

Art / Joanna Shaw-Eagle



## Convention Center offers dramatic art

\$4 million collection fits site

**T**he Washington Convention Center Authority (WCCA) this week unveiled its \$4 million public art collection. Things looked iffy for a time, especially when the collection — also called the art program — wasn't ready for the \$833 million center's grand opening March 31.

However, four years of WCCA work with curator-consultant Joel Straus, the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities and the Art Program Executive and Advisory Committees made it happen.

It was worth the wait.

The largest public art project in any U.S. convention center, this collection also could be one of the best.

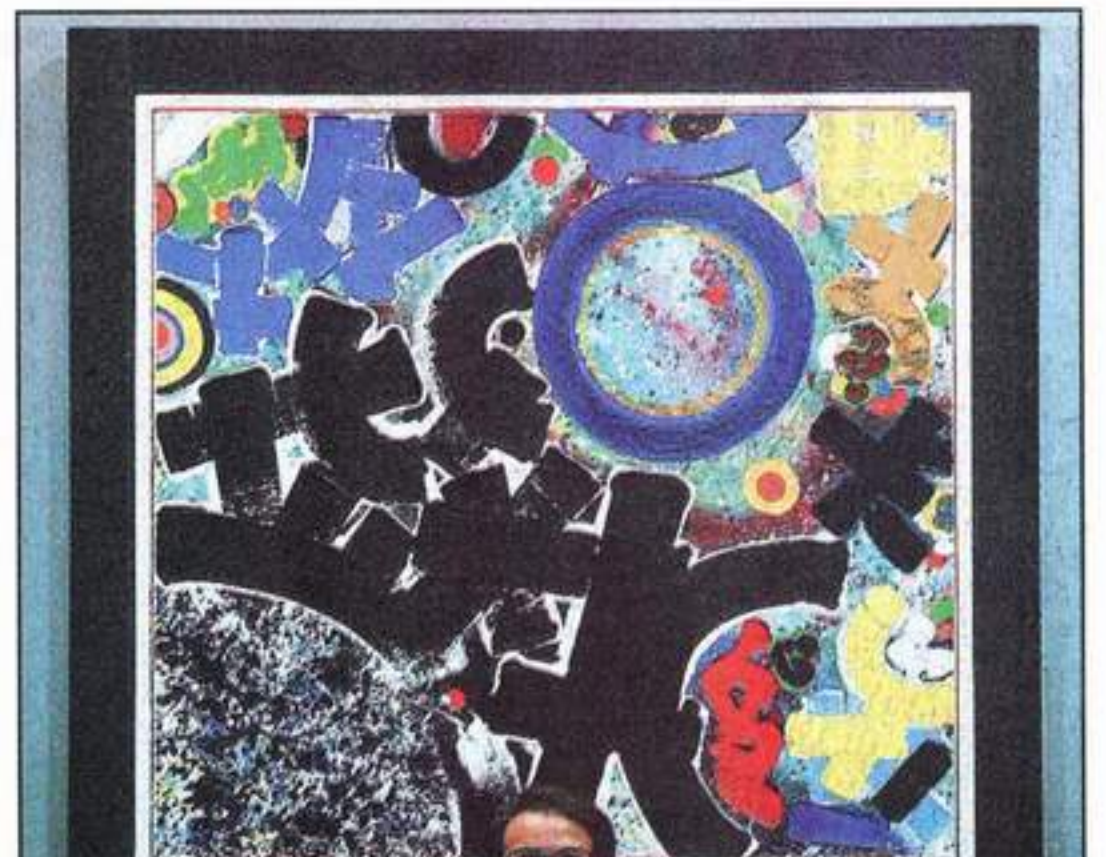
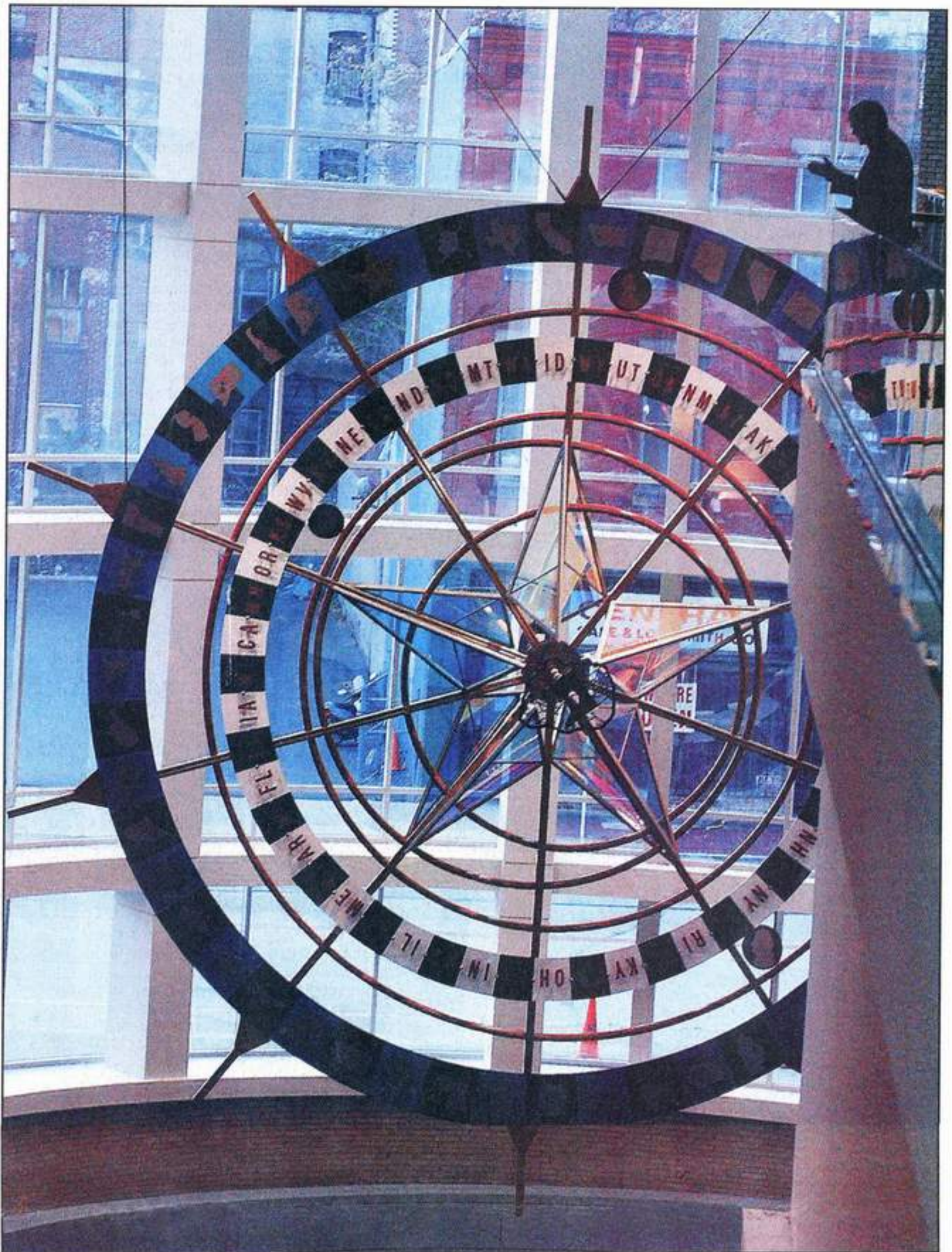
Early on, art was programmed into the center's architectural design to humanize its cavernous 2.3-million-plus-square-foot interior with intimate spaces for art. A huge building (actually three connected ones spanning six city blocks) was needed to attract



