

Dana Bousard, TOTEM OF THE WILLAMETTE, Fabric Wall Piece

TAKING STOCK - a review of Oregon's Percent for Art in Public Places program

by Nancy Lindburg, Artist Services Coordinator

1987 seems a magic year for government and the arts, and in particular art in public places programs. Many of this country's greatest WPA projects including Oregon's living treasure, Timberline Lodge, perched at the six thousand foot level of Mt. Hood, and the oldest crafts gallery in the nation, Portland's Contemporary Crafts, will be celebrating 50th anniversaries. And just 20 years ago the National Endowment for the Arts established its Art in Public Places Program. It awarded its first grant to Grand Rapids, Michigan, for the commissioning of Calder's *La Grande Vitesse*. That same year, 1967, the monumental Chicago Picasso was unveiled. America's built environment would never be the same.

And so, taking our cue from the old Roman god Janus, it seems an appropriate time to take stock of Oregon's Percent for Art in Public Places program, looking both backward and forward.

Hawaii was the first state to pass percent for art legislation in 1967. The director of its Foundation on Culture and the Arts, Viennese architect Alfred Piers, felt it important to create a program "fit for a democracy" in contrast to the European model "where art support grew out of the aristocracy." His goal was to "involve those already involved in the arts, as well as those for whom art meant nothing."

Following Hawaii's lead were Washington in 1973 and then Oregon and Alaska in 1975. Now there are some 20 states and numerous counties and cities in the nation with a variety of public arts legislation.

The impetus for Oregon's legislation began with the 10 million dollar addition to the State Capitol in Salem. The 1975 legislation was written to apply only to two counties--Marion and Polk. In 1977 the program became statewide. The law sets aside not less than 1% of the direct construction funds of new or remodeled state buildings with construction budgets of \$100,000 or greater for the acquisition of visual art. The Arts Commission is fond of saying that it's as if a family living in a \$50,000 home buys \$500 of original art. A modest, but important investment.

Towards the end of 1978 a full-time coordinator was hired to manage the growing program, along with other responsibilities embraced in the term, *artist services*.

Over these 12 years, and hundreds of selection committee meetings, and thousands of slides, the goals of Oregon's program remain the same: a commitment to excellence - of placing art of the highest merit in public places where it is accessible to the broad public. A commitment to the successful integration of art and architecture, and of bringing artist and architect together as a working team; a commitment to our artists to help them attain public recognition, visibility, and economic stability through new opportunities; a commitment to the citizens of Oregon to stimulate an awareness and understanding of the arts and the creative process; and finally, a commitment to building upon the rich heritage that is ours.

By now, of course, the meaning of those goals appears clearer, richer, deeper. Our places of work and study have been enriched, enlivened, distinguished. Artists have been given opportunities to create major commissions which have led to other opportunities and contacts in the private sector. A connection between good art, a healthy, working environment, and good business is clear. As Oregon's calligrapher laureate Lloyd Reynolds once said, "What good is art if it doesn't affect our daily lives?"

Since 1975, 54 projects have been completed ranging in size from \$1,200 to over \$100,000, in towns and cities from Ashland to La Grande. \$995,535 has been spent on 635 works by 436 artists. Each man, woman, child has an investment of a little over 50 cents in their State collection. Another \$900,000 in projects are before us in this biennium. Two project assistants are working on specific projects: Lotte Streisinger, from Eugene, is managing the large science complex project at the University of Oregon, and Carol Baumann is managing the Department of Transportation projects in Salem. Both Lotte and Carol are artists, teachers, and administrators.

