

04/26/2007

When the subway station was the art

By WAYNE MYERS, Dispatch Arts Editor

NEW YORK - After nearly 103 years, the George Lewis Heins-Christopher Grant La Farge-designed City Hall station is still the showpiece of the New York City subway system.

City Hall station is virtually a frozen tableau of what it looked like when it opened on Oct. 27, 1904, as the southern terminus of Manhattan's original 28-station subway line that stretched north to 145th Street in Harlem. The station has been closed to passenger traffic since Jan. 1, 1946, when necessary train platform upgrades were made impractical by the more-accommodating nearby 1904 Brooklyn Bridge station with its Grueby Faience Co.-made salmon-colored double-fired faience tiles.

Boasting a network of Guastavino tile-vaulted ceilings, cut amethyst glass-skylights and tulip-motif electroliers that light the way across its severely arcing train platform, City Hall station is a Beaux-Arts beauty of form and function that is counted among the world's most elegant subway stations, which include the Moscow subway (its stations are often called "the people's palaces") stations Prospekt Mira, characterized by its exquisite chandeliers, and Novoslobodskaya, opened in 1952, which possesses an awesome cluster of stained-glass windows.

The station was the capstone of Heins & La Farge's view of the subway as "a place worthy of attractive design-even beauty," a point well made in the excellent exhibition now at the New York Transit Museum Gallery Annex at Grand Central Terminal, "Architects of the New York City Subway, Part I: Heins & LaFarge and the Tradition of Great Public Works." (The second part, "Squire Vickers and the Subway's Modern Age," will open July 30 and run through Oct. 28.)

It's another stunner from this sliver of a gallery.

Heins & La Farge's commissions included the six original heavily-ornamented, wildlife-motif buildings constructed from 1899 to 1909 that make up Astor Court at the Bronx Zoo. The zoo's design elements, like the glazed pastel terra cotta ceramic tiles that line the lion cages in the Lion House, recall Heins & La Farge's use of the mass-produced tiles in the subway stations they designed for the Interborough Rapid Transit Company between 1901 and 1908. The Lion House tiles, two of which are on display in the exhibition, were covered over during a 1930's renovation. They resurfaced during the zoo's current renovation.

In Heins & La Farge-designed subway stations, the most utilitarian of objects-such as grates, weep hole covers, ticket booth grilles and sconces-were imbued with artistic flair, extending the philosophy manifest at City Hall station to the architects' more modest subway stations.

But whether ornate or Spartan, the stations had one thing in common: They were not filled with art; they were the art.

On display in the New York Transit Museum's exhibition is an array of subway artifacts, including a plaque from the 1908 Hoyt Street Station, a beautiful azure blue hunk of glazed terra cotta, a mint green plaque from Manhattan's 1904 Worth Street Station, which closed on Sept. 1, 1962, a cast-iron elevated station Beaux-Arts lamppost designed specifically for elevated IRT stations in northern Manhattan and the Bronx, and a particularly smart piece, the Atlantic Terra Cotta Company-made 137th Street/City College station plaque. This last plaque consists of two pieces-the mass-produced cornucopia-design base, also used at the 86th Street, 145th Street and 157th Street stations, and the "137th Street" piece inserted into the base.

There's also a Columbia blue acanthus leaf from the 116th Street/Columbia University station, where Michelle Greene's welded steel "Railrider's Throne" was installed as part of the Metropolitan Transit Authority's Arts for Transit program on the downtown platform along the 1 Line in 1991.

But the exhibit, from one viewpoint, may also be seen as an unintended elegy for historic New York City subway stations when looking at it in the context of inroads made by the Arts for Transit program.

Arts for Transit, which has filled New York City's subway stations with scads of public art, celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2005 with the exhibit "Along the Way: MTA Arts for Transit," which ran at the UBS Gallery in midtown Manhattan from June 30 to Sept. 9, 2005. (The Sandra Bloodworth-William Ayres authored book "Along the Way: MTA Arts for Transit" was published in November 2006.)

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The exhibition surveyed 183 completed or planned contemporary artwork installations and architectural works-like Robert Hickman's elegant barreled canopy for the Upper West Side's 72nd Street station executed in 2002-scattered among the MTA's New York City Transit's 468 subway stations, Metro-North Railroad and Long Island Railroad stations.

