informing him that Trafton himself had in fact paid for the artwork and that the art was not intended for a select few. Trafton didn’t want the collection to be driven by executive ego; he intended it to be for the employees.
Northwest Pride

Following Trafton’s lead, this first art committee wanted the collection to be a source of pride for the company and to have a sense of purpose, so they chose to focus on Northwest art—Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and Alaska (Reynolds, 2003). In addition to some must-have artists, including the iconic “Big Four” (Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan and Guy Anderson) and others associated with the Northwest School, such as Paul Horiuchi, William Ivey, Mary Randlett, James Washington Jr.—they sought overlooked artists, such as John Franklin Koenig and James Fitzgerald (Reynolds, 2003). They sought out a diversity of artists. In a 2019 interview, former curator Jim McDonald recalled that,

Most of the really successful artists, even at that period, were white males and teaching at the UW or somewhere like that, but we were collecting Margaret Tomkins, we were collecting [James] Washington [Jr.], collecting Asian American artists and one of my favorite pieces, the Hilda Morris sculpture. (personal communication, March 6, 2019)

With a significant population of Asian employees at Safeco, they wanted artwork to represent this cultural identity and to promote company initiatives such as diversity. They sought out living artists, emerging artists (Reynolds, 2003). Working with an annual budget of less than $100,000, they focused on early and mid-career contemporary artists whose work not only fit their modest budget, but more importantly, fulfilled their sense of purpose, both supporting and connecting them to the community. After initially working with an art consultant, the committee moved beyond First Thursdays and gallery openings and visited artists in their studios. They got to know the artists, and the artists got to understand Safeco’s purpose (Reynolds, 2003).
Corporate Culture

By the late 1980s, Safeco had been collecting for over ten years and the collection had grown to almost 500 pieces (Hutta, 1986). Internally, art was part of the employees’ day-to-day lives (J. McDonald, personal communication, March 6, 2019). “By making art a part of the workplace, a part of everyday life, you get away from the idea that art is inaccessible, that it’s for ‘someone else,’” said former curator Lynn Basa (Hutta, 1986). Employees began to expect art (Reynolds, 2003). In 1985, Gayle Bard, an emerging artist from Bainbridge Island came and worked in the building on a week-long installation-performance piece (Reynolds, 2003; Bard, 2019). Over 130 employees signed up for the first six-week art appreciation class (Placentia, 1986). Lunchtime lectures by local critic Matthew Kangas introduced artists such as Roger Shimomura (Basa, 2008). Six changing exhibitions were shown annually, with public openings (Savage, 1988). Notable shows included Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence and a faculty retrospective from the UW School of Art (J. McDonald, personal communication, March 6, 2019). The art committee discussed issues such as whether to collect Native American-style art that was created by non-native artists (Bruhn, 1985; Reynolds, 1985; Reynolds, 2003). Bruce Maines, who succeeded Trafton as CEO, at first didn’t see art as a priority. Eventually he grew to appreciate the collection enough to want to leave his own stamp on it, commissioning a piece by Robert Sperry (Reynolds, 2003). The UW faculty member created a ceramic monolith featuring motifs of fire and smoke, in tribute to Safeco insurance (Reynolds, 2003). Maines also restructured the arts committee, giving more power to a dedicated art curator (Maines, 1988). Art had become part of company culture, and Safeco was part of the arts community.
Corporate Community

