

ENGAGING CREATIVITY



"Liquid Gears," created by photographer Erich Schrempp for Winzeler Gear.



Artwork Emerging on the Plant Floor, Engaging Employees

Challenging traditional thinking.

Lea A.P. Tonkin

Manufacturing doesn't have to match its traditionally dull, dingy stereotype. Shedding drab decor for color and style, manufacturers are reflecting an appreciation for the arts — and in some cases, they gain new, positive attention and involvement from employees and customers.



In Brief

Art is personal, and so it can inspire a wide range of reactions. John Crane, Inc., Flexco, and Winzeler Gear have brought artwork into their plants, creating interest among employees and customers.

John Crane, Inc.: Creating A More Vibrant Environment

Thinking on the creative side about ways to encourage employee involvement, Ellen Sieminski, supervisor of industrial engineering at John Crane, Inc. in Morton Grove, IL was inspired by artworks on display at Winzeler Gear in Harwood Heights, IL. "I had visited Winzeler on a plant tour, and I was impressed with the environment they were creating for employees," she said. "I began thinking, 'If you're going to be at work eight to ten hours a day, why not look at something interesting and colorful for at least part of that time?'"

"Also, we were told by an outside customer that he knew our parts were high quality but that the appearance of our inspection lab area didn't necessarily reflect that quality," continued Sieminski. She worked with the maintenance staff, outside vendors, and quality lab employees to replicate the look at Winzeler — metallic silver walls with bright neon-colored pictures on the walls. Sieminski hired the photographer used by Winzeler, Erich Schrempp of Chicago, and gave him free rein to photograph product parts made at John Crane as well as some of their equipment, and then to do post-production work to add color and interest to the parts he photographed. (Employees at the Morton Grove facility manufacture mechanical seals used in pumps, compressors, and other rotating equipment; approximately 700 people work here, half in the plant and half in administrative areas.)

"We tried to turn the lab area into a showpiece. We polished the floors, got monochrome blue cabinets to

replace the old green cabinets in the area, and added new chairs and lighting, too," said Sieminski. Quality lab employees made suggestions about artwork selections for their area. Eight large panels (bright red and blue dominate these works) depicting seals, seal parts, and measuring instruments now adorn the walls of their work space. There is also a four-piece picture of mating rings, done in various neon colors.

At the same time, Sieminski and a co-worker coached the five quality lab employees on 5S initiatives that could improve work flow and the overall look of the 23-foot by 43-foot area. "We worked on 5S principles that would help the employees create the most effective layout in the area," she said. A dropped ceiling, track lighting, and repainted equipment resulted from this project teamwork.

Bill Larosa, a quality technician, said the quality lab looks much better than it used to, and that he appreciates the new lighting. "It did take a while getting used to the silver walls," he added.

"The pictures of seals and measuring instruments on the wall are beautiful," said Tom Johnson, a quality technician. "It used to look drab and dingy in the lab. Now it's brighter, we have better lighting, and the floors are polished. We have two open spots on the wall for art, and we want to fill them."

Over in the mailroom, Essex Harris said he appreciates the colorful, large artworks (two individual works and another that is made up of four prints) decorating the walls of his work area. He noted that 5S improvements in the mailroom last year creat-

ed better work flow, and these changes were topped off by the installation of the "postal art" — large collages of postage stamp images. (See Figure 1.)

Buoyed by enthusiastic responses from a number of employees (Sieminski conceded that not everyone offered compliments when the artwork started sprouting on work area walls), Sieminski lobbied for even more artwork installations. "We bought the rights to the pictures created by Erich, so we can use them in more than one location and in marketing materials," said Sieminski. "We added more pictures of our product parts and equipment on other walls and in other rooms in the building, including a conference room."

For the quality lab, about a year after the initial renovation and art installation, Sieminski asked Schrempp to take additional photos of mechanical seal parts and equipment, and on another wall in the lab, three more pictures were added. They are 30 by 50 inches. "I take the pictures to a local sign shop, and for about \$80 apiece, they are printed and put on foam poster board," said Sieminski. The John Crane maintenance shop personnel built wooden frames for the pictures, a cost-effective way to ready artworks for display.

