



## Brilliant, Bright, and Buried Deep

The creativity of the city extends far beyond and below where you'd normally expect it - including in the cavernous depths of the New York City subway system. BY SEANAN FORBES

One of New York's most vibrant art scenes exists in the last place most of us think of when we think of culture: hundreds of feet underground, along the tunnels and tiled walls of the city's subway stations. Subway line by subway line, tile by tile, and railing by railing, our subway system makes up one of the world's most sprawling and vibrant art galleries. Sculptures, mosaics, portraits, murals - wherever you start, there's art along the way. Here's where to view New York's finest.

### 81st Street and Central Park West (B and C)

#### For Want of a Nail (2000)

Collaboration between the American Museum of Natural History ([amnh.org](http://amnh.org)) and MTA Arts in Transit

At the south end of the platform, the area by the stairwell is a blue-toned seascape where three-dimensional ceramic fish swim behind banisters and along walls. By the northern staircase, tiles large and small come in rich shades of gold, brown and orange, and on both levels, mosaic creatures from lizards to owls perch on station signs and fly above benches. Along the southbound platform, brass plaques of fossils look so real that it's almost tempting to take a chisel to the wall.

**Insider knowledge:** The still existing species portrayed in the tiles are represented in color; the extinct ones are in gray.

### Delancey Street/Essex Street (F, M, J and Z)

#### Shad Crossing and Delancey Orchard (2004)

Ming Fay ([mingfay.com](http://mingfay.com))

Ming Fay created watercolor paintings at the Delancey/Essex station that were later morphed into glass mosaic murals. "Shad Crossing" transforms staircases and walls into underwater scenes with shad (a form of herring)

that are larger than men. When you change platforms, the scenery changes again, this time from water into a cherry orchard.

**Insider knowledge:** Orchard Street marks the spot where the actual cherry orchard seen in the mosaic used to stand.

### 59th Street and Lexington Avenue (4, 5, 6, N, R, W)

#### Blooming (1996)

Elizabeth Murray

([artcyclopedia.com/artists/murray\\_elizabeth.html](http://artcyclopedia.com/artists/murray_elizabeth.html))

At both ends of "Blooming," apparently random scatterings of shoes and coffee cups, composed of small bright tiles, appear in the station walls. These images lead to a mural that coats the mezzanine walls with color, and sees ceiling-high coffee cups curling around corners.

**Insider knowledge:** Murray found inspiration in the work of Paul Cezanne, Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock.

### Penn Station (1, 2, 3, A, C, E)

#### Eclipsed Time (1994)

Maya Lin ([artcyclopedia.com/artists/lin\\_maya.html](http://artcyclopedia.com/artists/lin_maya.html))

Between the LIRR and the entrance to the 1, 2 and 3 lines, look up at the ceiling, where Maya Lin has imbedded a clock. "Eclipsed Time" is made of sandblasted etched glass, aluminum, stainless steel, and fiber optics. A mobile aluminum disc moves across its stationary glass twin, alternately revealing and hiding the light. This light/dark cycle repeats daily, reminding travelers that at its essence, time is about much more than numbers.

**Insider knowledge:** Maya Lin designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC.

#### For Want of a Nail (2000)

© Arts for Transit Collaborative  
81st Street—Museum of Natural History, B, C lines

#### Blooming (1996)

© Elizabeth Murray  
Lexington Av. 59th St., 4, 5, 6 lines





**Penn Station (1, 2, 3)  
When the Animals Speak (1998)**

**Elizabeth Grajales**  
([nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/panyc/grajales.html](http://nyc.gov/html/dcla/html/panyc/grajales.html))

On the 2/3 platform and along the 1 train's platform walls, the playful charm and innocence of Elizabeth Grajales' handmade ceramics bring animal life underground. In floor-to-ceiling mosaics, a bear gazes benignly at deer grazing by a stream while lions smile at flying birds. Along the 1 platform, square plaques show the life of a blackbird in the city.

**Insider knowledge:** Grajales' stream represents the Hudson River; the cliff, New Jersey's Palisades.

**Penn Station (A, C, E)  
The Garden of Circus Delights (2001)**  
**Eric Fischl** ([ericfischl.com](http://ericfischl.com))

At the bottom-most level of the A/C/E lines, Eric Fischl's mosaic "The Garden of Circus Delights" follows the curves of the walls to portray a floor-to-ceiling circus composed of small glass tiles that give the station a golden glow. Making your way along its three-ring path, you see a ringmaster raising his arms, a dog balancing on his haunches, and fire-breathers exhaling flames. While you're probably just rushing to work, it still feels like the circus is always in town, as you're rewarded with sights such as a shadowy juggler tossing what may be balls of fire.