Safeco became well known for their support of the arts. In 1989, Julie Anderson, a curator well-respected in the arts community, was hired as curator of the art collection. By that time, art was embedded in Safeco’s corporate culture, evolving beyond space planning into corporate giving and finally into public relations. Having already funded a flat shop for fusing glass at the growing Pilchuck Glass School, Safeco developed a relationship with the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in Montana. No longer limited by capital cost guidelines, over the next ten years, the collection grew to almost 2000 pieces. In 1998, Safeco acquired American States Insurance, giving them a network of offices spanning the nation (Kangas, 2001). Safeco began sending pieces of the collection to be displayed in regional offices, increasing the exposure of Northwest artists. Eventually, the regional offices began to collect work from their local areas (Updike, 1999). In the late 1990s, Safeco built a campus in suburban Redmond, WA. Artworks were commissioned from Ed Carpenter and glass artists Paul Marioni and Ann Troutner. In the early 2000s, the entire collection was digitally photographed, and the art policy was updated to follow American Association of Museum standards. When Safeco won the naming rights to the new baseball stadium in downtown Seattle, Gerard Tsutakawa’s bronze sculpture “The Mitt” anchored the entrance to Safeco Field.

Corporate Restructuring

Starting in 2001, Safeco went through a number of reorganizations. The commercial credit division was sold to General Electric (Bloomberg News, 2001); the life insurance and investments divisions were sold and renamed Symetra Financial Corporation (Virgin, 2004); insurance brokerage was sold to Hub International Ltd.; and mutual funds were shut down (“Safeco signs definitive agreement,” 2004). Safeco announced it would consolidate operations
CORPORATE CULTURE: THE SAFECO ART COLLECTION

(Allison & Young, 2006). In 2006, Microsoft bought the Redmond campus while Safeco planned a second downtown office (Peterson, 2006). CEO Mike McGavick resigned to run for the Senate (“McGavick leaving Safeco,” 2005), the Safeco Tower was sold to the UW, and the company’s headquarters moved downtown (Iwasaki, 2006). Finally, amidst the financial crisis of 2008, Safeco was acquired by Boston-based Liberty Mutual (Bogoslaw, 2008).

**Community Concern.**

The art collection hung in the balance. Stories of badly handled corporate acquisitions were fresh on many people's minds (Graves, 2010; J. McDonald, personal communication, March 6, 2019; B. Sellars, personal communication, March 8, 2019). There were alarming stories of art piecemealed out to employees and later found in dumpsters—fallout from corporate mergers and acquisitions (B. Sellars, personal communication, March 8, 2019). In 2008, then-curator Jacqueline Kosak received over 50 letters from artists, gallery owners, museum directors, and former Safeco employees expressing concern for the fate of the art collection.

One of the first real art collections collected curatorially by a corporation...It is no wonder that the Safeco collection is more reminiscent of a museum collection than a corporate collection.— Janis R. Olsen (2008), Curator of Collections, Whatcom Museum

It’s a true honor to be a part of the collection. I hope it remains intact for future generations.—Saya Moriyasu (2008), artist in the collection

It really provides an education of the best of Northwest art.—James Tune (2008), ArtsFund

The art scene is much stronger for that consistent commitment [of] consistently supporting the artists and galleries of the Northwest.—Sam Davidson (2008), Davidson Gallery
The Washington Arts Consortium

In February 2010, Safeco and Liberty Mutual announced that they would donate 840 pieces of art to the Washington Arts Consortium (WAC), a coalition of seven regional museums from Seattle, Tacoma, Bellingham, Pullman, Spokane, and La Conner (Tu, 2010). The WAC had been founded in 1976 by Seattle arts patron and philanthropist Virginia Wright and already had three major collections in its care, shared by all seven museums, a unique arrangement in and of itself (B. Sellars, personal communication, March 8, 2019; Scher, 2017). The Safeco donation came with a $3.5 million gift for the continued care of the artwork (Tu, 2010). This was hailed by the arts community as a responsible and innovative solution (ArtDaily, 2013). “[The] donation is unparalleled in its size, its importance, and its impact on Northwest culture,” said Stephanie Stebic, then director of the Tacoma Art Museum and president of the WAC (Tacoma Art Museum, 2011). Beth Sellars, long-time curator for the Seattle Office of Arts and Culture and other regional arts organizations, was called upon to advise on the strengths and weaknesses of the 2000-piece collection (personal communication, March 8, 2019). She also curated an exhibition of selected works from the collection in honor of Safeco (B. Sellars, personal communication, March 8, 2019; Hackett, 2010). The exhibition spanned a hundred years of Northwest art, showing a progression of artists and their influence upon each others’ work, starting with Myra Albert Wiggins and ending with Diem Chau, Claire Cowie, and Justin Gibbens. The show was mounted at the Wright Exhibition Space and Wright herself called it the most beautiful collection of art to ever be shown there (B. Sellars, personal communication, March 8, 2019).

