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DOGS IN ART

Art on a Mission

THE U.S. DIPLOMATIC HEADQUARTERS IN NEW YORK HOUSES A SECRETIVE BLUE-CHIP ART COLLECTION.



THERE IS SOMETHING very colorful and unexpected to be found inside the Ronald H. Brown United States Mission to the United Nations in New York, and it isn't the fashion sense of the buttoned-down U.S. State Department staffers who work there. It's a cache of artworks by some of America's best-known artists, all of which have been carefully selected and installed in the diplo-fortress to enliven its interior spaces. A few pieces, including a black metal Alexander Calder sculpture, are visible through the ground-floor windows, but most of the art in this public collection will never be seen by the general public. Only diplomats and dignitaries are allowed inside the building, which was inaugurated last March.

The U.S. Mission to the U.N., at First Avenue and 45th Street is the only American diplomatic mission that is actually located on U.S. soil. Occupying only about a third of an acre, its corner lot provides what architects call a tiny "footprint" on which to build. Still, for this



site, Gwathmey Siegel & Associates Architects designed a 26-story-high tower that rises from a base topped by a playful, curvilinear roof and, in a concentrated manner, embodies and recalls many of the essential aspects of the much taller skyscrapers that have become the emblems of modern cities everywhere. "The new monolith provides blank walls for the possible attacker, but gives [the] notion of an austere memorial to the free exchange of ideas," an American Institute of Architects guidebook to New York noted about the building when it was under construction.

The architect Robert Siegel of Gwathmey Siegel told *Art & Antiques*, "The base of the building, at what we call the public level, wants to be inviting and engaging to passers-by, while the stepped-back tower, designed to the highest levels of security, houses all the private activities that go on inside." The Gwathmey Siegel design team's brief included accommodating various special-purpose facilities, including a high-tech press-briefing room and, on the top floors, a grand duplex reception room in which American diplomats can host receptions and other special events in the name of world peace—or on behalf of whatever other agendas they may be overtly or more subtly pursuing in the context of the U.N.'s wide-ranging mission. That multi-purpose room is topped by a tall, cylindrical space that has been dubbed a "dome"; its interior, which seems to glow, is lined with artist Sol LeWitt's 2010 acrylic *Wall Drawing #832: A red*



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Art on a Mission cont.



spiral on blue, a simple design consisting of equally spaced thin red lines against a bright blue background.

That site-specific piece was acquired for the U.S. Mission by the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies (FAPE), a non-profit, non-partisan organization based in Washington, D.C. Other FAPE-sponsored works in the building include Ron Gorchoff's *Totem*, 2009 (a vertical row of oil-on-linen paintings, each a nearly rectangular panel of a single, solid color), Lynda Benglis's *D'Arrest*, also from 2009 (a wall-mounted, half-globe sculpture of red-orange polyurethane) and prints made from designs by the quilt-makers of Gee's Bend, Alabama (aquatints made in 2006 and later years). Altogether, FAPE helped provide and install artworks in more than 180 spaces throughout the building.

Established in 1986, FAPE receives contributions from individuals, foundations and corporations and receives no U.S. government funding. Since its founding, FAPE has raised more than \$60 million in art contributions and cash; it has worked directly with the U.S. Department of State to outfit its buildings around the world—embassies, consulates, special missions—with permanent donations of fine examples of American-made art. “New buildings

like this one offer opportunities to work with living artists to develop site-specific works,” notes FAPE’s director, Jennifer A. Duncan. “Right now, for instance, sculptor Martin Puryear is creating a piece for a new annex building for the U.S. Embassy in Beijing. Because of its height—about 30 feet tall—and the way it will be sited, passers-by will be able to see it, so it will have a public presence.” —EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

