

Art works to help patients feel better, beautify space

Premium content from Kansas City Business Journal by Rebecca Logan, Contributing Writer

Date: Sunday, September 23, 2007, 11:00pm CDT - Last Modified: Wednesday, September 19, 2007, 9:27am CDT

Watching Jon Jackson walk through the Center for Advanced Heart Care at The University of Kansas Hospital is a bit like watching a museum curator making his rounds.

"We tried to mix the mediums," said Jackson, while running his hand along a shiny metal creation. "We've got fabric art. We've got steel art, stainless steel art, porcelain, Plexiglas."

The days of hospitals with boring blank walls are long gone, said Jackson, senior vice president and chief administrative officer at KU Hospital.

They should be, said Anjali Joseph, director of research for the Center for Health Design.

The Concord, Calif., group has studied the effect of art on healing for 20 years. Joseph said the topic has become more mainstream because of increased awareness among health care providers and a boom in hospital construction.

Art is abundant in KU's heart center, which will mark one year of patient occupancy in October.

As final arbiter of art selections, Jackson sought pieces with specific spots in mind. Near the center's cafe, for example, hangs a needlepoint rendition of a puffy, pink piece of snack food.

"People ask, 'Why do you have a Snowball in a heart center?' And it's, frankly, so people will think about what they are eating," Jackson said, tapping at the nutritional information that is part of the piece.

Much of the nearby art is considerably less literal, including the center's two showstoppers: a collection of 31 paintings by artist Rita Blitt that adorns three atrium floors and "PulseFlow," a dramatic glass creation by artist Vernon Brejcha that descends from the top of a brightly lit foyer.

Blitt donated her pieces after being approached by her cardiologist friend Dr. Loren Berehborn about donating artwork in memory of a mutual friend.

"The most common remark people say to me about what I do is that it makes them feel good," Blitt said. "It's an honor to do that. I think perhaps the reason that happens is that I'm expressing my joy of life. And I guess that comes through."

Jackson said all other art was obtained through a designated art-and-way-finding fund "in the neighborhood of 1 percent or slightly less of our construction budget."

Jackson appointed Beth Clark, registered nurse and clinical director of cardiovascular services, with picking prints for patient hallways, rooms and designated walking paths.

"Here we didn't want anything that would really push people's imagination that hard," Clark said.

Some research suggests that is key.

"Studies have shown that patients tend to prefer nature scenes and calming scenes," Joseph said. "Abstract ... can have other meanings and colors that might evoke negative emotions."

More interpretive pieces at KU's heart center are clustered in public areas. But that's not a hard-and-fast rule, said Jackson, who is cautious about what he describes as limited research on abstract art.

"We did what we thought would work in Kansas City in the building that we designed," Jackson said.

Clark said the art works because it keeps to a feeling of being neat, crisp and clean.

"In that kind of environment, patients just feel better," she said.