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anatomy of an annual report

The corporate issue simply wouldn't feel complete without a handful of annual report "anatomies"—that is, a glimpse into how some of the more innovative reports from 1995 were pulled together. This year, we look closely at four: The Progressive Corporation, The George Gund Foundation, The Neiman Marcus Group and Penwest. All engaging, all powerful and all rich, in their own ways.

The Progressive Corporation

by Janet Traylor



Photographer Teun Hocks appears in each of his own photos. Right: Cover of Progressive's 1995 annual report. Above: illustrates the idea, "sending signals."

If you think automobile insurance companies are stodgy, you haven't met The Progressive Corporation. Based in Mayfield Village, Ohio, and established in 1937, Progressive collects quirky, challenging work by emerging artists from around the world. The corporation started its print collection in the Seventies and now records more than 3,000 pieces in its computerized catalogue.

According to corporate curator Toby Devan Lewis, the company—with over 220 offices in various parts of the nation—encourages even its smallest claims offices to display art. "We've made a total commitment to the visual arts," she says.

Though conservative in its investment and capital management, the company views itself as proactive, changing, flexible and innovative. Such values are reflected in its annual report, which is visually anything but stodgy.

Art director Mark Schwartz of design firm Nesnadny + Schwartz (Cleveland, New York, and Toronto), whose company has produced Progressive's annual report for 14 years, says "They collect edgy, contemporary stuff—stuff

that makes you think.

Progressive's annual reports over the years have featured contemporary photographs, paintings and mixed-media work by Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol and James Rosenquist, among others. Well known and respected in the fine-art circles, Progressive was recently cited by The Association of Professional Art Advisors for its "significant contribution in the workplace for not only contemporary art, but for creative spirit," says Devan Lewis.

Each fall, the company chooses a theme and, with Nesnadny's designers and art directors, builds the following year's report around that theme. The work of Dutch artist Teun Hocks was chosen to illustrate the company's 1995 message. Artist selection is made with the guidance of the corporate art curator and the blessing of CEO Peter Lewis, himself a collector of contemporary art.

"We wanted a little humor and a lot of accessibility in this year's report," says Devan Lewis, who already had some of Hocks' work in the corporate collection.

An inventor, painter, set designer, producer and model as well as photographer, Hocks is not only the creator but a key subject of his work, appearing in each vignette as an actor. Schwartz describes Hocks' work as wacky performance, "Bill Wegman without the dogs—kind of Groucho Marx meets Magritte."

Scott Catto, director of P.P.O.W, Inc. gallery in SoHo, which represents Hocks in New York, agrees that the artist has a sense of humor and that his pieces are "very much about the human condition."

Hocks' work for Progressive illustrated the concept of "service," their most recent annual report theme. The cover features a shot of the artist in flight suit, red rocket lashed to his back. He stands on a large rock against a solid midnight-blue background. Crouched and ready for blast-off, he holds a lighted match in his hand.

On the back cover, Hocks, shirtsleeves rolled up and sporting a tie, appears to pedal a single-speed vintage bicycle up a 45-degree incline, a three-foot stack of books strapped precariously atop the bike's rear fender.





Clockwise, from left, each image illustrates a different theme: “meeting the challenge”; “jumping through hoops”; stepping up to the mark.”

Inside, a subtext on Progressive’s service philosophy accompanies each of the artworks. One photo shows the artist, feet planted firmly in a large clay flowerpot, standing in a rain-soaked landscape. Black umbrella unfurled, he sprinkles his legs with a metal watering can. The facing page discusses the company’s growth.

Another page illustrates the caption “Stepping up to the mark” with the sweater-and-muffler-clad, ice-skating artist tracing patterns on the ice. The wintry snowscape in the background echoes traditional Dutch landscapes with its bare-limbed trees, windmill and a distinctively painterly quality.

Schwartz says his design firm values a “fine-art” approach. He believes photographers would make better images if they paid more attention to the history of photography and painting. “A lot of graphic design today is too self-referential. People are not looking at important source material. You know, Vermeer was a great graphic designer.”

Close to life size (as large as 5 x 6 feet), the images are black and white. Hocks then embellishes the large prints with an oil-based crayon, adding painterly detail and texture to the surface. The prints are mounted on plywood with heavy wood frames, then painted by the artist to match the rather dark, neutral tones in the images.

Hocks was given very little direction except for the theme. The design firm and photographer communicated mostly by fax, which mitigated both time and language barriers. Schwartz says this was the first time Progressive had used an artist living in Europe. And although Hocks never had done commercial work before, the process went smoothly. “I would fax to this studio at 5 A.M. my time, then he would do sketches and fax them back.”

The budget, though undisclosed, was considered a bargain by both client and designer. Curator Devan Lewis believes Progressive has gotten good deals when it commissions work.

The company usually purchases a certain number of original works in addition to reproduction rights.

“They’re buying an asset that continues to appreciate,” says Schwartz. “It’s a very smart approach. They’re putting something on the walls their employees can enjoy and theoretically, getting either the art on the wall or the annual report art for free.”

Progressive purchased one-time reproduction rights for ten existing Hocks images; the company also commissioned five new pieces for the brochure; the originals were kept for the corporate collection.

With many corporations currently reducing work in their collections, Progressive’s relentless support of unconventional art is surprising. Then again, this company’s CEO signs his annual letter to shareholders, “Joy Love and Peace.”

At Progressive, innovation prevails. ●