

THE WELLS GROUP FINE ARTS

Wendy Wells Jackson, Fine Arts Advisor & Appraiser

Art that works with you

Mentor Graphics assembles collection with an ear for feedback

By **RANDY GRAGG**
of *The Oregonian* staff

If Portland's artistic adventurousness could be measured with a thermometer, we'd log in at heavy sweater temperatures. But in the world of corporate art collecting, we're talking down coats, earmuffs and moon boots.

It's not surprising. Few corporations nationwide are known for their adventurous spirit in art collecting. Decoration is the main goal, and soothing the ruling aesthetic.

However, a few businesses in the Portland area have tried to push the envelope. The newest among them is Mentor Graphics.

Founded in 1981, Mentor has been collecting art since 1984, filling its corporate chambers with work by some of the region's most

accomplished artists. And now, with its new facility in Wilsonville, the company's gone on what — by most Oregon corporation's standards — is a virtual buying spree: 38 new artworks, including a monumentally sized landscape painting and three commissioned sculptures.

"We're an adventuresome company," claims Frank Delia, Mentor's vice president and chief legal and administrative officer. "We want to foster emerging artists, decorate the halls, and maybe stir up a little controversy."

An eight-member volunteer employee committee selects the art, operating within a budget Delia controls. The amount or formula for its determination he would not reveal. With assistance from Portland art consultant Wendy Wells Jackson, the committee scruti-

nizes hundreds of slides of Northwest artists' work to make their selections.

Mentor has purchased a mix of decorative, "safe" art and more rigorous work by some of the region's critically acknowledged masters. For instance, Rick Bartow's scratchy fish and bird drawings, "Northwest mystic" Kenneth Callahan's landscapes and the late Hilda Morris' sumi brush paintings can be found in several meeting rooms. George Johanson's somber view of a rainy day adorns the lobby of one building. Michihiro's fiery painted steel tower sits in the dining commons lobby, often attracting children with an urge to climb things. Nearby is Henk Pander's 1986 pastel of Einstein in an Amster-

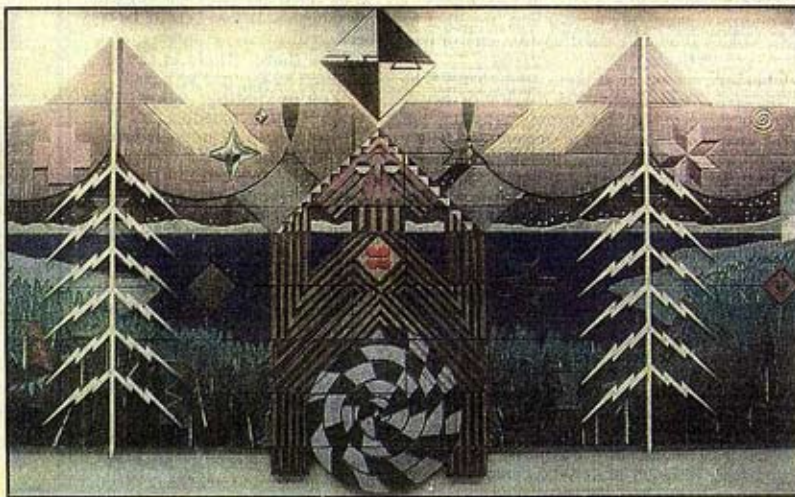
Please turn to
MENTOR, Page 8

"We want to foster emerging artists, decorate the halls, and maybe stir up a little controversy."

— Frank Delia,
Mentor
vice president

Photos by #
STEVE NEHL
The Oregonian

Tad Savinar's untitled relief sculpture looks as much like a corporate promotional display as an artwork. Pictured at right is a detail.



Seattle artist Jack Chevalier's wood carving is an employee favorite, evoking a landscape populated with Northwest Indian motifs.

Mentor: Works selected encourage involvement

■ Continued from Page P1

dam train station.

The Pander painting, committee member Mike Cook says, is one of the most popular. "I think Einstein is an inspiration to a lot of people here."

Hands down, the most stunning work in the collection is Paul Missal's 25-foot "Walk on the Beach at Seal Rock." Missal, perhaps one of the region's least known and underrated painters, has created the visual equivalent of "sensesurround" with this pointillistic scene of promontories off the Oregon coast.

Mentor's most recent acquisitions, however, are what distinguish the company among the region's corporate collectors. Instead of simply purchasing existing artworks from slides, for the lobbies of three of their newest buildings, the art committee commissioned new works.

Geoffrey Pagen's ceramic wall relief is the most abstract of these, resembling three vertical sections lifted from an asphalt street. Other, more colorful lines and forms crisscross underneath.

Seattle artist Jack Chevalier's large-scale wood relief carving, the committee members say, is favored among employees. Ostensibly a landscape, the pastel-hued construction also evokes the abstracted shape of a human figure formed of symbols reminiscent of Northwest Coastal Indian designs.

Unquestionably, the work that has been noticed most is Tad Savinar's commission.

At first glance, Savinar's wall-relief sculpture appears to be some sort of corporate advertising display with its five shiny, brushed steel placards sporting symbols and words floating over a flaglike field of black and red. Read the plaques, though, and the more subversive qualities of Savinar's work surface.

For instance, a circle with one quarter missing is labeled "hunger." Underneath, the plaque reads, "Since when did hunger have anything to do with eating."

And so on.

After being up only three days, however, Savinar's piece already was netting puzzled and annoyed comments from Mentor's employees. "People are saying it's 'too extreme,' that it's not accessible," committee member Cook says.

According to Cook, the piece has actually fulfilled one of the committee's goals: to generate dialogue about the art.