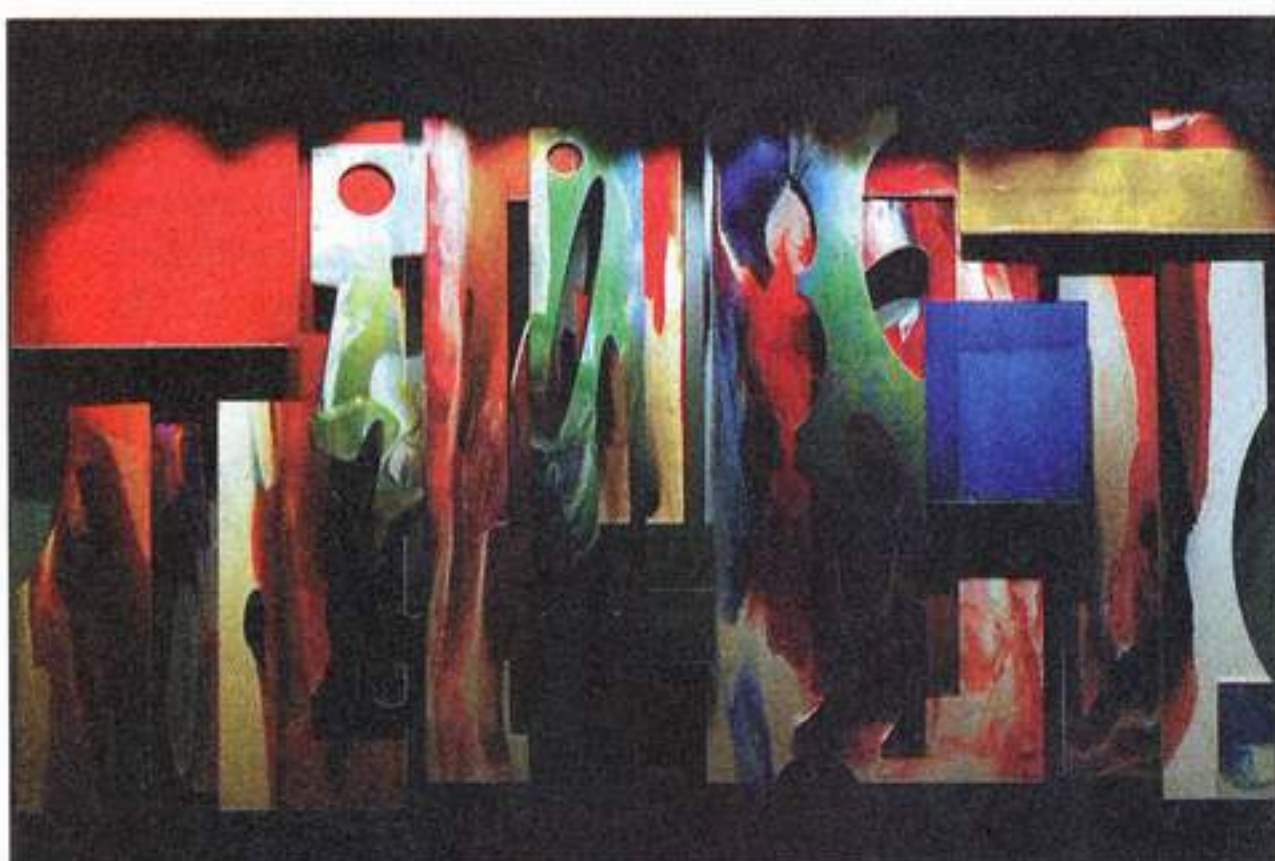
the convention business the District sought. At the same time, the structure had to be handsome (if the city had wanted an ugly convention center, it could have kept the one it already had), and the art inside had to be a drawing card in its own right.

