

Best practices for incorporating art in behavioral health settings

Art can have a tremendous healing effect on patients, but particular care must be taken within behavioral health environments. It's not just the images you select—it's how you display them



**RA O CONTRA CT
SALE S, INC.**

When done right, artwork can play a vital role within all healthcare environments, providing a positive distraction and an upbeat vibe. Those attributes mean such installations can be particularly valuable within spaces serving those with behavioral health (BH) issues.

But installing art in BH environments involves making a variety of careful choices when it comes to such factors as subject matter, styles of artwork, and frames designed for everyone's safety.

Architect James Hunt, AIA, founder and senior consultant for Behavioral Health Facility Consulting LLC (BHFC) in Topeka, Kansas, has seen his share of badly executed art installations in BH environments throughout his half-century of experience.

“The consequences of artwork not being selected and displayed properly can be very significant,” says Hunt, whose firm's recent projects include a 48-bed, new-build behavioral health inpatient facility at the West Springs Hospital in Grand Junction, Colorado, and a 25-bed behavioral health



remodel in the Kingsbrook
Jewish Medical Center in

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**RAO
Guardian
Frame in a
behavioral
health
patient
bedroom.**



Brooklyn, New York. “The wrong subject matter can result in a patient escalating instead of being calmed. A frame that’s not sturdy enough or not anchored properly can result in patients being able to remove it from the wall or break it into pieces that could be used as a weapon to harm themselves or others. And if glass is used as the clear covering for the image, it could be broken to yield shards that could also be used as weapons.”

Rather than deal with all those factors, Hunt says, some BH environments simply decide not to install any artwork. But that’s not really a solution, he believes. “That can reinforce a tendency for these facilities to be rather stark and bare, which is not conducive to treatment and recovery,” he says.

As a result, Hunt is a strong advocate for incorporating art into BH settings— but only after thorough planning. “The goal is to create spaces that are non- threatening, welcoming, and comforting,”

he says. “That will help patients relax and be calm, so they will be receptive to the only thing that will heal them: treatment provided by a skilled and dedicated clinical staff. The safe display of art plays a huge role in creating the best possible environment for that healing to take place.”

RAO Contract Sales, Inc. of Paterson, New Jersey, addresses those needs by manufacturing a specialized picture frame for use in BH facilities (it also developed a complementary line of mirrors called Hybrid Safety Mirrors). RAO president Seth Bergman enumerates the major ways his company’s framed artwork product— known as the Guardian Frame—differs from off-the-shelf options:

- **Compound radius corners and beveled edges.** While typical picture frames have four 90-degree corners, the Guardian Frame has compound radius corners and beveled edges. The design not only eliminates sharp edges from the four corners and edges of the frame but also significantly reduces the ability for the frame to be used as an anchor point, thus making it ligature resistant.
- **Lexan polycarbonate glazing.** Standard picture frames use glass or acrylic covers to protect the artwork from dirt and damage. The cover within the RAO frame, by contrast, is made of Lexan polycarbonate, which



Compound radius corners eliminate sharp edges and are ligature resistant.



The frame installs flush to the wall so that a person cannot get their fingers behind the artwork to remove it or hide contraband.

is Class A fire-rated and unbreakable. This is important in settings where patient populations may become violent, as acrylic and glass can break into pieces that could be used to cause harm.

- **Installation method.** Most artwork weighs 8 to 12 pounds and can be a lethal weapon if removed from the

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wall. Typical security-mount hardware, comprising top clips and a t-screw, won’t do in BH environments, because they aren’t strong enough, and they create a gap between the wall and frame that can allow a person to get their fingers behind the frame to remove it from the wall. The Guardian Frame is through-bolted to the wall so the frame sits flush against the surface. The flush-mount system also keeps contraband from being hidden behind the artwork.

As a turnkey framed artwork provider, RAO has a dedicated team of full-time installers. “You can buy the best and safest products for your patients,” Bergman says, “but if the products don’t get installed properly, then what’s the point?”

RAO also helps clients select the proper kinds

Subjects matter

Drawing on his nearly 20 years in the art industry, RAO president Seth Bergman offers the following dos and don’ts when it comes to the subject matter of artwork in behavioral health settings.

DOSDON’TS

- Bright and uplifting
- Photography
- Sharp focus Nature (excluding people)
- Life-size or smaller
- Wide-open areas
- Dark, menacing
- Abstract
- Blurry
- Industrial (machinery, etc.)
- Macro or distorted
- Claustrophobia-inducing images

RAO Contract Sales, Inc. (est. 1971) is a second-generation family business serving the healthcare industry worldwide with custom framed artwork and other wall decor. RAO manufactures all of its products in its state-of-the-art manufacturing facility located in Paterson, New Jersey. RAO's turnkey solutions help customers from inspiration to installation.

For more information, go to RAO.com.

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