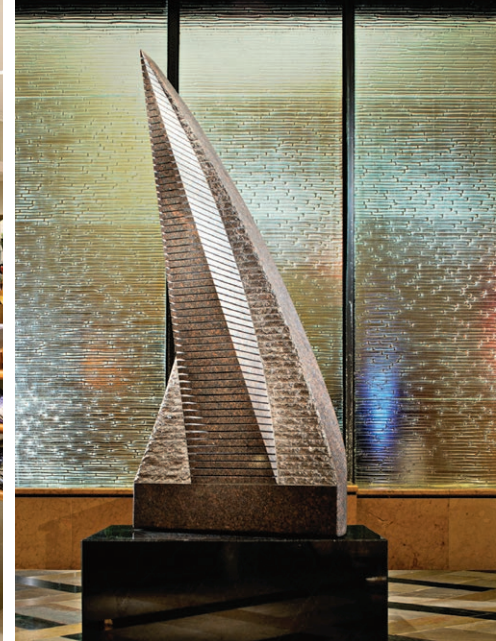


Public Spectacles

Some of the best private art stashes aren't *that* private. Peek inside the city's coolest 'semi-public' collections | *By Peter Barnes | Photography by Debora Smail & Julie Soefer* |



On the outside, the Williams Tower is all tinted glass and corporate ambition. A 901-foot-tall monument to business, owned by one of the largest real estate companies in the world.

Inside, though, a handful of lovingly woven Native baskets rest among the spotless Barcelona chairs and dark wood paneling of a reception room. A floor below, a Charles Schorre acrylic throws wild colors at passersby. On canvases in conference rooms and in pottery placed along hallways, the Hines family lends a little artistic soul to the company's Houston headquarters. "There is just a kind of earthiness that's a counterpart to the built environment," says **Hines Interests** Vice President George Lancaster.

Navajo, Apache and other Native pottery—some dating back 11 centuries—share space with Houston elder artist Dick Wray's abstracts and an ethereal landscape by California's William Wendt. The collection includes 50 pieces gathered by the Hineses to share with their associates and employees, and Lancaster estimates its value at just shy of \$1 million.

More than wallpaper for the corner office, such collections—privately owned but arguably called "semi-public," given their limited accessibility to visitors at large—lend businesses, hotels and other enterprises all over town credibility as important collectors. They also deepen artistic understanding and the quality of life for employees and guests alike, say art industry types. "This is an investment in culture," says gallerist Austin James of Bering & James. "This is an investment in our human capital."

James estimates there are 30 to 40 large, privately held collections among Houston's corporate giants, including the 600-piece troves he helps curate for oil stalwarts **Hess** and **Lyondell**. In many ways the collections mirror Houston's history, James says, flourishing with the oil fortunes of the 1970s, showing a gap in the 1980s and renewed interest a decade later.

Curators around town make note of collections held by law firms like **Baker Botts** and **Fulbright & Jaworski**. And it's even been reported that billionaire investor **Fayez Sarofim** once purchased a 16th century El Greco

ART FOR ALL
Scott Guion's mural, part of the House of Blues' folk-art collection; Joseph Havel's globe made of shirt collars at Neiman Marcus in the Galleria; and the Hilton Americas' granite sculpture by Jesus Morales

painting of the Crucifixion to add to the de Koonings and other works at his office. Reps for Fulbright couldn't be reached, while those for Baker Botts and Sarofim politely declined to discuss their collections.

At **King & Spalding**, Reggie Smith has been seeking out the brightest up-and-coming artists for the international law firm's collection since its Houston office opened in 1995. "We want to have people surrounded by works that are not only pleasant to look at but also interesting and challenging," says Smith, a board member of the Contemporary Arts Museum.

The firm has picked up four Andy Warhols—three of them from a series depicting John Wayne, Annie Oakley and General Custer. The 39th through 43rd floors of 1100 Louisiana St. also provide a home for work by Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, as well as a puzzle collage by Houston-based Al Souza. There are more than 100 pieces in the collection, whose value Smith declines to estimate. He insists, however, the value is greater than what's tangible. "There's a philosophy I certainly buy in to, that art inspires creativity."

