



# Metropolitan masterpieces

Great artwork is as close as the nearest subway station BY LORRAINE B. DIEHL

**H**ave you seen them? Giant tortoises swimming through subway tunnels. That pack of monkeys heading for the Central Park Zoo. There's Billie Holiday flying above the Apollo Theater. And poet Edna St. Vincent Millay dancing with the painter John Sloan.

You don't need hallucinogenic drugs for this trip. In fact, the only thing you have to be on is a subway platform. Thanks to the MTA's 15-year-old Arts for Transit program, a ride on a New York City subway can be a tour of visual delights. Next time you're underground, just look around. Subway art is everywhere: on platform walls, in passageways, along staircases and steel railings, even wrapped around platform columns. It can be seen, felt and sometimes heard.

"Most people don't have a clue how big this is," says Arts for Transit director Sandra Bloodworth.

Nowhere is subway art more delightfully larger-than-life than at the newly completed 81st St. B and C station. Here, a wonderland of ancient creatures awaits the rider, inhabiting the floors and walls along the entrance to the American Museum of Natural History. Step on a dormant crocodile and watch it rise suddenly in brilliant color up a wall where caterpillars become butterflies, and elephants and leopards walk in the shade

of their extinct ancestors. An aquarium of fantastic sea creatures is at one end, a sky full of stars and planets glitters at the other, and in between are those incredible bronze dinosaurs.

Think you've been sufficiently dazzled? You haven't seen anything yet. Get back on the C train and see other enchantments. Exotic, Cleopatra-like eyes greet you at the World Trade Center, where Andrew Ginzell and Kristin Jones have cast them in mosaic tiles, titling the work "Oculus." At Brooklyn's Utica Ave. station, you'll experience "The Children's Cathedral," artist Jimmy James Greene's playful mosaic murals, put together with the help of children from community groups. Giant tortoises can be seen at the Houston St. 1 and 9 station — part of Deborah Brown's "Platform Diving," a whimsical amphibian menagerie of whales, fish and a giant squid covering the station's walls.

"Why fish on a subway platform? 'We don't decide on a theme, but we do ask artists to respond to place,'" says Bloodworth. "In this case, the artist brought her sea creatures underground."

Along the 1 and 9, you'll find that most of the art does relate to particular stations. At 50th St., there's Liliana Porter's "Alice: The Way Out," a series of mosaic murals themed to "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland." Here, Alice pulls back a curtain, a reference to the nearby Theater District.

The 66th St.-Lincoln Center station has Nancy Spero's elegant but still-to-be-finished "Artemis, Acrobats, Di-

vas and Dancers," with its dramatic Aida-like opera diva commanding the center canvas. The Christopher St. station is where you'll find Edna St. Vincent Millay and John Sloan in one of Lee Brozgold's mosaic collages of people who have shaped Greenwich Village. And South Ferry has Sandra Bloodworth's own "South Sails," a huge, visual invitation to Manhattan's tip.

The most spectacular artwork referencing a subway station has to be Mark Giblin's "Cable Crossing" (4, 5 and 6, Brooklyn Bridge-City Hall station), where a skylit glass ceiling draws daylight onto the sprawling steel sculpture; it's as if the glorious bridge has somehow entered the station.

There's the art you feel, like James Garvey's "Lariat Seat Loops," bronze seat rests wrapped around steel columns on the 33rd St. No. 9 platform. And Michelle Greene's "Railroader's Throne," a single steel chair on the downtown platform of the 1 and 9 116th St. station.

There's the art you hear, like Chris Jannay's "Reach" (N and R, 34th St. station), a smile-inducing musical experience: You reach up and interrupt a sensor's beam, producing a jingly sound. And there's art that surrounds you, like Elizabeth Murray's "Blooming" (mezzanine connecting the 4, 5, 6 and the N and R at 59th St.), a colorful riot of coffee cups pouring out poems and cascading shoes along every wall of this "mixing chamber."

## GALLERIES OF GODS

Subway art can be an elevating experience. The 1 and 9 at 215th, 225th and 231st Sts., where the train rises above ground, is where you'll see Wopo Holup's subtly beautiful relief mural series "Elevated Nature I-IV." If you're heading for Flushing, you don't even have to leave the 7 train to see Yumi Heo's Q is for Queens, faceted glass pieces lining the 33rd, 40th and 46th St. stations. See them on a sunny day, when light pours through these colorful windows.

Just look around when you're underground. The amount of art in the subways will surprise you: "The artwork is so prolific, it's now at the point where it's more [noticeable] where it isn't than where it is," says urban geographer Jack Eichenbaum.

Even when the coffers were low, art got on the walls, in one case transforming a forbidding passageway at Columbus Circle into an inviting gallery. "We were asked to do something to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in America," says Bloodworth, who ran a contest for children and artists, asking them to talk back to the explorer from their place in time. Today, the 8-year-old "temporary" exhibit, with its intriguing paintings, including one of the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria sailing beneath the Brooklyn Bridge, has given the entrance to the Columbus Circle station new life. "Suddenly, it's a delightful way to go," says Bloodworth.

Eight years ago, new MTA guidelines dictated that any art introduced in a subway station support that station's architectural history.

"TheIRT — the city's first subway — has a wonderful Beaux-Arts style," says architectural historian John Kriskiewicz, who points out that line's early three-dimensional Heins and LaFarge tiles on the subway tour:



THOMAS MONASTER DAILY NEWS

