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Art Connects Amway Center, Orlando

The trend of art in sports venues continues at Amway Center.

by Kyle Stack / [@KyleStack](#)

The value that a major sports venue can serve its community isn't always limited to the features of its architecture or the quality of the team playing within it. In some cases, the value is achieved by the venue practicing environmentally-safe building practices and operations. In other instances, such as at Amway Center, the home of the [Orlando Magic](#), value is delivered by the inclusion of a \$1 million art collection.

The prevalence of art in sports stadiums, arenas and ballparks isn't a new phenomenon. The subject can be traced back decades if one considers the presence that player statues, photographs and other works have held in sports venues throughout the U.S.

Yet the trend which has been taking place the last several years in professional sports is of franchises equipping their new homes with museum-quality art created specifically for that place. Some of it relates to the team, some of it to the history of the team's locale but all of it is representative of franchises making a financial and spatial commitment to art. Cowboys Stadium in Dallas and Safeco Field in Seattle are two prominent examples. Amway Center is one of the latest.

Opened in October 2010 to house the Magic and the Arena Football League's Predators, the \$480-million, 875,000-square foot Amway Center boasts an 80-foot tall main lobby, a 50-foot cable structure littered with stainless steel "raindrops" and a 180-foot outdoor tower that serves as a beacon for the downtown-based arena. But it's the art collection curated by Tracie Specia-Ventura that makes Amway a destination for more than just basketball or arena football fans.

The collection is a testament to Orlando's local artists, of which 14 contributed to a project that numbered 19 artists overall. There are 200 museum-quality photographs and 138 pieces of original work inhabiting Amway. The pieces range from mixed media to digital work to abstract paintings. They commemorate the Magic, the team's history and the objects and places that define Orlando and Central Florida.

"Our main goal, because this is a public building, was to have the community and the spirit of the surrounding area brought to life," said Specia-Ventura, whose consultant firm, Los Angeles-based [Sports & The Arts](#), has also led projects at L.A.'s Staples Center and New Jersey's Prudential Center.

The Magic and the City of Orlando shared Specia's vision.

Building Amway's collection

Buddy Dyer, the mayor of Orlando, wanted artwork in Amway Center right from when the arena was approved in 2006, after a 5-2 vote by the Orange County commission to raise the tourism tax one cent to six cents per dollar provided most of the arena's funding. (*Orlando Magazine* reported in its October 2010 issue that the Magic contributed \$50 million to Amway's construction. The Magic are also on the hook for any cost overrun past \$480 million, which the *Orlando Sentinel* reported in its March 8 edition to be \$2 to \$10 million.)

"We wanted Amway Center to make a statement about our community," Dyer said during a phone interview. "And we did it with the architecture."

By that, he referred to the building's glass facade, the 180-foot beacon and the artwork within the arena, among other features. "I think it speaks to Orlando and, for the most part, the artists," Dyer said.

Art within Amway also provided a tie-in for other projects associated with the arena's conception. The Amway project approval in 2006 was part of a \$1.1 billion downtown revitalization effort which includes the construction of the Dr. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts and a renovation of the Citrus Bowl.

Ground was broken in late June on The Center for the Performing Arts, which is expected to cost \$354 million plus another \$71 million for land contribution and acquisition and road and site improvements, according to Mayor Dyer's office.

The City of Orlando recently completed a \$10 million initial phase in planned enhancements at the Citrus Bowl, which included structural work and lighting and technological improvements, also according to the mayor's office. The rest of the Citrus Bowl project, which will cost \$175 million, has no timeline for completion.

Dyer stated a yearning to bolster Orlando's art scene, which Specia considered vibrant even before working on the six-month Amway project. "It's such an arts community," she said, noting the five buses which, at the time of Amway's opening, traveled throughout downtown with image wraps of various art pieces from the arena.

Charles Freeman, the Senior Vice President of Business Development for the Magic, told SLAMonline that art was another way for Amway Center to engage the community. He wouldn't reveal the team's monetary investment in the art, including Specia's collection, but called it "substantial."

"We thought it was important – the culture it brings to the facility and how important it is in the city of Orlando," Freeman said via phone. "We wanted to build the best facility we could, and we felt like the artwork enhanced the facility that we had here."

