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Subway glories: why we need public art

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Photo: Vanessa Hua

Public art installations in the Second Avenue Subway in New York

As commuters rushed by, I tried not to get in their way. In between meetings in New York last week, I decided to visit the Second Avenue subway, which opened with fanfare on New Year's Eve. I walked slowly along the dazzling

mosaics and tiles in each station, snapping photos of the \$4.5 million public art installation, the largest in the state's history.

The subway is the first phase of an expansion proposed almost a century ago, and the delays of the troubled infrastructure project became a long running joke. At the 63rd Street Station, I marveled at Jean Shin's "Elevated" mosaics that draw upon archival photos to pay homage to the since-demolished elevated tracks at that location. I loved the trio of women in black, gray and white tile, reading newspapers. Even in this era of smartphones and tablets, newspapers carry on.

Vik Muniz's "Perfect Strangers" are life-size mosaic portraits, brilliant and bursting with life, who look as if they could step off the walls to join us on the subway train: a father with a bunch of balloons passing one to his daughter, a laborer loaded down with his tools, an African American man peering over his book, a businessman in a turban, a police officer with a Popsicle. One of my favorites is a South Asian woman in a gold-and-burgundy sari, checking her phone — just like everyone else hurrying by.

Many passing through the station were checking their phones, and their headphones and earbuds sealed them off from their surroundings. It reminded me of the social experiment conducted by the Washington Post for a Pulitzer Prize-winning story: Famed violinist Joshua Bell played for change in the Metro during rush hour. Of the 1,070 commuters who went by, only 27 stopped to listen. Everyone else had been in a hurry, lost in their thoughts.

Subway riders might have been dazzled when the stations opened, and what they had once marveled at was now routine, a part of the scenery. But oh, what scenery! At the 86th Street Station, Chuck Close's dozen 9-foot-tall "Subway Portraits" gaze out at us, including images of artist Kara Walker and musician Lou Reed. At 96th Street, Sarah Sze's porcelain tile "Blueprint for a

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Landscape” captures the feeling of motion, the gusts of wind that blow up and down the subway platform.

Even if most commuters on most days didn't pay much attention to the mosaics, I still deeply believe it matters — to all of us encountering the museum-quality installations for the first time, and for all those passing by on their umpteenth trip on the line, who might be caught up in worries and their hopes and their heartaches until the glitter of the mosaic catches their eye, a glitter that pulls them into the present moment, a glitter that might help them consider lives outside their own. Closer to home, I'm excited to see the public art installations planned for the Central Subway in San Francisco, slated to open in 2019.

Such art feels like a gift. Though in truth, isn't such art, paid for out of public funds, our due?

President Trump wanted to eliminate the National Endowment of the Arts, but thankfully, Congress recently approved a spending bill to fund the agency another year, boosting its \$148 million annual budget by nearly \$2 million, to pay for community arts programs and public art — all of which help foster community and culture, preserve heritage and provide educational opportunities.

The stations have stayed bright and clean, with nary a trace of the grit and funk found elsewhere. A friend who lives in New York and I agreed — the extension reminded us of the orderly, well-maintained subways in other countries. Later on my trip, I rode older sections of the subway, dank and dirty and yet with a charm all its own, filled with masses of people on the go, the kind of place where a rat could go viral on the Internet after it dragged a slice of pizza down a flight of stairs. The pizza rat symbolized the determination, the moxie it takes to succeed in New York.

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The last time I was in New York, the day after the presidential election, the mood in the city was dark and fearful. Six months later, on a beautiful spring day, people were gathering to protest Trump's first trip to his hometown since he became president, in a resistance that has persisted and grown.

At the Second Avenue Subway, the motto of America, *e pluribus unum* — “out of many, one” — and of New York, *excelsior* — “ever upward” — marked beams above the platform. Mottos we must hold onto now and in the future.