Smith notes that many pieces came from charity auctions, so he was able to build the firm's collection and at the same time serve philanthropic interests.

Not visiting Hines or a top-tier Downtown law firm anytime soon? There are other semi-public Houston collections members of the public may have some access to. At the famous **Tony's** restaurant in Greenway Plaza, for example, a 12-foot sculpture titled "The Three Graces" by **CONTINUED ON PAGE 166...**

...THE LOOP ART CONTINUED FROM PAGE 78 Corpus Christi's Jesus Moroles overlooks the dining room. While savoring owner Tony Vallone's dish of the same name—the edible version combines sea bass and grilled shrimp with a crab cake—patrons also can admire cryptic Rauschenberg abstracts, as well as paintings by other well known and emerging artists.

Downtown, designers built the **Hilton Americas** around 150 pieces selected for public areas; 30 artists were commissioned to help create them. "The whole thing is a work of art," says Hilton's Tere Perry. "With surroundings this luxurious, it was the ideal place to showcase a collection." A Rauschenberg triptych hangs behind the concierge desk. (The late artist was a Port Arthur native and turns up in dozens of important Houston collections.) A 19-foot-long sunset painted by Katherine Alexander spans a wall nearby. In the lobby, a perspective-defying Moroles granite sculpture weighing 3,000 pounds provides a contrast to the vivid chandelier of flowering orange Barovier & Toso Italian glass. Original works by Texas artists fill other prominent spaces throughout, and the massive mural of the world behind the bar is the work of New York's Jeffrey Greene, whose work includes commissions in Radio City Music Hall.

Smaller hotels often offer a peek at original works, too. At **Hotel ZaZa**, sexy *Vanity Fair*-style celebrity photos turn heads. Photography by Arthur Meyerson hangs in the **Hotel Derek**, as Dallas abstract painter Deanna Kienast was commissioned to create works for the hip retreat's new **Valentino** restaurant (see Food Drink Review for more).

For a complete immersion in folk art, one could spend an evening at the **House of Blues** Downtown, where about 400 works by self-taught "outsider" artists jazz up the space. Most of the artists hail from the South, and their pieces are as vivid, textured and quirky as the characters who painted them. Take Houston-based Big Al Taplet, whose joyfully bright paintings and signs first began as advertising for his shoe-shine stand in pre-Katrina New Orleans. Nationwide, the House of Blues' collection—divided among venues across the country—includes 10,000 pieces, says Scott Smith. He curates the work from a warehouse in New Orleans and says he doesn't know of a bigger collection of folk art anywhere.

Nearby at the **Hobby Center**, semi-public art is also in generous supply. At the request of the center's benefactors, Sol LeWitt lent his geometric designs to a 35-foot-wide wall in the lobby. Elsewhere, richly colored Leonardo Nierman tapestries titled "The Magic of Music" and "Rhapsody" were added in 2004. Outside, there's a two-part Tony Cragg sculpture that looks like a Southwestern stone formation cast in bronze.

Meanwhile, back in the Galleria area, a short walk from the extraordinary Hines collection, **Neiman Marcus** is filled with sometimes subtle art pieces many shoppers might miss. The luxury retailer has about 2,500 original works of fine art on display in stores around the country, with a tasteful selection of paintings and sculpture at its Galleria location. "We have an amazing collection here in the store, and we love for people to come in and enjoy it," says spokeswoman Stacey Swift.

Entering from Post Oak Boulevard, shoppers encounter a large, contemporary Roger Berry work called "Rodeo" that matches similar ribbon-like sculptures above the jewelry and handbag counters. Downstairs in the men's department, Glassell School director Joseph Havel's "Collar Sphere"—a three-foot globe made from men's shirt collars—liven up rows of ties. Likewise, the Couture Salon gets a splash of color from paintings like Charlotte Smith's "Blue Yonder," which greets shoppers coming off the escalator with whimsical acrylic circles set against a blue background. On the opposite wall, near the Mariposa restaurant, six Nate Cassie painted enamels—large, striking rectangles marked in lime green, yellow and orange—line one wall.

