

Airports for Art Lovers

AIRPORTS FOR ART LOVERS

Though Most Fliers Just Rush By, Public Art Thrives at Airports, From Dutch Masters to a Giant Red Rabbit

By Scott McGarvey

If you want to see some of the best contemporary art in U.S. cities these days, buy an airline ticket.

Airports have been spending heavily on public art over the past 10 years, thanks to a heavy focus on turning what historically have been nondescript atriums of stress into interesting rest stops catering to upscale clientele.

Many terminals have moved beyond posting grade-school drawings of airplanes. Now they incorporate huge installations into the layout of new buildings and house works from big-time artists. Some airports have opened museums and curate roving exhibits. Others proudly display works by Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella and Roy Lichtenstein. Atlanta's new international terminal spent \$5 million on art. San Francisco International, considered a leader in airport art, has spent more than \$15 million since the 1970s.

Cities say they know travelers aren't eager patrons and no one goes to the airport for the sculpture, but they can use art to make a good first impression when visitors arrive. "Public art can class up your airport," said Jack Becker, executive director of Forecast Public Art, a Minnesota-based art consultancy, and publisher of Public Art Review.

Airport officials say changes in travel after the 2001 terrorist attacks brought more attention toward art in terminals. New security requirements leave travelers frazzled and force them to spend much more time at airports.

The American Association of Airport Executives has held an annual meeting of airport art program officials for the past 11 years. "Once 9/11 happened, airports were desperate to make the experience calmer and more enjoyable for passengers," said Greg Mamary, the AAAE's head of special projects. "And art has made a difference."

In addition, urban beautification efforts in cities created ordinances that often require 1% to 2% of public-building construction budgets be spent on art. Since airport terminals are usually very expensive projects, airports end up buying major installations, and much of a city's public art budget winds up at the airport.

Airport authorities typically form committees, or use local arts boards, to make selections, usually done through commissions to, or proposals submitted from, artists. Art that works well in terminals leads harried travelers to stop and take a closer look—and snap photos. Some airports monitor social media mentions to measure art-program success.

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Sacramento

The city greets passengers with Lawrence Argent's 'Leap,' a 56-by-19-foot, aluminum red rabbit jumping toward a granite suitcase.



Miami

Miami turned the lobby of a people-mover station into a kaleidoscope of pastel colors with Christopher Janney's 'Harmonic Convergence.'

San Diego

'The Journey,' by Jim Campbell, is a 700-foot-long ribbon of 38,000 LED lights with fluttering images of people swimming, dancing and walking, plus birds in flight.

Dallas Love Field

The airport installed 'Back in a Moment,' a Sherry Owens sculpture of seven 12-foot-tall cast-bronze trees, as part of its recent renovation.

Seattle-Tacoma

Frank Stella's 'York Factory A,' a 1972 oil on canvas, hangs on a wall at Concourse A in Seattle. The airport also displays work by Robert Rauschenberg.



(Clockwise from top left) Sacramento International Airport; Miami LYNX; U-T San Diego Port of Seattle; Associated Press; Photo: (clockwise) International Airport Authority

Public Art at Airports: Masterpieces vs. 'Plop Art'

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Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport has a giant bronze wishbone at the entrance to a security checkpoint in its international terminal, rubbed by travelers now for good luck. Miami International Airport has a half-mile walkway of terrazzo tile

THE MIDDLE SEAT

embedded with mother of pearl and cast bronze fish, shells and other elements called "A Walk on the Beach" by Michele Oka Doner. San Diego spent \$2.2 million on "The Journey," a ribbon of 38,000 LED lights that has images of people swimming, dancing and walking, plus birds in flight, fluttering throughout the sculpture.

Many airports have long housed iconic works, such as the Alexander Calder sculpture "Flight" at New York's Kennedy International Airport and Michael Hayden's 1987 neon light show set to music in an underground walkway between United Airlines concourses at Chicago O'Hare International Airport.

But unlike bunkerlike terminals of past eras, new airports typically boast large, open atriums that house food courts or shopping malls, plus high ceilings and walls of windows to reduce claustrophobia. Those open spaces create unique opportunities for large-scale sculptures.

Airports have diverse populations, so airport art often is tailored for a

very general audience. While museum art often makes provocative social commentary, airports have opted for more easily approachable art for a varied group of "patrons."

Successful airport art often connects to the local community, so you know where you are when you land. Critics call Joyce Kozloff's mosaic in the floor at Washington's Reagan National Airport that uses a map image of Chesapeake Bay attractive from a distance and fascinating up close.

Other well-received installations simply reflect an aviation theme: but-terflies forming the shape of air-planes in Las Vegas or a tall pile of colorful baggage in Santiago, Chile. And art consultants say good public art is clever and surprising, reward-

ing repeat viewing and closer inspection.

"Some approach it in a decorative way," said John Carson, head of the School of Art at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

Often airports resort to what some in the art world derisively call "plop art"—objects plopped into a spot that have no relation to their environs. "Sometimes you get a large abstract sculpture or lighting effect that's purely decorative and doesn't have depth, and that's disappointing," said Mr. Carson. But if the artist looks at the aesthetic and surrounding architecture and mixes in some substance, "that work will be successful."

Some works have elicited jeers. A huge, wall-mounted, blue work shirt at Milwaukee's airport was deemed by some in the community as a pejorative comment on the city's reputation as a blue-collar town. The Dennis Oppenheim work was scrapped before it was installed.

Denver International Airport has been hailed as a model of public art. But Luis Jimenez's "Mustang," a giant, cobalt blue fiberglass horse with neon-red eyes at the airport's front drive, has been criticized as Satanic-looking. (Mr. Jimenez, a renowned sculptor, was killed in 2006 when a large section of "Mustang" fell on him.) The airport has stuck by the piece, which was installed in 2008, despite the criticism.

Mr. Becker, the art consultant, notes that some of the greatest public art in the world wasn't universally liked at first, including the St. Louis Arch, the Eiffel Tower, the Washington's Vietnam Veterans Memorial and even the Statue of Liberty. "Over time, pieces become adopted and accepted on their own and become



Denver International Airport, above, has been hailed for its art. However the airport's 'Mustang,' right, by Luis Jimenez, has drawn criticism.



symbols of the city," he said.

Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport has a large collection of contemporary sculpture. But the airport also has a collection of Dutch masterpieces from the Rijksmuseum on rotating display. The airport takes extra precautions for its expensive paintings. Its museum is in one of the most secure places in the airport, after passport control, a Schiphol spokeswoman notes. The paintings are secured behind glass in a climate-controlled environment.

"If someone would open the window cases, alarms would set off straight away," she said. "And the paintings are not that small that you can easily run away with them."



Sacramento's airport displays 'Samson' by Brian Goggin; two 23-foot pillars constructed with vintage luggage.

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