

Art and the Transit Experience

Cynthia Abramson

As more and more cities build or modify their transit systems, interest has grown in art-in-transit programs, which generally commission works of art for or engage artists in the design of transit systems. Supporters of these programs believe that they can “integrate creative values into such places ... where thousands of people circulate and encounter each other every day” — thereby improving these environments for users and enticing riders back to public transportation.¹

Transit art projects have been both decorative and functional. While they can contribute to the cultural life and profile of a city, they also can help shape the experience people have of using a transit system as they move through a city.

The art projects featured here respond to the special nature of traveling through a city on public transit. They celebrate acts of arriving and departing, times when we move not only between different places but also different states of mind. They mediate between local communities and the region to which the transit system connects them, helping passengers understand their place within the region and revealing and strengthening the identity of local communities. And they increase passengers’ feelings of safety, comfort and orientation in systems that are often unfamiliar and disorienting.

Additional research by Todd W. Bressi, Hanan A. Kivett and Jill Slater.



(Above) Jean-Paul Laenen’s photomural in Brussels’ Aumale Station recalls the neighborhood that was demolished when the subway was built.

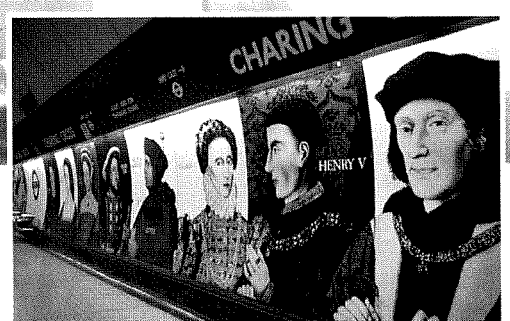
(Center) Hector Guimard’s canopy for the Abbesses Station, Paris. Photo by Cynthia Abramson.

(Right) London’s Charring Cross Road Station, with Richard Dragun’s reproductions of paintings from the National Gallery and Portrait Gallery, which the station serves. Photo by Cynthia Abramson.

Placemaking

Landmarks and gateways can help create a sense of place in a city, both for residents and visitors. The ability of transit stations to function as both is illustrated by the art nouveau glass and wrought iron entrances French architect Hector Guimard created for more than 200 Paris Metro entrances between 1900 and 1913. Their stylish design dignifies and elevates the act of traveling by Metro. Guimard’s shelters have become synonymous with the Metro and with the city of Paris itself and serve as local landmarks in the neighborhoods where they still stand.

Contemporary artists have created thematic artworks and designed system elements that help establish connections



between municipal transit systems and the communities they serve. Often, these projects make reference to a site, landmark, historic person or event that is meaningful to an area served by a transit stop, or they evoke the character of a nearby district.

Metrorama '78, Jean-Paul Laenen's dramatic photomural in Brussels' Aumale Station, recorded both the destruction of the Anderlicht neighborhood and the life that had existed there for more than half a century before metro construction began. The mural literally envelopes riders, wrapping around the upper section of the station walls.

Richard Dragun's vitreous enamelled steel mural in London's Underground marks the place of the Charring Cross

station by creating a continuum of visual images — from the National Galleries above to the station below — and by reminding passengers of nearby landmarks in the city.

Recent projects also follow this strategy. In Los Angeles, Francisco Letelier's murals in the Westlake/MacArthur Park station celebrate the culture of the Latino neighborhood above; sculpture in the Aviation and El Segundo stations evoke the dynamism of the aerospace and defense industries nearby.

Other projects celebrate transit environments as places of their own. Jack Mackie's array of green and orange utility poles in a bus staging area next to Seattle's Convention Place Station lend a sense of theatricality to this otherwise workaday space.



(Top) Sigvard Olsson's designs for Stockholm's Rådhuset station play on the sense of being in a place that has been excavated.

(Above) Gunnar Larson's "Transformation in the Sky" in Stockholm's Farsta Centrum station.

Photos by Cynthia Abramson.

Humanizing the Metro Environment

In most cities, the transit system is used by more people than any single building. Yet concerns for passenger comfort seem to have been ignored in the design of transit environments, particularly in older systems. This is especially true for underground lines, where sometimes only minimal lighting and ventilation are provided. While some argue that transit environments are experienced less deliberately than other architectural spaces,² one could also argue that transit environments are experienced more intensively than most other places, and passenger comfort therefore demands extraordinary consideration.

The Stockholm Metro provides some of the best examples of how art has been used to humanize transit environments, to make them more comfortable and interesting for passengers. There, designers have endeavored to introduce light and color into the underground in order to counteract the effect of Scandinavian winters on passengers.

Gunnar Larson's "Transformation in the Sky," at the Farsta Centrum station, seeks to create a warm and summery atmosphere in what is basically a cold and windy place where passengers both buy tickets and wait for trains. Ulrik Samuelson's



Reflective phrases carved into the risers of the Douglas/Rosencrans station stairway on Los Angeles' Green Line. Courtesy Los Angeles County MTA.