Colorful pictures of the company's dry gas seals were hung on the walls of the seal refurbishment area as part of a 5S project (eight CNC machines are also in the room) during the past couple of years. The operators proposed what photos they thought they'd like. "That led to interest in creating artwork for an employee cafeteria area," said Sieminski. "Supervisors from two areas suggested images for artwork there: There are seal parts from our Adaptive Hardware department, as well as parts from our Standard Cartridge product line." All of this artwork is tied to 5S and work area improvements.

"At the same time, it is a more



Figure 1. Colorful collages depicting stamps adorn the mailroom at John Crane, Inc. Shown here is “Seven Stamps – Mailroom Art 2” created by Chicago photographer Erich Schrempf.

vibrant environment,” Sieminski said. “Employees know that somebody cares and has put thought into their work area. In our central parts warehouse, someone asked about getting our ‘motivational artwork,’ so the warehouse supervisor and I picked out parts that we stock and had Erich take photos of those. We ended up hanging one in the main warehouse and two in the break room.” Then a six-foot by four-foot picture of a dented retainer was installed along the main aisle in the middle of the plant. “When we repainted our main hallway a month ago, we put three images printed on canvas on the wall,” said Sieminski. For these three works, Sieminski sent photo files to mpix.com, an online photo reproduction company, which

printed the images on canvas stretched over a frame (\$170 for a two-foot by three-foot “gallery wrap”), ready to hang. “Although we started with the manufacturing area, it is nice to have the photos in the hallway. Not everyone makes it to the floor on a regular basis, and some employees were unaware of the artwork in the shop,” she said.

Once people started noticing the artwork, many supervisors had additional ideas about images they would like to see in their area. “One of the supervisors came up with the idea of a picture incorporating two types of seals playing checkers. Now we have a checkerboard picture that incorporates seals on a game board, on both office doors in that area as well as in

an employee break area,” said Sieminski. (See Figure 2.) “I’m happy that people in the plant are accepting art. We want to do more but we’re mindful of cost. We are looking at redoing our training center; the woman who runs it has expressed interest in having artwork there.

“I would like to say we achieved something from our artwork,” Sieminski said. “It has attracted comments from both employees and from our customers, and it sparks the imagination. At first, it may have seemed alien to some employees here. I assume by now that most people are used to my love of vibrant color and have grown used to the artwork popping up. Anywhere I see a blank wall, I see potential for artwork.”

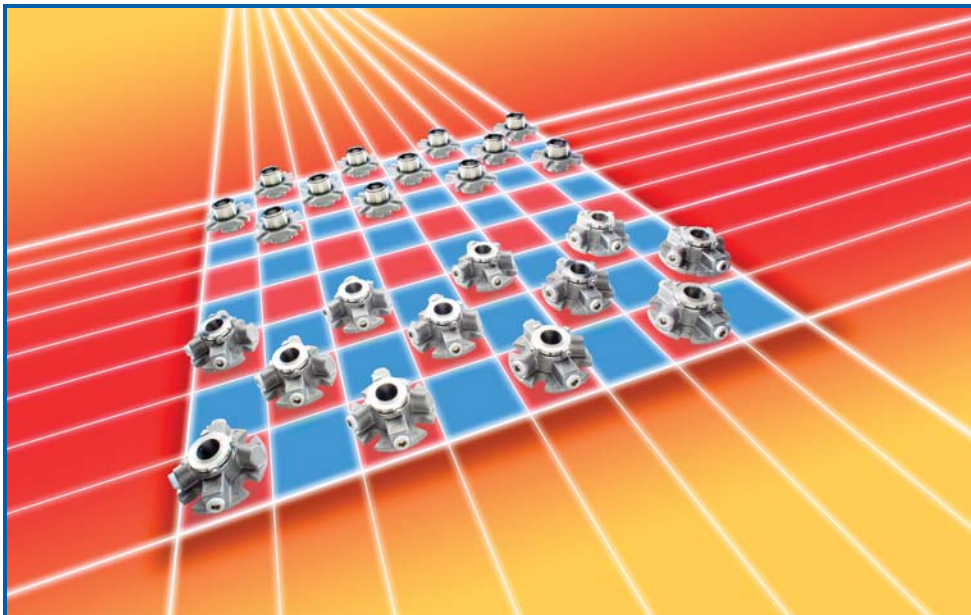


Figure 2. . “Checkerboard seals” was created by photographer Erich Schrempp after a John Crane supervisor suggested artwork picturing two types of seals playing checkers.