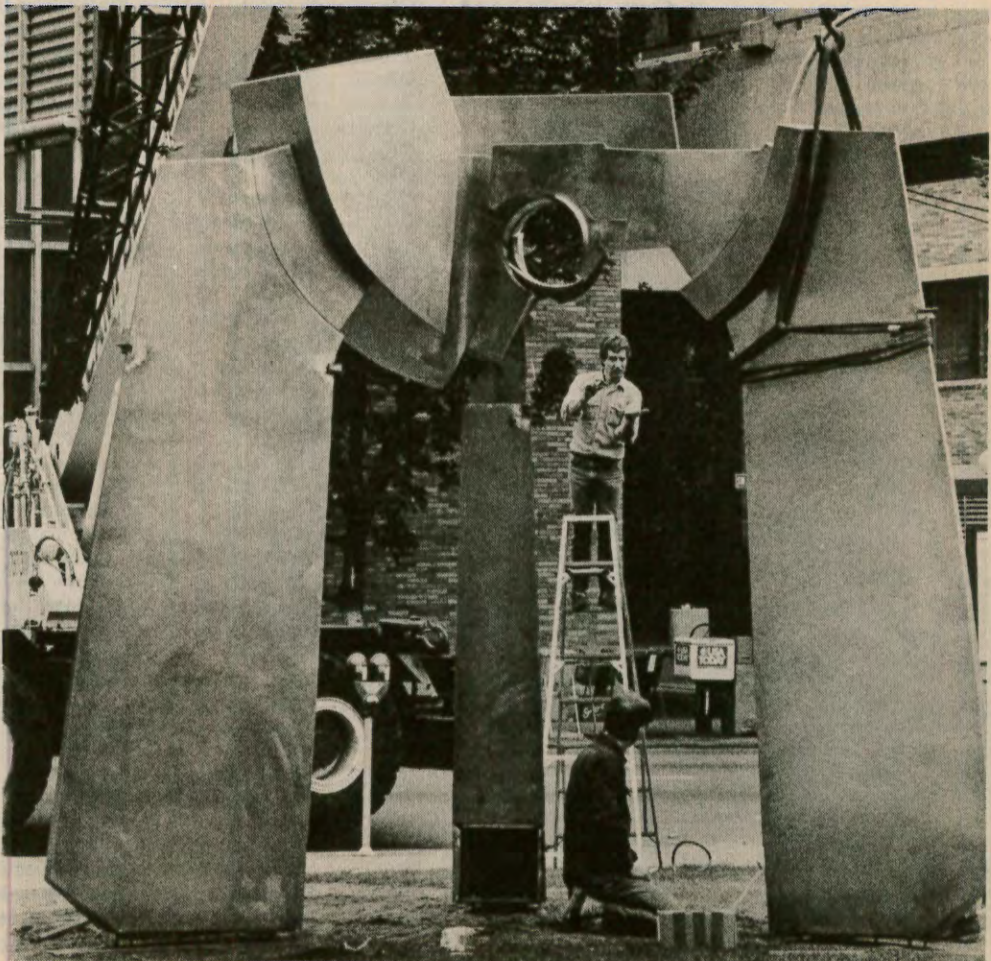
Making the arts a real presence in our daily lives takes the interlocking efforts of agencies, artists, architects, and the public alike, who serve on selection committees. Selection committees are set up for each project with the responsibility of choosing artists to be

commissioned, or the work itself to be purchased for a particular site. This partnership has proven to be a vital and healthy process--capable of very diverse and significant results.

But art for public places in Oregon has not been without controversy. Robert Maki's corten steel piece, *Pentagon Square*, in front of the state's Revenue Building in Salem continues to inspire lively debate. Its bold, severe form captures light and shade with the regularity of a sundial. Strong artistic statements will always evoke strong positive and negative feelings. Leaving the studio and gallery for the "market place" is likely to open up even more criticism for artists. "Art and advanced thought are not justified by popularity contests," quipped Norway's great playwright Henrik Ibsen. The gap between conventional visual attitudes and a visual language that is on the edge of today's contemporary aesthetic thinking hasn't closed significantly since the days of Goya and Schumann. Grappling with those gaps becomes an ongoing challenge which is very much a part of any healthy Art in Public Places program.

Government and the arts - Oregon has enjoyed a very special kind of partnership with other governmental agencies involved in each percent project, especially the State System of Higher Education, the Department of General Services, and the Department of Transportation. Representatives of those agencies have sat on countless Selection Committees, written as many contracts, and helped to solve the inevitable problems. Along with the artist members of the Selection Committee, representatives of both the contracting and resident agencies have been able to take the risks and have the trust that must accompany the commissioning of new work. Besides trust and risk taking, courage plays the final role. The Metropolitan Arts Commission's *Artworks* in Portland said it best: "To create and support art of quality takes courage. No creative venture begins or succeeds without both artist and the art patron taking risks, responding to difficulties with insight, resilience and daring judgment, accepting struggle to forge a visionary ideal into reality." Such are Art in Public Places programs - in Oregon and all across the nation.

Photo by Daniel Clark



Tom Morandi, YANKEE CHAMPION, Portland State University, Portland.