The national artist

So, what about that art? Pittsburgh-based artist [Tom Mosser](#), a former Pittsburgh Pirates mascot who's renowned in the art world for his ambidextrous style of drawing and painting, contributed 30 pieces to Amway. The one which might garner the most attention is his [Dwight Howard](#) drawing that serves as an ode to Italian artist Leonardi Da Vinci's famous Vitruvian Man sketch.

The piece, thought to have been accomplished by Da Vinci in 1487, is a study of a human's physical proportions. Howard, the team star and as much of a physical specimen as there is in the League, was a natural fit.

"It just makes so much sense because of the human anatomy and the athlete anatomy," Specia said. "It just works."

It was Specca who came up with the idea. As she explained during the second of two phone interviews for this story, her thought for the drawing first came to her when she came across a Nike poster – familiar to many – of Michael Jordan palming a ball in each hand, arms extended. While watching a Magic game, Specca translated the idea to Howard replicating the position of the man in Da Vinci's Vitruvian piece.

There was one problem – Howard's body isn't proportional. "The challenge with him is that his head is a little small for his body," Mosser said by phone.

He feared that drawing Howard true to his proportions would create a distraction for casual viewers, whose attention to the piece, overall, might be disrupted by noticing Howard's smaller noggin. So, he took what he called artistic liberty to refine Howard.

"Those are the kinds of things you have to do with artwork," Mosser explained. "If you see a photo of an athlete, it was photographed. There's no question if the athlete has an unusual expression on his face or if he looks odd. But if you do a representational piece of artwork and something looks a little funky, then your artwork is going to be funky, too."

Mosser's loop technique, the backbone of Howard's Vitruvian, also lives in his other drawings, which includes 15 pieces representing current and former players for the Magic. Look at any of the drawings and it's apparent how a sketch is built on quick, circular motions. Mosser said he adopted the technique when he was a kid, since he enjoyed drawing in circles.

But the quick motions make sense in other ways. For one, they're economical. He was constantly working on deadlines for the Amway project, which meant he had to complete the player sketches in a relatively brief time – roughly 10 hours each. Mosser employed his ambidextrous approach by using both hands to work one piece for about 30 minutes, then moving on to the next.

"Working on so many pieces, you want them to mach," he said. "Because there's a deadline, I want to be able to finish them at the same time, or in groups. Sometimes I would do groups of four or five because I would get them to the framer. They had deadlines to get these things framed."

Unsurprisingly, he advocates the emergence of art in sports venues. It opens up his range of potential projects, sure. But, in his mind, there is another factor at play.

"They're spending millions of dollars on the best plumbing and the best wood and the best carpeting and the fixtures," Mosser said. "It's nice to spend money on fine art, too."

The Orlando artists

The heart of Amway's artwork is its connection with Amway's surrounding area, just as Specca had intended. A core ingredient of Central Florida art is the remembrance of the Highwaymen, a group of 26 black artists from the 1950s and '60s who traveled throughout the area to sell their works door-to-door.

Roy McLendon, one of the original Highwaymen, has 11 paintings depicting seascapes, swamps, ponds, sunsets and landscapes throughout Central Florida. All his work was done on a parquet floor in reference to the arena's basketball influence.

Another local artist, [Larry Moore](#), contributed five pieces, although four of them were grouped to create one depiction of a set of rooftops in Orlando. The fifth piece shows a night scene downtown.

"It's not a literal painting of downtown," Moore said by phone. He wanted to communicate the excitement of downtown without making it too static. Therefore, he created lots of angles, which is why the buildings are slanted. A loose, "drippy" nature was also necessary, he said. He accomplished that by using gesso, a white binding material, on a wooden box and then painting, sometimes slinging, gobs of paint at it to define its texture. "I used heavy amounts of paint because I wanted it to have energy," Moore said of the 4' x 7' piece.

Energy was a theme in many works. So was love, which was brought in abundance by [Donna Dowless](#), who's unofficially known throughout the Orlando art community as the city's Ambassador of Love. A former senior vice president at Ticketmaster for 18 years in Orlando, Dowless is familiar with the value art can serve inside a monstrous glass and concrete structure.