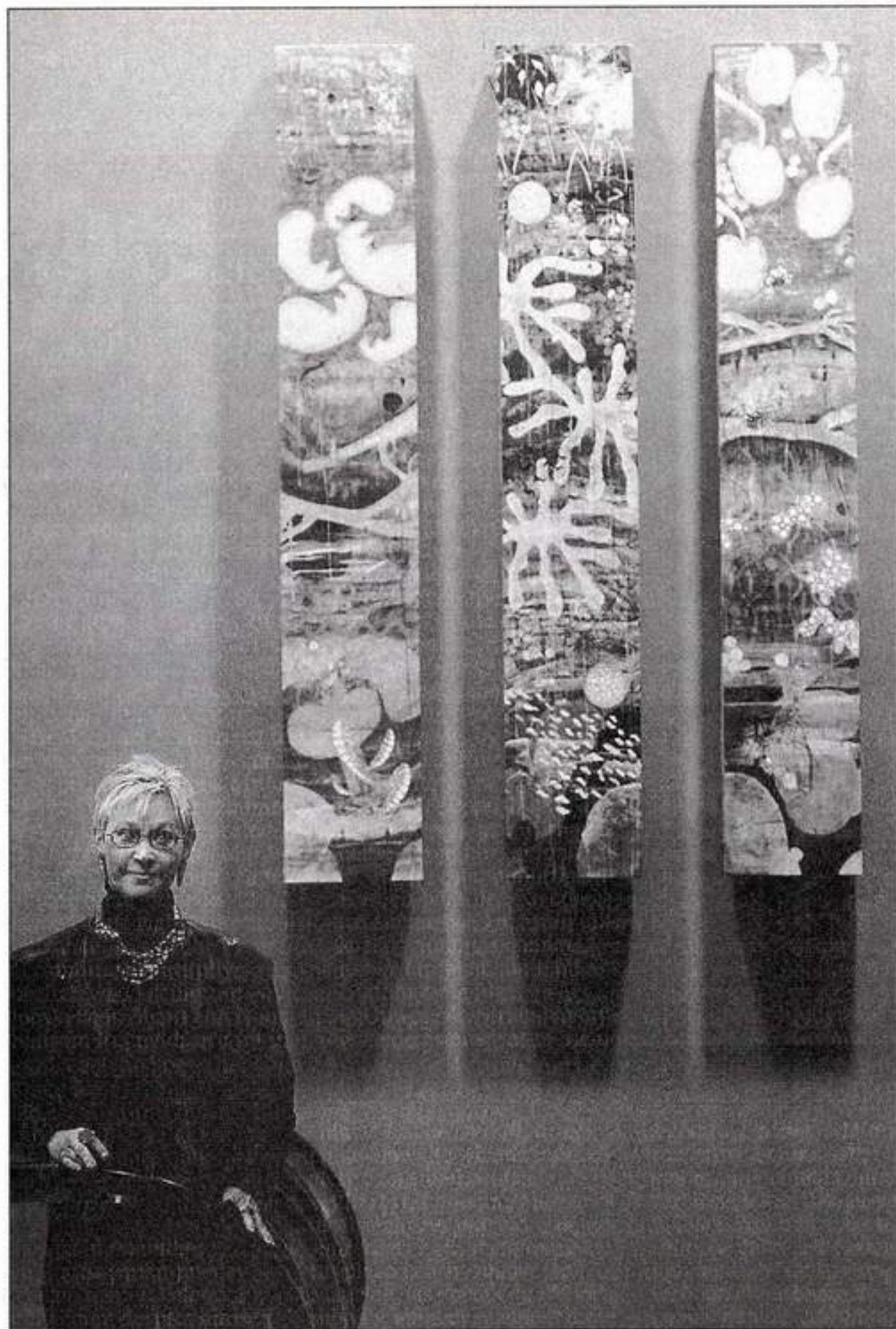
Art and architecture had to be mutually complementary. Anyone viewing the gleaming glass-and-masonry structure on Mount Vernon Place NW will see that the architectural teams succeeded. Ditto for the art inside.

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At top from the left are Tony Gittens, executive director of the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities; Vivienne M. Lassman, associate curator of Joel Straus Consulting; and curator-consultant Joel Straus next to the Jim Sanborn piece "Lingua." At top right, Larry Kirkland is silhouetted near his "Capital Stars." A detail of Sol LeWitt's "Wall Drawing No. 1103" is at middle left. An untitled work by Jae Ko is above. Kendall Buster's "Parabiosis II" is at center. Ming Wang sits in front of his "Space Orchestra" (far right), and Sam Gilliam's "Many Things" is at right.