Kungsträdgården station recreates the gardens above — featured are waterfalls with lichens and moss growing on the walls, cast architectural features, statuary and sculptures from different times and a variety of buildings, terrazzo floors and Venetian water vases.

The designers of the Santa Monica/Vermont station on Los Angeles' Red Line realized that Angelenos, with little tradition of using underground spaces and a long tradition of earthquakes, might be fearful of using that city's new subway. Their design for the station entrance includes skylights that allow natural light to reach the station platforms.

At the Douglas/Rosencrans Station, artist Renee Petropoulos notes that people passing through are marking an important transition in their day — moving from work to home or vice versa. Words set in the risers of the station stairway echo the thoughts that might be going through a passenger's mind.

Vicki Scuri's Seattle bus tunnel counters the disorientation and discomfort travelers often feel in dark, claustrophobic tunnels. Bright lighting and vivid graphics help riders see their place in the tunnel and orient themselves to the streets above.



(Above) Francisco Letelier's mural, *El Sol*, describes the Latino community living near the Westlake/MacArthur Park Station on Los Angeles' Red Line. Courtesy Hanan A. Kivett.

(Right) Paragraph short stories posted at Seattle's bus stops make waiting a bit more pleasant. Courtesy Seattle Metro.

Safety, Wayfinding, Circulation and Orientation

The connections between different transportation lines or modes present particular challenges for passengers and designers. They are places where people might find themselves momentarily disoriented or where people moving in different directions conflict. Transit artists also have addressed these problems of circulation and wayfinding.

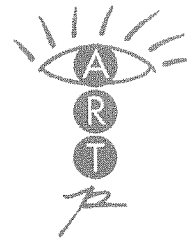
New York City's subway is renowned for the bas reliefs that adorn its earliest stations and helped identify them to non-English-speaking immigrants — among them are a sailing ship for Columbus Circle and a steam paddlewheeler for Fulton Street.

Nicholas Munro's ceramic murals depicting mazes and the game "Snakes and Ladders" for London's Oxford Circus station were controversial because they parodied the labyrinthine passages, corridors, escalators and staircases that characterize many Underground stations. Some critics argued that Munro succeeded only in reinforcing the chaos and complexity of the subway environment.

Ake Pallarp and Enno Hallek adopted a more direct approach to solving the problem of wayfinding at the Stockholm Metro's Stadion station. Using rainbow-colored wooden arrows and pointing fingers, they created lively signage to direct passengers to the College of Music and Stadium.

Gates can serve important functions in metro stations as well, directing passengers towards a particular station entrance or exit and preventing people from crossing the tracks. But they also can be one of the most unwelcoming elements of the transit environment.

The gates in the Stockholm subway, however, include the ornamental ironwork of Britt-Louise Sundell's gate at the



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Heroic
Journeys
We Make
Everyday

The moment was frozen in time, like a photograph. They watched each other. Eventually he broke the silence. "I'll come and see you," he said. "Fine," she replied. "I'll walk," he continued. "No," she said, "I live two hundred miles away. You'll have to come by car or bus or train." He waited briefly. Then he said, "Everywhere is walking distance, if you have the time."

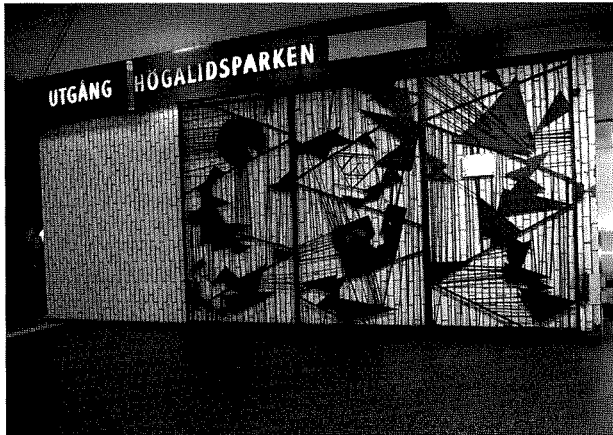
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"Snakes and Ladders," a mural by Nicholas Munro in the London Underground's Oxford Circus station, comments on the complexity of the station layout. Photo by Cynthia Abramson.





Above: "Domino," Wrought iron security gate on platform of Mariatorget Station, Stockholm. Design by Britt-Louise Sundell. Photo by Cynthia Abramson.



Painted wood safety fencing positioned to keep people from crossing tracks at Hallonbergen Station, Stockholm. Design by Elis Eriksson and Gosta Wallmark, with input from local children. Photo by Cynthia Abramson.

Mariatorget station, Sivert Lindblom's sculpted iron platform dividers at Västra Skogen which serve to separate waiting areas for inbound and outbound trains, and the child-like drawings and scribbles of cartoonist Elis Eriksson and Gosta Wallmark on the white wooden fences in the track arches at the Hallonbergen station.