Swift says that the collection and exhibition of semi-public art was integral to the mission of the store's late president Stanley Marcus, who was on the leading edge of a trend still alive in Houston today. "He wanted it to be a total shopping experience. When the customer comes in, it's not just about the clothes," she says. "It's about your total environment." ■

...THE LOOP CULTURE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 82 to principal Barbara Bears and snippets of the season to come, including both Walshes dancing. But it's the show that follows that has Ballet buffs salivating.

In February, Houston Ballet heads to the Orient, with a lavish new production of the beloved warhorse, *La Bayadere*, a ballet that dares to blend white tutus, deadly serpents and opium. Welch thinks it's time for a major makeover of Marius Petipa's melodrama of a temple dancer and her warrior lover, with a little Bollywood thrown in. "It's a big, sexy and juicy ballet," says Welch.

As he did with his updated *Swan Lake* in 2006, Welch plans to beef up the characters, adding more modern and believable actions. "We are trying to lure younger audiences, and they just don't buy it when things don't make emotional sense," he says. To that end, Welch plans to flesh out the love story so it's more convincing. And he'll also punch up the story's girl fight, and work in a few live snakes. "I love the way they move," says Welch. "After all, this is one of the few ballets that includes a dramatic death-by-snakebite scene."

It's fitting that costumes and sets are being designed by Brit Peter Farmer. He's been a part of the Ballet's history since '72, the only designer to've worked with three of the company's directors—Nina Popova, Ben Stevenson and now Welch. Farmer goes for a painterly effect—"a make-believe, storybook India," says Welch—with a palace of warm velvety brocades contrasting a lush surrounding forest of blues and greens.

Besides *La Bayadere*, other season standouts include *Pecos Bill*, Welch's ode to the Lone Star State, and *La Fille Mal Gardee* (*The Wayward Daughter*), one of the best loved comic ballets. Both show off the company's acting chops. And yet, the biggest hit of the season may unfold offstage, as the company's extraordinary new Houston Ballet Center for Dance rises on the corner of Preston and Smith streets.

Turning 40 in a former dress factory on West Gray just wasn't going to cut it, so a new headquarters was in order. The company has always had an artistic presence Downtown—as they share the Wortham Center's main stage with Houston Grand Opera as a performance space—and now they'll have a bricks-and-mortar presence, too. A sleek, cityscape-changing skywalk will, in fact, connect the new facility to the Wortham. The six-story, 115,000-square-foot Center will contain nine studios, a 200-seat "black box" theater, 20 dorm rooms, a full suite of administrative offices and be, according to Ballet press materials, "the largest dance facility of its kind constructed in the United States." Says Executive Director Cecil C. Connor Jr., "It will be one of a kind."

The architect for the project is Marshall Strabala, director of design for Gensler, who has designed three of the world's tallest buildings, including China's Shanghai Tower. Mixing sleek black granite, stucco and glass, the design proffers a dramatic contrast between dark and light. Think black-swan white-swan. And the top-floor dance studios feature floor-to-ceiling windows, so Houston can enjoy drive-by ballet. Welch and exec Connor hope that the building will not only be a landmark for Houston but also a magnet attracting the world's best dancers.

It's about time, Welch adds. "We are not small-fry," he says. "We are bigger and more capable than what our current facility allows." The company reports that it already has 70 percent of the funds it needs for the project, and a capital campaign headed by philanthropists John C. Bass and Jesse H. Jones II is underway to raise the rest. (The late Anita B. Stude was also a co-chair of the drive, having passed away in July.) The building should open in the spring of 2011.

For now, though, preparations for the 40th anniversary schedule continue apace in the old space, where it seems fitting that young Joseph Walsh has been assigned *La Bayadere*'s "God of Dreams," a brand new role Welch created for him. "I feel like the company has taken on new energy," says Walsh. "Now we are taking it to the next level." And Welch eagerly concurs. "It's time to reward Houston for investing in us with a Downtown presence," he says. "It's important for our board, our audiences and our dancers. Really, our best is yet to come." ■