Art Underground: A First Look at the Second Avenue Subway

By RANDY KENNEDY DEC. 19, 2016

When a city has been waiting for a badly needed new subway line since 1929, public art is probably far down the list of expectations, well behind accommodations like a) working trains, b) lights and c) some means of entrance and egress.

But when commuters descend into the new Second Avenue subway’s four stations, at 96th, 86th, 72nd and 63rd Streets, now set for a New Year’s Day opening — or perhaps a little later if things don’t go as planned — they will find one of the most ambitious contemporary art projects that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority has ever undertaken. The agency’s art department, M.T.A. Arts & Design, founded and first funded in 1985, is rarely — in a salmagundi system 112 years old — presented with a brand-new, blank canvas.

But lately, with the opening of the superstation at Fulton Street downtown and the extension of the No. 7 line to a new terminus on West 34th Street, the subway’s art thinkers have been able to participate almost from the beginning in incorporating installations in tile work by leading artists into stations’ designs. If the effort doesn’t always result in stations that look like artworks themselves, as some of the best stations in Europe and Asia do, it has nonetheless put the aesthetic front and center again in a way that evokes the ambition of the city’s first subway stations in 1904, with their mosaics, faience
and amethyst-glass skylights.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, who has taken an unusually personal role in the Second Avenue subway’s final push toward opening, casts the art in historical terms, as a clarion call for government to once again be a builder of inspiring public amenities and infrastructure. “At some point government adopted an attitude that its job was to build things that were functional but unattractive and unappealing,” Mr. Cuomo said in a statement to The New York Times. “But that’s not how it has always been, and it’s not how it should be. With every public works project, I believe there is an opportunity to elevate the everyday, to build a public space where community can gather and where culture and shared civic values are celebrated.” At a news conference on Monday at the Museum of Modern Art, he recalled an era of infrastructure development under Nelson A. Rockefeller and Robert Moses. “This is just the beginning of a new period of rebirth,” he said.

What follows is the first subterranean tour by a reporter of the new subway’s art, created at a cost to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority of $4.5 million, out of an overall budget of $4.45 billion. Four artists were chosen beginning in 2009, from a pool of more than 300 high-profile applicants, to treat the stations as their very own and make them into individual installations.
Jean Shin, perhaps the least known of the artists chosen, often makes pieces from castoff objects that she accumulates and puts together until they achieve a kind of melancholy monumentality and civic weight.

Ms. Shin’s 63rd Street station art includes a geometric image of elevated girders that were dismantled in the 1940s and 1950s.

Credit George Etheredge for The New York Times
For her installation, “Elevated,” she dived into the past – specifically the past that was supposed to bequeath New York the Second Avenue subway generations ago, and that led her to the idea of illustrating the demolition of the Second Avenue and Third Avenue elevated lines in the 1940s and 1950s.

She dug through archives at the New York Transit Museum in Brooklyn and at the New-York Historical Society and used photographs she found to create what feel like deeply resonant historical-museum dioramas in mosaic and glass, based on images of everyday riders and pedestrians from the 1920s through the 1940s, along with geometric shots of elevated girders being dismantled.

For the 63rd Street station, Jean Shin used archival photographs of the Second Avenue and Third Avenue elevated trains and their passengers to create compositions in ceramic tile, glass mosaic and laminated glass.

“‘We’re such a youth culture,’” said Ms. Shin, who works in New York. “‘I think it’s nice to have people of the past among us.’” She added: “I was also imagining New Yorkers way back then feeling, ‘Hey, we’re finally going to get the Second Avenue subway!’”