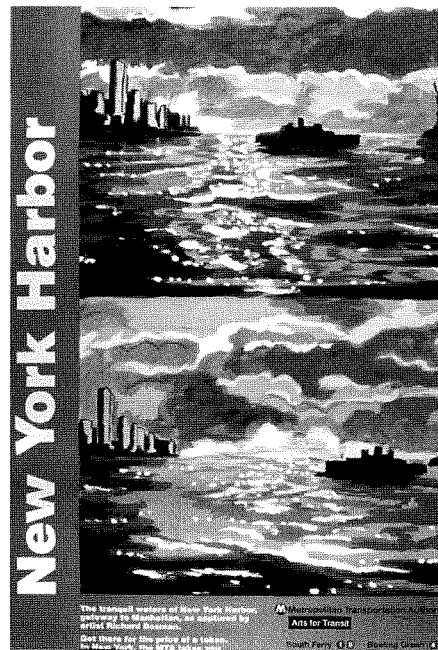
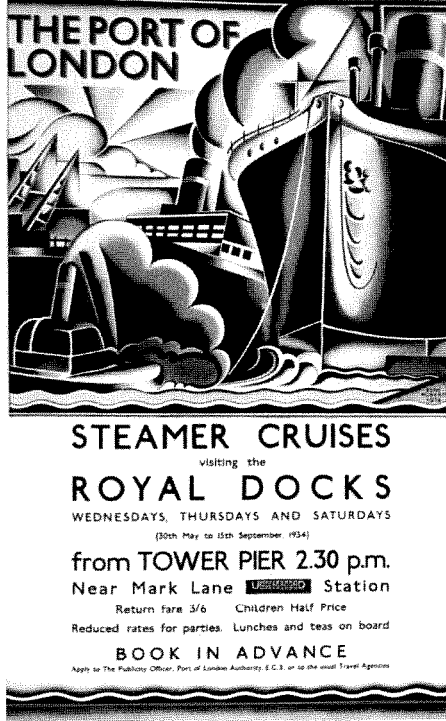
Subway Poster Art Programs

The London Underground is famous for its subway posters. The earliest posters, dating back to the early 1900s, were selected by Frank Pick, publicity director of the London Passenger Transport Board. They depict a myriad of desirable destinations that could be reached by "tube." Their emphasis on the connection between public transport and leisure travel developed as a response to dwindling ridership caused by the growth in popularity of the private car.

The most well-known poster artist was Edward Johnston who, in 1916, created the non-serif lettering and logo design which revolutionized the field of typography. Other noteworthy artists used cubist and abstract idioms to idealize the historic events of the time, stir the patriotism of the British citizenry and expose the public to modern art.

The current poster art program is funded out of London Regional Transport's marketing budget. These funds cover both the design and production of the artwork and artist fees. Between 300 and 400 posters are displayed at a time, depending upon the amount of existing unsold advertising space, throughout the Underground. They stay up for six to eight months, and are produced in runs of 6,000. The original paintings from which the posters are made become the property of the London Underground and are added to their fine art collection.

The use of fine art posters on station platforms has been adopted by other cities, most recently New York. The Metropolitan Transit Authority's (MTA) poster art program began in 1990, also with the goal of encouraging recreational use of public transportation and to celebrate the neighborhoods of New York City. Four artists are commissioned every year and charged with creating a vision of a particular neighborhood. Recent posters have depicted the New York Harbor, Brooklyn's Fulton Mall, the farmer's market at Union Square and various cultural institutions. The original artworks, which range from oil paintings to collage, are added to the MTA's fine art collection.



Posters are hung for approximately three months at a time, and printed in runs of three to four thousand. Like in London's Tube, they are displayed in the unused advertising panels throughout the system's 469 stations. The posters, which enjoy tremendous popularity, are funded out of the MTA's marketing budget, with the Arts-in-Transit program paying all artist commissions and fees. Like London's poster art program, the New York MTA's posters function as both aesthetic enhancement and public relations tool.

Notes

1. Pol Mara, *L'Art Dans le Metro*, (Brussels: Societe Transport Intercommunaux Brusselois, 1981), 201.
2. "Metro and Architecture: Buildings and Public Transport," *Revue of the International Union of Public Transport* 36:4 (January 1988): 276.

(Top) "The Port of London Steamer Cruises," Esmé Roberts (1934); "New York Harbor," Richard Bosman (1993).

(Lower row, from left) "Sir John Soane's Museum," Dan Fern (1987); "Downtown Brooklyn/Fulton Mall," Loren Munk (1992); "El Museo del Barrio," Marina Gutierrez (1992); "Chinatown by Underground," John Bellany (1988).

London posters courtesy London Transport Museum.

New York posters © Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