Photos by Jessica Tefft/The Washington Times

## CENTER

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Mr. Straus has emphasized from the outset that his work here entails close collaboration with varied constituencies — the architects, the local community and the arts program committees, which include members from several of the city's museums.

"My job is meant to be complicated," the bearded, 44-year-old Mr. Straus says with a laugh, citing, for example, the oversized Sol Le-

■ One of Mr. Straus' many wise decisions was to include local artists who don't show much here or exhibit in other cities.

Witt staircase that Molly Donovan, a National Gallery of Art assistant curator of modern and contemporary art, suggested to him.

Greeting visitors to the center at street level is Jim Sanborn's imposing "Lingua," two 16-foot-tall, perforated bronze columns dramatically lit from within. "We place art at the most intensely trafficked areas and axis points," explains Mr. Straus, whose Chicago-based Straus Consulting curated the art for Chicago's McCormick Convention Center, among other projects. "Jim's piece is just right near the entrance."

Smaller, beautifully crafted wood sculptures by locals Foon Sham and Nancy Sansom Reynolds are set in

wall vitrines specially designed for the center.

As one is riding the escalator up to the dramatic, sun-filled "L Street Bridge," the orange-red-blue-green-and-yellow-striped LeWitt staircase ("Wall Drawing No. 1103") seems to levitate directly ahead. To the left, Larry Kirkland's witty "Capital Stars" — a suspended glass sculpture with a three-dimensional star in the center surrounded by what look like circular elements from a dartboard — is hung against a huge two-story window.

Below floats a translucent cloth sculpture, "Parabiosis II," the work of Richmond's Kendall Buster, who recently created a show of exceptionally original cloth sculpture for the Kreeger Museum. The white-coated steel, shade-cloth-covered biomorphic shape looks as if it could take wing. (Shade cloth is a special kind of fabric manufactured in South Africa for shading greenhouses.) Actually, Miss Buster envisions it as a mythical city of interlocking buildings.

Quite by coincidence, Washingtonian Sam Gilliam's evocation of a city — a construct-relief titled "Many Things" — is mounted nearby. The grain of the birch wood beneath the shimmering red, orange, green and purple thinned acrylic helps evoke the irregular grid of a city. "I wanted to have the feeling of a city," Mr. Gilliam explains, "in moving the eye from the orange rectangle in the upper left, through the thinner vertical bars of the middle, to the gleaming white horizontal bar at upper right."

As the escalator reaches Level Two, two Asian-inspired works by Betsy Stewart and Jae Ko come dramatically into view. Miss Stewart's "Pond Totem" of floating biomorphic images comes from her lifelong interest in Asian philosophy. Korean-born Jae Ko configures huge rolls of Sumi ink-soaked adding-machine paper for what could be a Buddhist mandala.

