



ORIGINAL ARTWORK OWNED BY MTA NEW YORK CITY TRANSIT

Her subway art's on track

BY MEGAN H. CHAN
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Almost every weekend in the 1960s, Toby Buonagurio would accompany her mother into Manhattan on the No. 2 subway train from their home in the Bronx. Sometimes the two would visit her grandmother on York Street or run shopping errands.

Buonagurio's mom always made time for her daughter to visit one of the city's art museums or dress up at one of Second Avenue's secondhand stores. Each trip into the city meant a transfer at Times Square, where Buonagurio soaked in the intense stimulation she later understood to be the combination of bustling business and theater districts.

Sculptor Buonagurio, now 59, later channeled her artistic impulses into making ceramic tiles known for their quirky, exaggerated colors and shapes. When the MTA selected her work to be included in the long-term renovation of the Times Square subway station, Buonagurio was especially excited. Her permanent exhibit, "Times Square: 35 Times" includes 35 ceramic tiles embedded in glass-paneled walls along the partition constrained by Broadway, Seventh Avenue, and 42nd and 43rd streets.

A New York-centric view

The tiles, each a little bigger than a square foot, feature what she calls "hyperactive vignettes and snapshots" of the city with high-chroma colors and exaggerated personalities. Chefs dangle giant fire-engine-red lobster legs in one bas-relief while another displays a child in a baseball cap holding an oversize hot dog. Her favorite

tile features a New Year's Eve reveler with palm-tree-green eyes, a pastel blue face and fluorescent orange and red hair, blowing a pink and green party whistle.

"To me, this is the center of the universe," said Buonagurio as she smiled and tapped the inch-thick glass cover of the New Year's Eve tile. "Everything is deeply intense and to me, epitomizes the high-octane energy of New York City. You can stand here for just a few minutes and you feel it — the energy — and that's what I wanted to get."

Whittling her memories down to 35 images proved the hardest task for Buonagurio, who shares a Bronx home and studio with her husband, Edgar, an abstract painter. For more than 30 years, Buonagurio has crafted three-dimensional tile sculptures, which she usually builds into the shape of a classic high-heel pump. "You make the work for the right reason, because it means something to you, and that's all you can do," said Buonagurio, an art professor at Stony Brook University.

Art has played an important role in New York's transit system since it opened in 1904. In 1985, the city founded MTA Arts for Transit, cementing its commitment to the "beautification" of the city. Sandra Bloodworth, the agency's director, said Buonagurio's work captures the iconography of Times Square.

Buonagurio spent a year photographing the action in Times

Square at different times of day. She developed three central themes: performing arts, street life and fashion — the last of which was inspired by her immigrant grandfather, a tailor.

While she tried her best to capture many people's perspectives, she couldn't resist putting a personal touch on the work. At the top of the stairway leading to the uptown Red Line — her lifelong home line — is a tile that portrays her purple-faced husband with a paintbrush alongside herself, wearing her signature gaudy earrings.

"It's a big obligation and responsibility because New Yorkers are the most discerning people," she said of the exhibit, for which she received \$150,000, according to MTA officials.

The people's museum

Bloodworth believes the subway should serve as a proletariat museum. "If you treat a place

well and you treat it as an important place, people will respect that," said Bloodworth, who recently co-authored a book on MTA's arts program with Long Island Museum director William Ayres. "Along the Way: MTA Arts for Transit" chronicles the history of more than 150 site-specific works since 1985, including Buonagurio's.

Susan Tunick, a New York artist whose terra cotta mosaics are displayed in Brooklyn's Parkside and Prospect Park stations, said the specificity of location has much to do with pace. How people move and how fast they move through a space should determine not only the mood, but the size of the work, in her view.

"Choreography is crucial when you're thinking of space," Tunick said. "How does it move? I'm in there, my work is there to examine the space, but the [viewer] is there to leave on the next train. You have to be part of the station and observe what's around you underground and understand that pace." The Times Square station is used by 270,000 commuters a day.

But Buonagurio, Tunick and other subway artists do more than just give the transit system a pretty face, said Elliot G. Sanders, director of the Rudin Center for Transportation at New York University. Such beautification supports the city's economic health.

"Invented realities have legs that travel for a long time," said Buonagurio. "I want to bring you into my reality with your own experiences. I want you to be drawn into the imagery. Just don't expect anything to be too real."



PHOTOS BY EDGAR E. BUONAGURIO

Stony Brook art professor Toby Buonagurio in the Times Square subway station with her MTA-commissioned works; left, "New Year's Eve Party: Dec. 31."



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Buonagurio's "Child With Hot Dog Vendor" is part of her "Times Square: 35 Times" installation at the station.