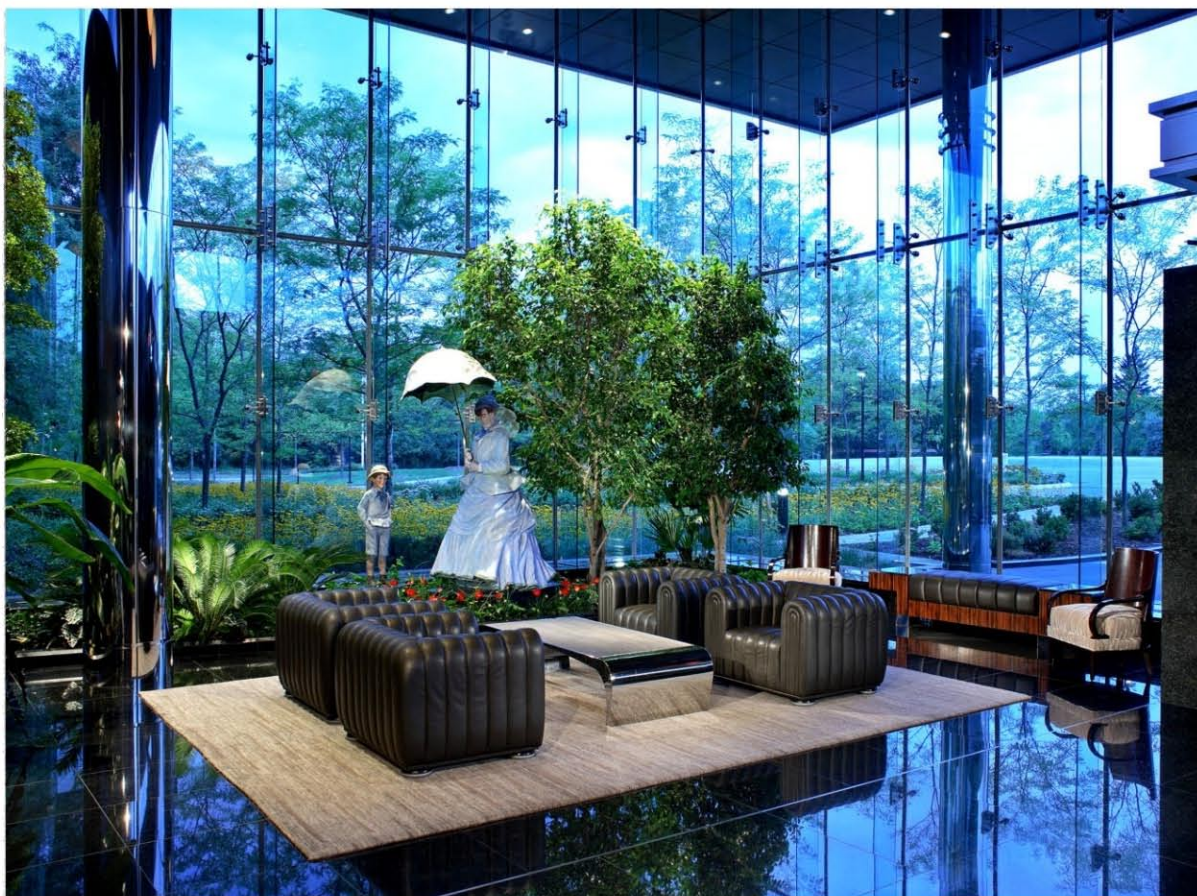


CREATIVE SPACES

A TOUR OF INNOVATIVE WORKPLACES

The art of human resources



PHOTOS BY DAVID WHITTAKER

Art in the Four Seasons head office in Toronto: above, *Through Poppied Fields*, by J. Seward Johnson, bronze hand-painted sculpture, The Sculpture Foundation; below, *Clouds and Trees 2005* (diptyches), by Nathan Birch, acrylic on canvass, Mira Godard Gallery.

FOUR SEASONS

'It improves the lives of the people who work here'

BY SARAH TRELEAVEN

The sprawling corporate headquarters of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts in suburban Toronto has the subdued but inspiring feel of a distinguished museum; it's as though gaggles of schoolchildren holding onto one long piece of rope might any minute be shushed and corralled down the corridors. The collection of Canadian work has been lovingly displayed throughout the building, awash in natural light that follows the work down the halls, up the high-design spiral staircase, and even into the bathrooms.

What The collection includes almost 200 pieces, mostly acquired over the past decade: purposefully diverse but cohesive paintings, sculptures, photography, prints and glass by a range of artists, such as Robert Polidori, Paul Fournier, Jacques Payette, Brent McIntosh and Doris McCarthy.

Showpieces The main lobby showcases a larger-than-life whimsical sculpture (*Through Poppied Fields*) by J. Seward Johnson. A woman holds a parasol while her young, ruddy-faced charge looks on in what could be mistaken for a homage to *Mary Poppins*, but is actually a hat tipped to Claude Monet. Tucked around the corner, at the end of a short hallway, is a stunning laser-cut Kelly green glass sculpture (*Four Seasons' Veil*) by Lutz Haufschild. And on the second floor, just outside the comparatively sober main boardroom, Nathan Birch's two playful paintings — one capturing a partially clouded blue sky, the other a tight gathering of vivid green trees and shrubs — each spill asymmetrically onto dual canvasses.

Where Office art is often relegated to key locations, but here it fills most available space. Open a desk drawer or pull back any curtain and you just might come across an Edward Burtynsky photograph or rich Ivan Eyre painting. The selection of some of the work in the less-public workspaces offers a knowing wink to staff. Hugh Martin's photographs of coupled chairs, for example, greet the employees responsible for purchasing hotel furnishings.

How The art committee, which includes four to six rotating members, has worked for more than 20 years with Toronto-based art consultancy firm Kelly McFarnan Lavoie (KML). Together, they source from private galleries across the country. "We look for things that have an enduring quality," says John Kelly, principal at KML. "There's respect for a wide range of things, and a belief that every [employee] deserves to have this experience."

Why "The art can be considered decor, but it's also emotive, nostalgic, challenging, thought-provoking and invigorating," says executive vice-president of human resources Nick Mutton, who oversees the purchase of the artwork. "And on all of those levels, it improves the lives of the people who work here." Nicola Blazier, a media relations manager who has been with the company for 28 years, seems humbled by her surroundings, calling it "a wonderful place to work." On the wall behind her were two glass installations that set the light dancing even on an overcast day. Mr. Kelly nodded in agreement. "Everyone will tell you that their most important asset is their people," he says. "But this actually shows it."

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