In 2017, the Washington Arts Consortium board voted to disband the organization, concluding that their mission to ensure greater access to art throughout the state “is now less
crucial.” A panel of Northwest museum executives and curators distributed the artworks and the WAC’s endowment among the member museums, with the condition that former Consortium members would have priority for borrowing works from the collection, free of loan fees. Wright stated, “I am pleased with their decision and delighted that the collections will live on through our member museums, continuing to serve as an important resource for the entire state” (ArtForum, 2017; Kiley, 2017).

The Safeco Legacy

What did it mean to be an artist in the Safeco collection? What does it mean to be an artist from the Northwest? Geographical distance from the east coast and its New York-centered art scene gave artists in Seattle and the Pacific Northwest the freedom to not conform—an independent spirit (Guenther, Burns, & Marquand, 1983). This fostered artistic diversity, pluralism, and dialogue within the community.

From the 1960s onward, the visual arts in Seattle grew in many directions. Non-traditional media such as video and installation art were taking off and craft and artisan works in glass, fiber and ceramics were embraced and pushed. The public became more accepting of municipally funded art (Kingsbury, 1989). Art historian Martha Kingsbury (1989) describes this time as a “great stretching of the meanings of art—what it can be like, where and how a person might encounter it, who is making it, and how they go about it.”

The Safeco Art Collection became a portrait of this cultural and creative independence. In Trafton’s (1985) retirement letter, he described Safeco as “a conservative/radical company—conservative in style—radical, in fact, revolutionary, in tactics and strategy... Obviously the conservative work patterns have not inhibited imagination and creativity at Safeco.” As might be expected, the art collection avoided any intentionally political or provocative work (Reynolds,
and of course could not encompass all of the art in the Northwest, but the collection was strong in the areas of abstract and representational painting, fiber arts, glass, ceramics, sculpture, Northwest Coast Native and Asian art (J. McDonald, personal communication, March 6, 2019). It was a who’s who of Northwest artists from emerging to masters, but perhaps more importantly it supported living artists in the Northwest. It became the country’s leading private collection of Northwest art. It evolved into a public collection as part of the day-to-day lives of the Safeco employees; as it was shared and made more publicly accessible; and ultimately in its donation to not just one or two museums, but to a collective of regional museums across the state.

Amongst the letters sent to Kosak in 2008 was one from Reynolds of the original art committee. “Of late, it feels as though the Pacific Northwest has been losing many of the things that used to define it,” he wrote. The Safeco Art Collection was one of those things. A corporate art collection that started with a sense of purpose and grew into something that became meaningful to many, “a picture of our culture here over the past several decades” (Reynolds, 2008). The Safeco Art Collection spoke of a time when the city was intent on keeping the lights on.

Method note:
This case study was developed by Aubrey Benasa, MFA 2019, as part of Seattle University’s MFA in Arts Leadership applied research seminar focused on the Arts Ecosystem Research Project. Interviews were conducted with Jim McDonald, former curator of the Safeco Art Collection, currently Director of Cultural Services, City of Fort Collins, Colorado; and Beth Sellars, curator of A Corporate Legacy – A Continuing Cultural Gift, Wright Exhibition Space,
2010 and former curator for the City of Seattle Portable Works Collection, and for Suyama Space, as part of this research during Winter Quarter 2019. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing.
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Additional Readings


SAFECO Art Collection. Seattle Public Library Special Collections, Seattle, WA.