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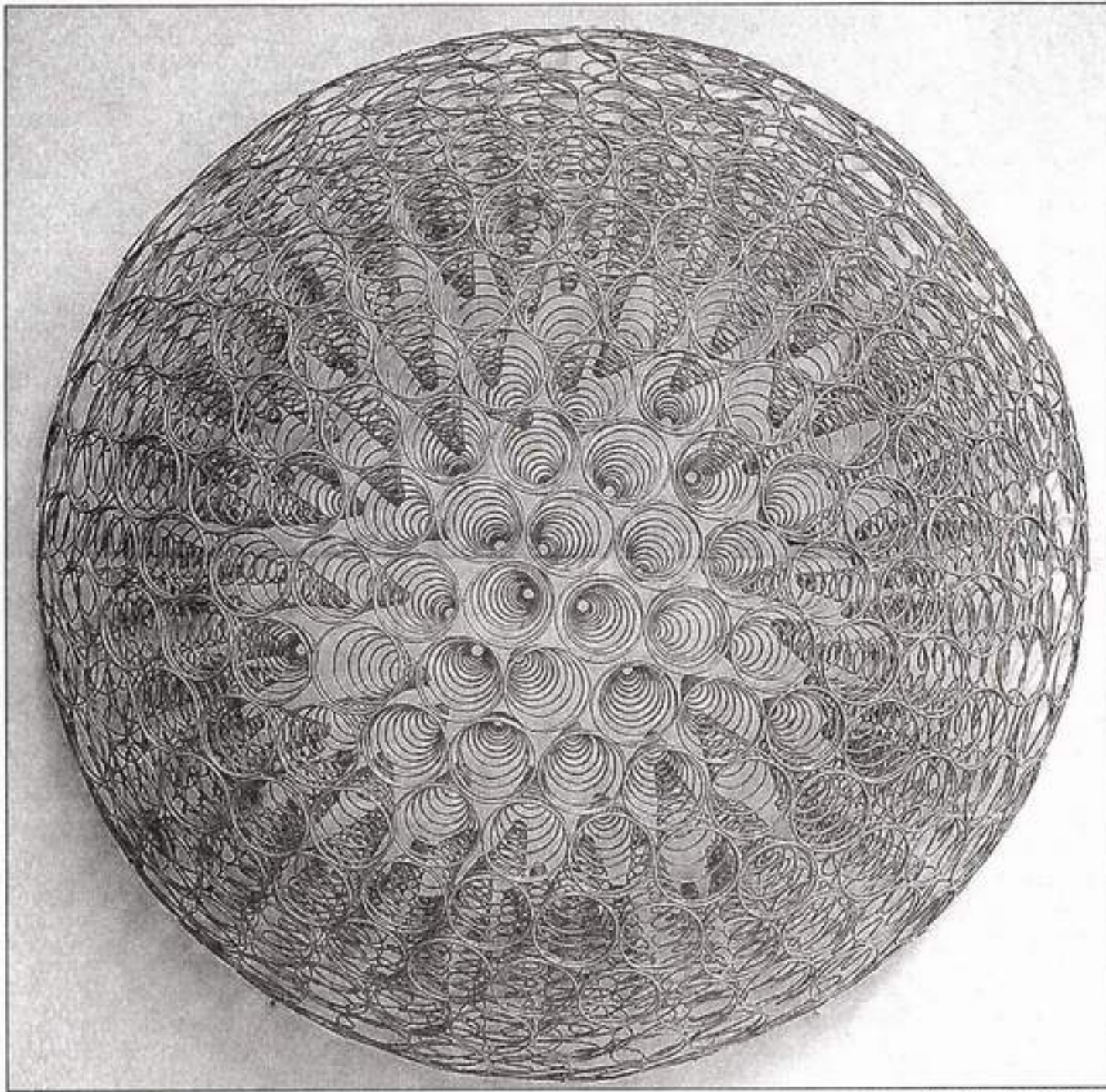


Photo by James P. Beirn



local artists who don't show much here or exhibit in other cities. Among them are Chris Gardner, Carole Bolsey, Annette Polan and Wendy Ross. Most notable is 83-year-old Ming Wang, whose calligraphic "Space Orchestra" was inspired by the artist's flight across northern China before the invading Japanese in the 1930s. "I've never forgotten those skies," he says.

The D.C. Commission for the Arts and Humanities was smart enough to call on the best talent — museum directors and curators, an experienced curator-consultant and local artists — to put together this \$4 million prize. Our city is mighty lucky.

**WHAT:** Washington Convention Center Art Collection  
**WHERE:** 802 Mount Vernon Place NW  
**WHEN:** A permanent exhibition open during center hours  
**TICKETS:** Free  
**PHONE:** 202/249-3200. To schedule public tours of the collection, call the WCCA community hot line at 202/249-3100.



Betsy Stewart (top left) poses with her "Pond Totem #33, #19, #32." Karen O. Brown (top right) arranges the pieces of "Flying Dreams." Wendy Ross' "Volvox I" is at center. Sol LeWitt's "Wall Drawing #1103" is above. Rik Freeman and his "Shaw Rhythms" are at left.