

## Putting the art in BART

### Mosaics, murals and steel cows brighten up stations from SFO to Orinda

Carolyn Jones, Special to The Chronicle  
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For the latest in fine art, Bay Area patrons can visit a pantheon of cutting-edge venues: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Palace of Legion of Honor, MacArthur BART.

Uh, BART? Oh yes. There are steel cows in Berkeley, colorful tile mosaics at 16th Street and a giant shimmering sculpture at San Francisco International Airport, among others.

The 30-year-old transit agency has, in the past three years, undergone a public art renaissance, commissioning nine pieces for its stations and greenways, with four more on the way at SFO.

"The art makes the stations more livable, more integrated into the community. It gives them a human scale," said Laura Timothy, a senior planner at BART who heads the Art at BART project. "Basically, it makes it a better place to walk around."

The nine projects are at MacArthur, West Oakland and 12th Street in Oakland;

the Ohlone Greenway beneath the elevated tracks in Berkeley; Embarcadero and 16th Street (three projects) in San Francisco; and a traveling exhibition commemorating the Americans with Disabilities Act, which will eventually become a permanent installation at the Ashby station.

The artworks at the SFO stations include artist Ned Kahn's 6-foot-tall circular stainless steel piece made of 1-inch square disks attached to pins. The disks rotate when hit by a breeze, and so the whole sculpture will shimmer every time trains enter and leave the station.

That piece and the others in the SFO extension stations were funded with \$1.5 million from the federal government and other sources.

"These projects have a huge value," said San Francisco metal sculptor Amy Blackstone, who created four steel cows for the Ohlone Greenway. "They help make people feel happy and more connected to their communities. They just make for a healthier environment altogether."

BART's initial foray into the art world came in the late 1960s and early '70s, when the stations opened. BART organized a panel of art professionals to commission pieces for almost all the original stations. Over the years, pieces were added on a case-by-case basis, such as the Fire Wall at Rockridge and a tile mosaic at Fruitvale.

But when the late '90s boom added to BART's coffers, its board decided to revive the art program. Putting \$250,000 into the project over two years, Art at BART was able to team with other agencies, such as the City of Oakland and the Ohlone Greenway Group, to commission a slew of sculptures, murals, mosaics and other artworks for BART stations.

Most of the artists who contributed were veterans of the public-art process,

so they were prepared for the bureaucracy and limitations that go with the job. They knew, for example, that negotiations could take years and their work would have to be approved by numerous boards - few members of which have any art knowledge.

They also knew their options for materials were somewhat limited - anything they used would have to be easy to scrub off graffiti, be able to withstand weather conditions and be relatively affordable. That's why all the new pieces are made of paint, steel or tile.

"The days are gone of horses on pedestals with a patina from 300 years of sea air and bird stuff," said Diana Pumpelly Bates, a San Jose sculptor who created three murals and a steel panel for the 12th Street station.

San Francisco artist Mark Adams has never used the MacArthur BART station. But the two will forever be linked.

Adams, known for his colorful tapestries, stained glass, paintings and mosaics, has created two projects for the busy Oakland transfer station. The first one, commissioned in 1968, was a tile mosaic on the wall above the stairwell. His second piece, a pair of enormous, abstract murals, will be finished within the next few weeks.

"I didn't realize how many people saw that first piece I did there," Adams said. "Occasionally someone will mention to me that they saw it, and I'm always amazed, especially after all these years."

Alas, his mosaic is no more. Two years ago, someone from BART called Adams to tell him the mosaic would have to be removed to make way for an elevator.

So Adams returned to the station for the first time since it went up to take a look at his piece.

"I must say I was quite impressed with how well it stood up," he said. "It was just absolutely perfect, after all those years. But I couldn't say it was so worthwhile that it precluded an elevator. My wife is

handicapped, so I know exactly what that's like."

It was too expensive to move the mosaic, so he offered to create another one. But he and BART couldn't agree on a price until an art agent intervened and worked out a deal: Adams would design and paint murals on two other walls at the station, and BART would provide the paint and two painters to help with the work, plus a stipend for Adams.

"I'm not one to intellectualize my work. I just want to do something that makes people feel good and a little surprised, give them a charge on their way to work. Hopefully it'll be better than coffee," he said with a laugh.

Much of the new BART art takes its inspiration from the thousands of commuters who pour in and out of the stations day after day.

Oakland's 12th Street station recently came alive with three murals and a 4, 500-pound, 5-foot stainless steel panel, all by San Jose's Bates. The murals, each adorning a separate entrance to the busy downtown station, are titled "Coming and Going from Sunup to Sundown."

The metal panel, which was installed two weeks ago in front of De Lauer's news stand on Broadway, is called "Their Eyes Were Watching God," from the Zora Neale Hurston novel. It features a central area adorned with eyes glancing expectantly in different directions, surrounded by a representation of the Oakland hills.