Flexco: Changing the Image of Manufacturing

Abstract, fluorescent, colorful pictures on the walls of the die repair room at Flexco in Downers Grove, IL represent a “first attempt” at introducing artwork in the plant other than in administrative areas. The 30-inch by 50-inch prints were created from photos of dies and tools that were taken by Bob Hafey, director of lean operations, and Bob Johnson, a die maker from die repair. “We were looking for pictures that related to dies and tools used in the area,” said Johnson. Hafey said he enlarged the images and used a fill color technique in Corel Photoshop on pictures to make them look abstract. (See Figure 3.) “In their natural state, without added color, the pictures would have looked sterile,” he said. “We blew up those pictures and had them printed on foam board at a quick print shop. The images are vinyl and unframed. We used mirror clips to

hold them in place. Then we hung them on the walls after a kaizen blitz team completed a 5S project in die repair.” Hafey noted that the total cost per picture averaged \$115.

Krista Howland, human resources (HR) manager, along with Johnson, was on the die repair kaizen blitz team. “The pictures get people talking and interacting,” she said. “It doesn’t matter what people’s reactions are, as long as we are getting people involved. Some employees think the artwork is good, and some don’t — that’s what happens with art.”

“The artwork brightens up the room and makes it a nicer place to work. I enjoy it when people ask about the pictures, and I have similar abstract pictures like that at home as well,” said Johnson. “The whole room is totally different, with walls we painted white and equipment painted light gray. And since we finished the 5S project, we have specific spots for all of the tools in the area.”

“After most 5S efforts, things can look pretty sterile,” commented Howland. “Now people in the die repair area have an organized work space, but it’s not boring. The environment is vibrant and different.”

Hafey’s take on reasons to encourage art in manufacturing: “First, it makes people think,” he said. “It also sparks discussion and debate. That’s what art has always done. Third, it also challenges the standards of what can be put on the walls of the manufacturing plant. If you can challenge that, then what else can you challenge?”

Art can also change people’s thinking about manufacturing, believes Hafey. “Manufacturing doesn’t have a very good reputation,” he said. “It is perceived as dirty, noisy, and dangerous. Not many people raising children today hope that their children will have a career in manufacturing. Art in the workplace challenges that conventional thinking. If there is art on the walls, people working in the area think differently about their work area. They are more inclined to maintain and clean it. People walk through die repair and notice the difference. It is one small way to change manufacturing’s image.”

Winzeler Gear: Creative Collaboration

Employees at Winzeler Gear pride themselves on creative solutions to meet customers’ needs for precision-molded gears. Plant visitors and people checking the company website (www.winzelergear.com) will immediately note the company’s artistic flair reflected in colorful gallery displays and company-sponsored artworks. “Gear manufacturing is an art, achieved by customers and suppliers working together as strategic business partners,” said John Winzeler, the third generation Winzeler to operate the Chicago-area business. The company’s largest wall graphic, dubbed



Figure 3. Die repair area photos at Flexco were transformed into abstract artworks now on displayed there. This image was created by Bob Hafey of Flexco.

“Liquid Gears,” is 14 feet high and 44 feet long; in a striking, five-color palette, it depicts gears drenched with color for photography.

Prominently-displayed modern artworks in various media boldly attract positive attention from customers, especially those from other countries such as Japan and France, said Winzeler. “We are here to create aesthetics for our customers, employees, and others,” he said. “We project the image of a modern, forward-think-

ing company. Some employees ‘get it,’ and for others, it doesn’t matter. It is their choice, and it is personal.”

For Winzeler, artworks sponsored and displayed by his company are very personal. “I don’t separate my private life and my life at the company,” he said. “I get my creative energy from creative forms around me. We’ve taken a gear — a mundane object — and turned it into an art form. The same kinds of art that Winzeler Gear displays at the plant are also found in my

home. Every one of our major customers has reprints of some of our artworks in their workplaces, and some of their executives have them in their homes as well. The economy may have stymied our creative side, but we will continue to encourage creative collaboration with our customers.”

Lea A.P. Tonkin, Target executive editor, lives in Woodstock, IL.