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Bay Area retail veteran rediscovers art of deal

Art, the final retail frontier.

That, at least, is what retail powerhouse **Helen Bulwik** is selling these days. Her new Emeryville-based **Pacific Art Group** wants to do for art what **Gap** did for t-shirts and **Pottery Barn** did for dressers: move it into the mass-market mainstream.

All furniture retailers use wall art to dress up stores and catalogs, Bulwik said, but few of them sell it. They're potentially missing out on millions of dollars. After all, if you bought the couch that looked good under the painting in the store, wouldn't you want the painting as well?

That's where Bulwik, a longtime Bay Area retail consultant, comes in. Pacific Art Group has assembled a stable of 130 artists who will produce work specifically for retailers.

"It's a fashion business," Bulwik said. "We do not do art for art's sake. This is about finishing a home."

Bulwik draws on her decades of experience to coach the painters on what she thinks the market wants this season, from color scheme to imagery. From there, the artist is free to follow his muse.

Pacific Art Group currently owns exclusive rights to 300 images, and it can acquire up to 1,000 images a year, all made available to retailers on an exclusive basis. Retailers **Horchow** and **Neiman Marcus** have signed on and Bulwik said she is working on programs for other home furnishings retailers.

Originals range from \$2,400 to \$8,000. A "giclée," (replica digitally printed on canvas, textured to resemble paint), costs about 20 percent of that. A poster print, framed and laminated to look and feel like canvas, costs less than half the giclée.

Pacific Art Group will remain in the background, with all artwork branded by the retailer. And Bulwik has little patience for those who might sniff at commercializing the creative process. "We take art and remake it into a form that can go into every retail environment," she said.



TALK OF THE TOWN

Jim Gardner

Taking it to the bank

Hefty pay packages, tongues-a-wag over who's doing what, legal battles over top talent: Are we talking buffed athletes, sexy movie stars or best-selling authors here?

No, it's your humble neighborhood community banker. With small banks sprouting across the Bay Area and elsewhere, bankers are hot and rivalry for talent has reached the boiling point.

Witness the **Mechanics Bank** in Richmond, none too pleased that one of its key bankers, **Vern Padgett**, left to join the Walnut Creek branch of new San Francisco-based **Presidio Bank**.

Kathleen Quenneville, Mechanics' general counsel, won't discuss what's going on except to say, "the lawyers of the two parties are working to address the Mechanics Bank's concerns."

Presidio Bank declined comment altogether, but word has it that the dispute — which hasn't blown into a lawsuit yet — was discussed in detail in offering documents that Presidio distributed to investors. The star-powered venture, with early backers like **Warren Hellman**, **Paula Collins** and **David Pottruck**, collected \$40 million to open its doors, the most ever raised by a startup bank in California.

A rival East Bay community banker said it's all just a phenomenon bankers should understand well: supply and demand. "There's only so many bankers you can spread around," the banker said.

— Compiled by Jim Gardner.

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Got a tip for Talk of the Town?

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