Bates said: "It's supposed to suggest that something is about to happen, something is about to be born, and you never know what you're going to get."

Part of the appeal for artists to create public artworks is to have their work be viewed by millions. But there are other benefits.

BART patrons at San Francisco's 16th Street station are greeted by a 40-foot-tall tile mosaic carrying a message from 250 neighborhood kids, their parents and other community members: Respect.

The piece, titled "Youth Rights," was sponsored and paid for by BART and St.

John's Education Thresholds Center, a tutoring and after-school program in the Mission. High school students from the center, with the help of lead artist Gary Carlos and Urban Institute director Ali Vieira, made the tiles by hand, broke and cut them into shapes, fired and painted them, then mortared and grouted the piece. The process took more than seven months.

The mosaic has four themes: community, opportunity, power and rights and respect. Symbols such as stars, people, birds and keys tie the themes into a single vision.

In the two years since it was unveiled, the piece has never been vandalized.

Those who worked on it still stop by to show it off to friends, said Vieira.

"The kids are really proud of it," she said. "It's a permanent, public piece of work that will have lasting impact. And it was really fun to make."

The project, she said, brightens up one of the busiest and highest-profile spots in the neighborhood.

"It's a constant reminder of the positive things youth in this neighborhood are doing. They're not just all hoodlums," she said. "A lot of good has come from this - you don't realize how much impact something like this has, but it really can make a difference."

In Contra Costa County, San Francisco artist Win Ng designed and executed a 100-by-16-foot mural in paint and plaster stretching along one wall of the concourse level at the Orinda station. The abstract geometric design was done in gray and ocher, and completed in the early 1970s.

The El Cerrito Plaza and El Cerrito Del Norte stations were awarded national design honors by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Alfonso Pardinias created and executed longitudinal glass wall mosaics, which are located on the station walls between the concourse and platform levels.

In Lafayette, three bright, multicolored glass mosaic columns depicting trees, birds and animals designed by Berkeley artist Helen Webber bring out a spirited and lively mood throughout the station. Alfonso Pardinias rendered the mosaic work.

And the Richmond station sports a design by William Mitchell of England, who created the deep-relief sculpture of fiberglass and natural materials located on the concourse level. Contrasting orange and earth-tone colors enriching intricate geometric shapes imparts an Aztec accent to the station.

If you're very quiet, you can almost hear the mooing in North Berkeley. That is, in the three-minute intervals between BART trains. Four steel cows, created by Blackstone, graze peacefully beneath shade trees on the Ohlone Greenway, a stretch of grass and gardens beneath the elevated BART tracks between Gilman and Peralta streets. They fit in so well that neighbors have outfitted them with cowbells and ribbons.

The cows, installed in August, are made of three-eighths-inch steel, which over time will rust. Three are two-dimensional, and one is turned at an angle to seem three-dimensional. They have names - Elsie, Ferdinand, Laxmi and Kali. The latter two names were given by the Nepalese engineers who helped install them.

"Public art produces joy, a feeling of pride - it says that beauty matters, we matter," Blackstone said. "And for BART, it shows that they're not just some huge bureaucracy. These are real people, and they care about people's spirits."

## Public works

Here is a partial list of the artwork at BART stations.

### MacArthur, Oakland

San Franciscan Mark Adams is creating a pair of red-orange-blue-and-black murals covering huge portions of two walls just outside the station entry.

### 12th Street, Oakland

San Jose sculptor Diana Pumpelly Bates created three murals and a 4,500- pound, 5-foot stainless steel panel. The murals are titled "Coming and Going from Sunup to Sundown." The metal panel in front of the De Lauer newsstand on Broadway is called "Their Eyes Were Watching God," from the Zora Neale Hurston novel.

### Embarcadero Station

"Wall Canyon" by Berkeley artist Steven de Staebler dominates the west end of the station. The 37-foot sculpture rises piece-by-piece from the train platform to the concourse. Also on display is a granite relief of the late Tallie Maule, chief architect for BART consulting engineers, by architect William Cullen, who donated the piece; "Nomex," Berkeley artist Barbara Shawcroft's woven rope sculpture made of the special nonflammable plastic; a freestanding sculpture by Berkeley artist Doug Heine called MJKK; and "Spin," a work by Robert Ellison that serves as industrial art security panels on the bike station.

The following stations are part of the BART extension to San Francisco International Airport. The artworks were funded by federal money. The art will be unveiled in early 2003:

### South San Francisco

Jeff Northam of Pescadero and Rufus Seder of Boston designed 16 "animated" murals made up of old photos of the area that are layered on glass panels.

### San Bruno

Gordon Huether and Christine Stone, both of Napa, created two stained glass windows for the station.

### San Francisco International Airport

"Wind Portal," a 6-foot-tall circular stainless steel piece made of 1-inch squares attached to pins, was created by Sebastopol sculptor Ned Kahn. The installation shimmers as trains enter and leave the station.

- Source: BART

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