"It enhances the whole experience of coming out to the event," Dowless said by phone from her Orlando residence. "That whole surprise of seeing a piece of art on a wall or seeing a sculpture or seeing a wall covered in bright colors...people enjoy that."

Four pieces round out her contribution – Love Grows and Sky High Love I, II and III. All are mixed media on paper on board. The pieces share a number of characteristics; they're blue and contain numerous stars and circles with most objects in the shape of hearts. Blue was chosen not so much for its connection to the Magic's primary color but for its peaceful nature.

The circles are a reflection of movement – of basketball and more. "The circles that I work with represent movement of the game, movement of the industry, movement of the people coming in and out [of the arena], and the excitement of loving and being in the venue for live sports and entertainment," Dowless said.

A fourth Orlando-based artist who spoke with SLAMonline, [Ivaldo Robles](#), finds his artistic inspiration in music. Robles completed four glass and canvas works, including the 5' x 7', saxophone-influenced Aspirational Celestial. Materials used on his pieces include oil-based paint and water-based lacquer that he mixed with paint to create a translucent effect and to get more "dimension through colors," as he wrote in an email message.

Robles said that jazz serves a prominent role in his work. He explained that he'll begin to listen to music before he paints and, as only an artist could do intuitively, let the music take him through the piece. In other words, he feels the painting through his music. Ultimately, he wants to hear the music by observing his painting. Robles offered an example of that through one of his Amway pieces.

"For the Vibraciones Magicas piece, I decided to give a touch of the Magic's star by using the idea of shape and color to represent a guitar," Robles wrote in an email. "It is also made of geometric shapes which have deep dimension and which give the illusion of buildings."

Specia discovered Robles after running across his website at an Orlando gallery. She was taken by his work and invited him to join her group for Amway Center. "I hope something wonderful happens to his career because he was such a neat spirit," Specia said.

Much of the appreciation Specia has for the artists' work is returned to her from them. The five artists who spoke with SLAMonline repeatedly expressed their gratitude to Specia for having been chosen to have their work displayed at Amway Center. Dowless explained it most succinctly. "She knows how to listen to the client to tell the story that the client is trying to tell."

Art's role in sports venues

For the artists, there may be no better public forum to have their work showcased than a sports stadium, arena or ballpark. Tens of thousands of fans trek through these facilities up to hundreds of times per year, whereas a local city museum may receive only a couple thousand people per day.

Ironically, Amway Center's artwork was to be the center of the NBA universe for the 2011-12 season. In addition to Magic home games, the arena was the selected venue to host the 2012 NBA All-Star Game. All NBA-related events at Amway are now up in the air as the league continues its work stoppage. That's an isolated event, however.

Sports venues continue to be a receptive area for art because of their expansive nature, their rough edges and surfaces which can be softened with colorful paintings, sculptures and more as well as people's inherent interest in the subject.

"Art is not just for people who go to museums," said Jack Becker, an executive director at the Public Art Review in Minneapolis. "Museums have this aura about them – elitist. [The perception is] you have to know something about art if you're going to go there and be able to appreciate it. But street art is everywhere now."

Indeed, the perception of what art is changes from person to person. Art's definition surely is morphed into various theories and philosophies. But if it's going to be in a sports venue, it needs context, Becker said. That's where the connection is drawn between the venue and the reason that person is at the venue. That's how people can develop an emotional tie to whatever piece of art at which they're looking.

To accomplish the effect that Specia wants for each facility, she often moves through the space even at its most basic levels of construction. Forget looking at blueprints, she will say. Get into the space and pay attention to scale, lighting and surfaces. That's how she develops her initial thoughts for a space, a mentality that she's utilizing as she outlines her plan for artwork at the Florida Marlins' new ballpark, which is set to open in April 2012.

"You got to walk through the space," Specia said. "The walls come to life and they speak to you."

And the walls at Amway Center are littered with references to the Orlando Magic, past and present, to the city of Orlando, past and present and to the objects and landscapes that anyone throughout the world can identify with Florida. Sports stadiums, arenas and ballparks constantly evolve in so many ways. Art is just one facet of their evolution but it's one which can make a community feel a little more connected to the place they call home.

All images provided by Sports and The Arts.













