

UNDERGROUND TREASURES:

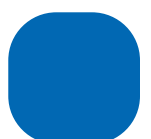
# NEW YORK CITY'S SUBWAY ART

by Catherine Fredman



Going to work...and then home again. It's a day-to-day routine that takes up a lot of our lives. Even if you live only a few minutes from where you work, those minutes add up quickly over the weeks, months and years. No wonder we look for ways to fill the time.

One of the most eclectic, thought-provoking and delightful art collections you've never heard of lies under the streets of New York City. Its more than 700 miles of galleries are open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It showcases works by known artists such as Romare Bearden, Elizabeth Murray, Faith Ringgold and Eric Fischl, as well as unknown artists hoping for exactly this opportunity. Millions of people visit every day without realizing it.



**Catherine Fredman** writes about personal finance, management strategy and adventure travel. She's especially proud of co-authoring best-selling business books with Intel Chairman Andy Grove and Dell Computer CEO Michael Dell, as well as surviving survival school in southwest Utah, where the native New Yorker learned to catch fish with her bare hands and build a fire without matches.

## Underground Treasures: New York City's Subway Art, continued

It's the New York subway system.

Art has been an intrinsic part of the New York subways from their inception. Like many civic leaders of the time, the planners were proponents of the "City Beautiful" movement, which positioned that public art would promote civic virtues among the masses. An 1891 report on the viability of an underground transportation system specifically recommended including "painting and decoration to give brightness and cheerfulness" to subterranean stations.

On October 27, 1904, 150,000 people paid a nickel each and surged through the turnstiles of the newly inaugurated Interborough Rapid Transit Company (today's IRT line). Richly colored mosaic borders and glazed terra cotta plaques designed by George L. Heins and Christopher LaFarge offered a series of images that both captivated the eye and provided a visual reference to the neighborhood above. For example,

**There are always things to notice around us as we commute - if we choose to pay attention.**



Faith Ringgold *Flying Home Harlem Heroes and Heroines (Downtown and Uptown)* Glass mosaic murals

a beaver at Astor Place recalls the source of the Astor family's fur-trading fortune. Robert Fulton's steamship, the *Clermont*, sails across the walls at the Fulton Street station. At Wall Street, there's a depiction of the ancient barrier that gave the street its name. As urban legend has it, the station-specific plaques and color schemes were planned to help illiterate or non-English-speaking immigrants identify the stops. While that may have ended up as the practice - "Get off when you see the eagle" (at Park

Avenue and 33rd Street) - there's no proof that it was part of the original intention. The documented purpose of the artwork was simply to encourage people to explore a magical and magnificent underground world.

It worked - for a while. The subways were the vital arteries that enabled the city to grow. By the 1940s, the turnstiles clocked more than 8 million rides a day. Fast forward some 80 years, and magnificence was in short supply. Graffiti covered station walls and virtually every subway car. Crime was soaring and ridership was plummeting. Something drastic had to be done.

The largest public transportation rebuilding effort in national history began to pump more than \$30 billion into turning around the subway system. A tiny percentage of that money - on average, one percent of the construction



Grosvenor House Students & Nitzza Tufino  
*Westside Views* - 1989 Glazed ceramic tiles

## Underground Treasures: New York City's Subway Art, continued

For people who take the subway in New York City, going to work can be like going to a gallery.

budget for every station undergoing rehabilitation - was set aside for original artwork, to be chosen and administered by the newly formed Arts for Transit program.

Sandra Bloodworth, the director of Arts for Transit, recalls a colleague criticizing the program, complaining, "I've got the body on a gurney, and you're worried about its hair color."

On the contrary, Bloodworth replied. "You've got the body on a gurney, and I'm worried about its soul." Today, as the subway system celebrates its 100th anniversary and Arts for Transit approaches its 20th, it's flourishing as never before, with nearly 140 works of public art - and counting - scattered throughout the 722-mile system. While today's subway art shares the original purpose of brightening dim stations, Arts for Transit has a much greater goal.

"The art should reflect its ridership," says Bloodworth. "If you ride the subway, you see such diversity in the riders, and if you go to all the stations, you will see that diversity reflected in the art."

The range is stunning. There's *Life Underground* by Tom Otterness, 140 humorous bronze sculptures "scattered in little surprises," as Otterness says, throughout the 14th Street IND station. They include a couple of fare beaters sneaking under a barrier and a cop ready to catch them on the other side, someone sitting on a bench perpetually waiting for a train, and - in a nod to another enduring urban legend - a grinning alligator emerging from a sewer to snag an unwary rider.

There's Faith Ringgold's *Flying Home*, a mural of Harlem's historic heroes and heroine floating like angels over local landmarks like the Apollo Theater at the 125th Street stop for the 2 and 3 express. There's a multi-media extravaganza spread over two floors and a staircase at the stop for the American Museum of Natural History. It starts with a cell, evolves through dinosaurs and a bas relief coral reef, and from there spreads into an imagination of the cosmos.

"It's fun to run my hands over it," says Deborah Brown of *Platform Diving*, her whimsical mosaic mural of whales and dolphins swimming through a subway tunnel at Houston Street.

Glass mosaic tiles have mostly replaced ceramic as an artistic medium. Their colors are both deeper and brighter, and the glimmering qualities of the



Tom Otterness *Untitled* - 2000 Cast Bronze

## Underground Treasures: New York City's Subway Art, continued

glass are a particular plus in dreary stations. "You get your money's worth," explains Bloodworth. "It's durable. You get impact. And it's indestructible - pretty much."