Vice President Delia seems philosophical about it, claiming there

almost always is some kind of friction about the art, ranging from where it's hung to why the company is buying it at all.

The growth in the size and quality of the art collection parallels Mentor's own progress. The art committee was formed at the same time the company began selling stock. Mentor then employed a mere 150 people. Currently, the Oregon campus alone employs 1,200, and the collection numbers 118 pieces. The number almost reached 120, but, once again paralleling the company's financial flow chart, CEO Tom Brugere nixed two proposed commissions — which would have been their largest ever — just in time for Mentor's first quarterly loss of \$5 million.

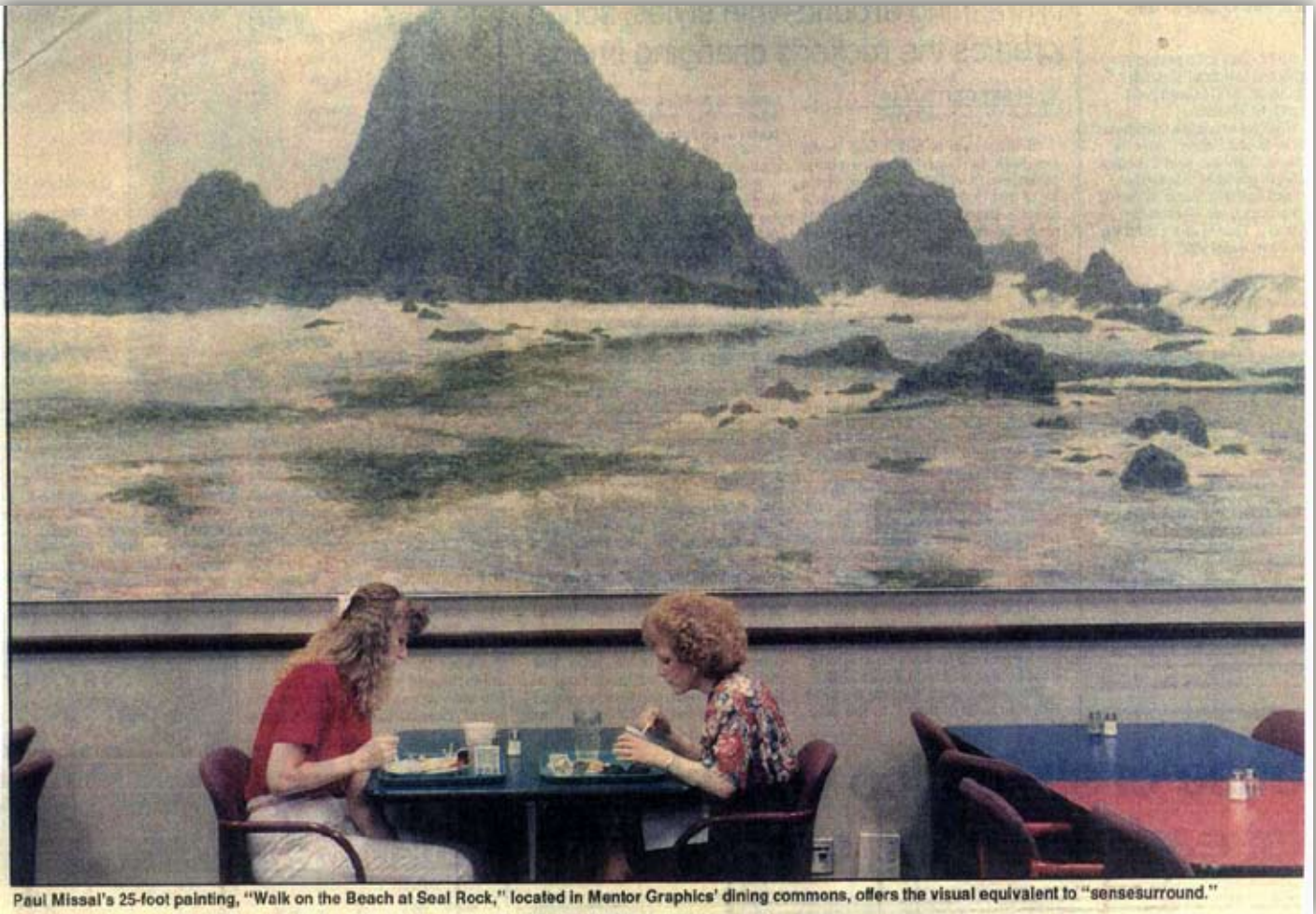
In numbers, the collection still is minor league compared to Kaiser Permanente's 500 artworks or Microsoft, whose 212-acre Redmond, Wash., campus is home to a whopping 700-piece collection. And, in artistic quality, Mentor falls well short of Management Compensation Group, a Portland company that owns a collection complete with catalog, one curated by Paul Hart, an Oregon Art Institute board member and former MCG partner, or the Seattle office of Perkins-Coe law firm, in which partner/curator Charles Katz has both an art history degree and a watchful eye on New York trends.

However, Mentor art committee member Cook is confident the company will continue to expand the collection. Both he and Delia have hopes for a major outdoor work for the campus. The Japanese wing of the company also collects. Cooke said there's talk of exchange shows.

For now, Cook feels Mentor has reached a plateau, and the committee is planning educational programs — possibly some brown-bag lunches with the artists — to make sure the rest of the employees are happy at this elevation. With this attention to education and the company's openness to a little controversy, Mentor is not only collecting for its employees, but bringing a warm breeze to the chilly world of corporate art.

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Caption above: Paul Missal's 25-foot painting, "Walk on the Beach at Seal Rock," located in Mentor Graphics' dining commons, offers the visual equivalent to "sensesurround."