Some of the artwork, like Roy Lichtenstein's 2002 futuristic "Times Square Mural," is singular.

Mosaics include Liliana Porter's 1994 "Alice in Wonderland"-themed "The Way Out" at the 50th Street station on the 1 Line and Nancy Spero's 2000 "Artemis, Acrobats, Divas and Dancers" at 66th Street/Lincoln Center. The latter is consistent with the Heins & La Farge use of plaques to depict historic scenes linked to New York's neighborhoods, like the Grueby Faience Co. beaver plaques at Astor Place, emblematic of the fur trade that helped make John Jacob Astor's fortune.

Among the more whimsical of the artwork is Tom Otterness's sculpture "Life Underground," which displays an alligator emerging from a manhole to snatch a hapless child, at the 14th Street/8th Avenue station.

More thrilling work like Alfred Ciebal's 1998 oil-on-canvas "The Subway," depicting a narrow subway station platform washed in blue with riders warily peering down the tunnel watching for the headlamps of an approaching train, and Jane Dickson's steamy "Times Square" (1991-1992) has come out of Art for Transit's poster division.

"Old and new happily coexist," states the "Along the Way: MTA Arts for Transit" exhibition's companion brochure.

But do they?

In late 2002, a clash over planned Arts for Transit artwork installations at the Heins&La Farge-designed 103rd Street, 110th Street/Cathedral Parkway and 116th Street/Columbia University stations as Columbia University readied for its 250th anniversary that would coincide with the New York subway's centennial on Oct. 27, 2004 erupted.

According to Sandra Bloodworth, Arts for Transit's director since 1996, it was the first and only time since its inception in 1985 that Arts for Transit met community resistance.

The key factor in the dispute was that the 110th Street and 116 Street stations are city landmarks, having attained that status in 1979.

Both stations and the 103rd Street station, which does not have landmark status, fell under the jurisdiction of Community Board 7. Some board members perceived Arts for Transit's plans for the landmark stations as a threat to their historical character, especially their tile work, largely untouched since 1904.

"This board is the only public body that can defend the integrity of [the 103rd Street station's] nearly 100-year-old interior, Kate Wood of Landmark West!, a non-profit community group that works to preserve the Upper West Side, was quoted as saying in a Feb. 6, 2003 Columbia Spectator article.

The Morningside Heights Historic District Committee's Carolyn Kent was quoted in the same article as saying, "When you have an interior system designed by men of such genius, it would certainly be a mistake to attack their remaining intact work."

Speaking on the project's behalf was John Tauranac, author of several books on New York architecture, including "Manhattan Block by Block: A Street Atlas."

In the end, the board voted to support planned renovations at the three stations, but prohibited installation of new artwork.

Some celebrated the outcome as an affirmation of Heins and La Farge's vision.

Bloodworth called the episode "a most unfortunate situation," particularly since Arts for Transit led the preservation effort of historic mosaics in the New York City transit system. "There would be no mosaics if it wasn't for the program," she said.

"It was preservation gone amok," she said. "This was the interpretation of a very few, very vocal people."

Bloodworth insisted Arts for Transit would never install artwork where the community didn't want it. "The art is for the people," she said.

But she felt that had more community members had the chance to speak, the outcome at least at the 103rd Street station would have been different.

"A great compromise would have been to do it at a station [103rd Street] that was not landmarked," she said. "The only thing impacted would have been tiles that were going to be replaced anyway."

The installation at 103rd Street would not have clashed with the station's design and would have celebrated the history of the IRT as well as its architectural history, Bloodworth said.

Intended for the station, she said, was a complex yet subtle timeline consisting of the original IRT map with tiny mosaics at each station

showing 1904 and 2004 above-ground views of the stations. The timeline would have run through the new part of the station's walls.

"We would never alter a station's historic integrity," Bloodworth said. "We're the ones that saved these stations' historic integrity. That's our mantra."

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"Architects of the New York City Subway, Part I: Heins & LaFarge and the Tradition of Great Public Works." Through July 8 at the New York Transit Museum Gallery Annex at Grand Central Terminal.

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