Installing art in the stations does more than just decorate them. Bloodworth finds that the presence of art actually decreases the amount of graffiti. "When you include art, people take care of things," she finds. Even when the walls are defaced, she says, "The artwork is respected."

Bloodworth considers the Arts for Transit program "one of the biggest miracles that happened in the city." When it started, the city was inching back from the brink of bankruptcy. Today, New York is rebounding from the tragedy of September 11th. Art, Bloodworth believes, continues to salve and save the city's soul.

"I really felt - and I still feel - as people talked about the city turning around, it happened because the subway had shown that it could be reborn. It set the psychological mindset for New York. If you could do it in the subway, you could do it anywhere."

Arts for Transit publishes *Art en Route*, a guide to art in the MTA network. To request a copy and get information about art in the New York City subway, go to [www.mta.info/mta/aft/](http://www.mta.info/mta/aft/).



Jane Greengold *Wings for the IRT* - 1995  
Ceramic and bronze relief sculptures



Deborah Brown *Platform Diving* - 1994 Glass mosaic murals

### Space Can Stimulate Inspiration at Work

Old thinking: you work at work, you rejuvenate away from work.

New thinking: high-performing workers need to release stress, rejuvenate and re-energize at work. One of the six planning principles of a high-performance work environment that have been identified by Steelcase is the use of space to inspire people so that they can do their most effective work.

Of course, people get inspired in different ways -- some through quiet and solitude, others by interactive stimulation through exercise and play. Whatever the type, spaces designed with inspiration in mind can help heighten people's senses, their awareness and their mental processes.

Adding art to the workspace is one way to make the space more inspiring. Depending on what you select, art can be stimulating or help establish tranquility.

For more in-depth information on how to use space to stimulate inspiration or to learn more about the planning principles that enable an effective workplace, see the Steelcase research papers at [steelcase.com](http://steelcase.com) or contact your local Steelcase representative.

## Getting There

*We asked a few people in different cities to tell us about what getting to and from work is like for them.*

### **Rose Allison**

Environmental Protection Agency  
Washington, DC

I take the Washington Metro to work. My line, the red line, is the most used line in the system and is above ground where I live.

I go from Silver Spring, M.D., just outside the District of Columbia, to downtown Washington where my office is.

On the way to Union Station (where we go below ground), I see a Civil War fort, Fort Totten. Then there's the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception near Catholic University and the Brentwood Post Office where the Anthrax exposures took place in the fall of 2001.

My ride takes about 30 minutes. I exit at Metro Center, a big transfer station, and walk to my building between Pennsylvania and Constitution Avenues. To my left is a view of the Capitol Building and to my right is a view of the Treasury Building. Although you can't see it because the street jogs, the White House is kind of behind the Treasury. Once I cross Pennsylvania, there's the Old Post Office Building with its clock tower, where I check the time.

Working in Washington, I'm surrounded by places tourists come especially to see, and every so often I'm struck with the realization of how much power and history is centered here. But most days, I'm pretty much like commuters in other places, caught up in the routine of just getting to work.

### **Michael Van Meter**

Portfolio Management Consultant  
Chicago, Ill.

For 32 years, I lived in Iowa City and commuted by car to Cedar Rapids, through the rolling, rural countryside of eastern Iowa, a distance of 23 miles each way through a relatively empty landscape that makes you think about Grant Wood - and not much more.

To fill the time, I became an NPR junkie. I had a front-row seat for watching the seasons change. I tended to drive fast. I had two accidents with deer. That's about it.

In July 2004, I moved to the near north side of Chicago, and most days now I walk to my office. It's 2.2 miles, round trip. It takes about 23 minutes each way.

A big part of the enjoyment for me is that I can vary my route. If I want to see big-city, dramatic skyline views, I walk down Lakeshore Drive, past the Drake Hotel, the Palmolive Building, the Hancock Tower. If instead I head south down Dearborn, I go through an old residential neighborhood of brownstones. Or I can walk another block west and head south on Clark, which has a more commercial feel.

I make my decision about which route to take impulsively, at the very last minute when I walk out the door.

I have up to four Starbucks to choose from, depending on which route I take - but I usually get coffee only once or twice a week. For me, the walk is a mostly visual thing - I typically don't want to do or think about other things. Maybe eventually the experience will get old, but for now I'm still totally captivated by it. I sometimes tell people that I feel like I've been rewarded for something, but I don't know what it is. That's not a bad way to feel every day.

### **Charlie Bosetti**

Steelcase Regional Sales Director  
Southern California

There's not much to love about driving the freeways in and around Los Angeles, but Charlie Bosetti loves going to work at Steelcase's new, ocean-view four-story showroom in Santa Monica.

The new Steelcase WorkLife Center was created to re-establish Steelcase's presence in the greater Southern California market. Steelcase had a WorkLife Center in Tustin, Calif., about 40 miles south of LA, when its manufacturing plant was there. But when the factory moved to a new state-of-the-art facility in City of Industry about 18 months ago, the decision was made to relocate the showroom and sales offices to another location.

"We did an exhaustive analysis of market potential, growth patterns and the needs of our critical audiences. It became very clear that Los Angeles County in general, and Santa Monica specifically, was where we needed to be," Charlie says.

Designed through a partnership between Steelcase designers and Shimoda Design Group of Los Angeles, the space is located adjacent to the popular Third Street Promenade. The façade was designed with a seamless glass storefront inspired by the retail-oriented pedestrian community.



Steelcase WorkLife Center  
Santa Monica, California