New York City’s Long-Awaited Second Avenue Subway Is Packed With Public Art
The city’s four newest subway stations are covered in colorful mosaics

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SMITHSONIAN.COM
DECEMBER 28, 2016

For nearly a century, New York City’s Second Avenue subway line has been the butt of all kinds of jokes thanks to the decades spent in development. Against all odds, however, it appears that the newest addition to the iconic mass transit system will finally open in just a few days. But that’s not the only noteworthy
thing about the city’s newest line: the first phase of the Second Avenue Subway also features some of the city’s freshest (and largest) public art installations.

It may sometimes get overlooked in the hustle and bustle of the daily commute, but New York City’s subway stations are packed with art. Though the stations have become home to all sorts of artworks over the years, like mosaics of peering eyes at Chambers Street, or the disarmingly cute bronze sculptures that dot the 14th Street A/C/E stop, according to the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), subway art has been a part of the transit system’s lifeblood since its earliest days.

“The founders of the New York City subway believed that every design element in the system should show respect for our customers and enhance the experience of travel,” the MTA writes on its website. “Language was added to contracts that required the highest quality materials and craftsmanship. This led to the extensive use of ceramic tile, terra cotta and mosaics as decorative elements.”

Over the years, this transitioned into new artworks lining the walls of the city’s subway stations, with more than 300 pieces of public art included in the subway’s collection. And with artworks by Chuck Close, Vik Muniz, Sarah Sze and Jean Shin, the first four stations of the Second Avenue subway will be no exception, Untapped Cities reports.

"The Second Avenue subway provides New Yorkers with a museum underground and honors our legacy of building engineering marvels that elevate the human experience," New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said in a recent presentation, Jen Chung reports for Gothamist. "Public works projects are not just about function—they’re an expression of who we are and what we believe. Any child who has never walked into a museum or an art gallery can walk the streets of New York and be exposed to art and education simply by being a New Yorker. That is where we came from and that is what makes New York special."

Each of these four artists were selected years ago, and each were given one of the four new stations to use as a canvas. At the 96th Street station, Sze’s “Blueprint for a Landscape” unfolds as one rides the escalator down, immersing commuters in abstract, blueprint-like drawings, Randy Kennedy writes for the New York Times. The 86th Street station is dominated by 12 massive mosaic portraits by
Close, which includes composer Philip Glass and artists Kara Walker and Zhang Huan. The tiled walls of the 72nd Street Station, meanwhile, are adorned with three-dozen life-sized mosaic portraits of everyday New Yorkers for Muniz’s “Perfect Strangers,” which notably includes one of the city’s only instances of a public artwork highlighting a gay couple. Last but not least, Shin’s installation at the 63rd Street station, “Elevated,” highlights New York City’s past by covering the walls in geometric patterns reminiscent of the girders the city is built on, as well as mosaic portraits of people based on historic photographs from the New York Transit Museum’s archives.

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

With such vibrant art decorating the city’s newest subway stations, the morning commute will be a little bit brighter and easier when the inaugural Second Avenue Subway ride departs on December 31.