**Insider knowledge:** Fischl's work normally focuses on human relationships, and is frequently dark in tone.



(blockwise)  
**A Gathering (2001)**  
© Walter Martin and Paloma Muñoz  
Canal Street, A, C, E lines

**The Garden of Circus Delights (2001)**  
© Eric Fischl  
34<sup>th</sup> St. Penn Station, A, C, E lines

**Life Underground (2001)**  
© Tom Otterness  
14 Street 8th Av., A, C, E, L lines

**The Return of Spring (2001);  
The Onset of Winter (2006)**  
© Jack Bes  
Times Square-42 Street, A, C, E, N,  
Q, R, S, W, 1, 2, 3, 7 lines

**Canal Street (A, C, E)  
A Gathering (2001)**  
**Walter Martin and Paloma Muñoz** ([martin-munoz.com](http://martin-munoz.com))

Walter Martin was born in Virginia. Paloma Muñoz is from Spain. In other words, they are quintessential New Yorkers. In their Canal Street installation, "A Gathering," either 174 (the MTA's count) or 181 (cited on Martin and Muñoz's website) birds fill the mezzanine. Blackbirds the size of puppies sit atop the tollbooth. Chipper black grackles sit on beams, gossiping in the railings and peering down at platforms. According to the artists, birds are social creatures – just like the people they watch passing by each day.

**Insider knowledge:** Martin and Muñoz moved from Brooklyn to Pennsylvania the same year "A Gathering" was installed. The decision was forced upon them by development.

**14th Street (A, C, E)  
Life Underground (2001)**  
**Tom Otterness** ([tomotterness.net](http://tomotterness.net))

Tom Otterness' work is cheerily cartoonish. Beneath 14th Street, little bronze sculptures populate both platforms and the mezzanine. Round men crawl under railings and are caught by the police; alligators snack on commuters; ankle-



high couples rush for trains, hauling coins almost as big as they are; under staircases, tubby workers take saws to support beams. Anticipate the unreal. In the world according to Tom Otterness, beams can (and do) have ears.

**Insider knowledge:** Kansas-born Tom Otterness studied at the Art Students League and then at the Whitney, both in New York City.

**Broadway/Lafayette (6 - south only; B, D, F, V)**

**Signal (1997)**

**Mel Chin ([artcyclopedia.com/artists/chin\\_mel.htm](http://artcyclopedia.com/artists/chin_mel.htm))**

Broadway-Lafayette was on the Six Nations trading route, where once, long ago, regional Native American tribes exchanged goods. Sculptor Mel Chin honors that history with a series of broad, pierced cones, broad sculptures that rest at the bases of pillars on the mezzanine with glass-stopped holes forming patterns based on tribal badges. They glow like campfires, but their lights rise and fall with the arrival and departure of trains a level below. Note the tiles on the walls that look like blue smoke. Their shape was inspired by an Iroquois message of peace.

**Insider knowledge:** For "Signal," Mel Chin collaborated with Seneca tribe member Peter Jemison.

**Times Square (1, 2, 3, S, N, R, Q, W; by passage from Port Authority, A, E, C)**

**Times Square Mural (2002)**

**Roy Lichtenstein ([lichtensteinfoundation.org](http://lichtensteinfoundation.org))**

Most of us are accustomed to seeing Lichtenstein's comic-book-dot art in replica. Times Square has the real thing. "Times Square Mural" comprises sixteen panels of porcelain enamel on steel. Six feet high and fifty-three feet wide, the mural is set just beneath the ceiling, facing the southern section of the plaza

on the mezzanine joining the 1, 2 and 3 with the N, R, Q and W. The hooded figure at the right of the mural is from the Buck Rogers comic strips.

**Insider knowledge:** "Times Square Mural" was commissioned in 1989 and completed in 1994. Because of MTA budget problems, the piece was put in storage until 2002.

**Times Square (1, 2, 3, S, N, R, Q, W; by passage from Port Authority, A, E, C)**

**New York in Transit (2001)**

**Jacob Lawrence ([whitney.org/jacoblawrence](http://whitney.org/jacoblawrence))**

Among the most renowned Black artists of the 20th century, New Jersey-born Jacob Lawrence spent most of his life in New York City. Reminiscent of intricate Roman tile work, the clean earth-and-sky tones of "New York in Transit" celebrate multicultural city life. His glass mosaic spans the staircase that leads from the 42nd Street mezzanine to the N, R, Q and W trains.

**Insider knowledge:** "New York in Transit" was the last piece of public work produced by Lawrence, who passed away in 2000.

**Times Square (1, 2, 3, S, N, R, Q, W; by passage from Port Authority, A, E, C)**

**The Onset of Winter (2001) and The Return of Spring (2005)**

**Jack Beal ([jackbeal.net](http://jackbeal.net))**

On the 41st Street mezzanine, Jack Beal's glass murals sparkle like summer sunshine. The south wall shows Persephone descending into the underworld (here, the subway). On the north wall, Persephone and her mother, Demeter, shop at a fruit and vegetable stand.

**Insider knowledge:** "The Return of Spring" was presented on September 14th, 2001, just three days after the terrorist attacks on New York City. ■



**Times Square Mural ©**

Estate of Roy Lichtenstein  
Times Square—42nd Street, A, C, E,  
N, Q, R, S, W, 1, 2, 3, 7 lines

*The MTA Arts for Transit website ([mta.info/mta/artsfortransit](http://mta.info/mta/artsfortransit)) has more information about the installations. There's also a brochure, Art En Route, that can be had for fifty cents at the MTA Transit Museum Shop in Grand Central Terminal, but it isn't always in stock. If you (understandably) fall in love with the city's underground art, a hardcover book, Along the Way: MTA Arts for Transit, (available at the Museum Shop, major bookstores, or at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)) will either keep you satisfied or—more likely—spur you to do what you never imagined doing: spend a day off in the subway.*