

The story behind the octopus and turtles at the Houston Street subway stop

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DEBORAH BROWN

The sea life has taken over the subway at Houston Street subway stop.

Houston Street subway stop has not gone to the dogs – it’s gone to the seals, turtles and octopi.

Since the mid-90s, the 1-line stop has been home to an array of sea life, tiled mosaics that make up one of the system’s more curious and colorful pieces of wall art.

On one wall, there’s a curious manatee craning to read a newspaper over a man’s shoulder. On other walls there are octopi clinging to a pole near the turnstiles, turtles cavorting on mosaic tracks and seals swimming around just outside a subway car.

The sea life — shown in a series of seven 10-foot-long pieces — was one of the system’s earlier permanent art installations, according to MTA Arts & Design Director Sandra Bloodworth.

Formerly called Arts for Transit, the MTA’s arts program launched in 1985, at a time when a number of imminent station renovations made permanent installations difficult.



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Deborah Brown's art installation features curious sea life appearing to interact with subway riders.

When it came time to do some work on the Houston Street station, the MTA evaluated dozens of artists' bodies of work before selecting a small handful who were asked to submit proposals. After a station tour and an explanation of the MTA's expectations, prospective artists submitted proposals — in a slide presentation.

When Deborah Brown — a Los Angeles native who originally came east for college — got the commission in 1992, she wasn't experienced as a mosaic artist.

"I'm a painter," the 60-year-old Kipp's Bay resident explained. However, the subway needed something that would hold up as a permanent art installation, so Brown started calling around in search of someone who could translate her work to tile.

She got out the phone book and just started picking out numbers under the mosaics listing.



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The art installation is named *Platform Diving* after the playful turtles diving off the platform.

One of the names she came across was Stephen Miotto, a well-known mosaic maker based in Westchester County. From her art studio in Brooklyn, Brown went to meet Miotto and the two clicked.

Brown knew she wanted to make her proposal a marine life project — she'd just finished some underwater works and wanted to continue the theme.

“The idea was to pick something to do with how we traversed this underground terrain and draw a parallel between how sea creatures navigate the ocean and how we navigate the subway,” she said.

“They were meant to be funny confrontations between subway riders and sea creatures.”



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A seal peers at passersby catching the subway.

The MTA found it funny, too.

“We loved this concept of commuters traveling along with sea life, as if the manatee is waiting for the train,” Bloodworth said.

The proposal got approved without any major modifications, although there was one change — one octopus was holding a coffee mug in the original concept.

Each painting has an individual titles, but the overall project is called Platform Diving, a reference to the turtles seemingly diving off the station platform into the tracks.



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Straphangers travel calmly as seal swim outside.

The project was done on what would be a shoestring budget by today's standards. All seven mosaics were commissioned by MTA Arts & Design for a mere \$40,000 as part of a \$4 million station upgrade project.

The station was originally built in 1918, fashioned in the Arts and Crafts style by early subway architect Square Vickers.

The anti-industrialist Arts and Crafts movement was about craftsmanship and natural materials — and the tiled mosaics fit right into that look.

The work doesn't just fit in by early 1900s standards, though — it's also popular with today's passengers.

"People really do love it," Brown said. "I've heard people say, 'That's my favorite stop.'"