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The Bronx – a Mosaic of Public Art

by Kristy Caruso

New York City is an epicenter for all kinds of art. In addition to being home to some of the world’s top museums, our city’s very streets abound with artists and performers. People who want to experience public visual art should head up to the Bronx, where outdoor sculptures, mosaics and paintings are plentiful, inspirational and free—and just a train ride from midtown Manhattan.

Public art in the Bronx is both modern and historic. In places like The Woodlawn Cemetery, there are spectacular 19th century sculptures. The Bronx’s General Post Office houses beautiful murals from the Works Progress Administration of the Great Depression. More examples are found in parks, on subways and even in schools.

In recent years, the Bronx has become a center for cutting edge public art, thanks in part to arts and culture organizations that have helped revive art throughout the five boroughs. Programs like P.Eace for Art, Public Art Fund and Arts for Transit help support established and emerging artists. These programs make art accessible and visible throughout the Bronx. Taking art outside the museums and putting it on the streets brings sculpture, mosaic, and multimedia projects to the forefront, particularly in the Bronx.

The Bronx boasts the works of globally acclaimed artists, many commissioned by the organizations above. Some are natives of the borough and others have honed their skills nationally and internationally. Vito Acconci, a critically acclaimed artist and landscape architect from the Bronx whose work was commissioned by Arts for Transit, has an installation at the 161st Street Yankee Stadium subway stop for the 4, B, D trains. Wall-slide, a massive stone, fiberglass and tile piece, created in collaboration with di Domenico & Partners can be viewed 24/7.

Andrea Arroyo, known for her relief paintings and whimsical figures, has had her work featured on the covers of The New Yorker. In the Bronx, you’ll find her six-foot cast relief sculptures, titled Harmony I and II at Intermediate School 206 at 2280 Avenues. Another piece in faceted glass is at the 2 and 5 Gun Hill Road subway station. “My work is about celebration, says Arroyo. “I wanted to convey a celebration and balance of city, planet, and universe for the subway piece,” aptly titled Mi Sol, Mi Planeta, Mi Ciudad (My Sun, My Planet, My City).

Ellen and Allen Weider created a different form of art for the lobby of Middle School 254 at 2452 Washington Avenue. The space was transformed into a gallery, with 16 frames showcasing materials used in the building of the school. In a statement on their public art, the creators say, “To many people art appears an alien language. But when public artworks are created that truly engage the public, they offer a fresh vision and can allow us to see what was previously taken for granted in new ways.” Their project, entitled Abstractions is available for viewing by making advance arrangements with the school. Please call 718.220.4881 to make an appointment.

Accessing all the public art around the Bronx is manageable thanks to a website created by the Lehman College Art Gallery (LCAG). The site, accessible at lehman.edu/publicart, maps out high-art neighborhoods across the borough and lists the artists, biographies, and locations of the work in each community. It also provides travel directions and a downloadable PDF per neighborhood.

Suzan Huetzel, Gallery Director for LCAG, and former educator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan, is inspired but not surprised by the magnitude of public art spaces in the Bronx. “Some of the greatest artists of contemporary history are displayed here,” she says with pride. “The pieces are inspirational and approachable.” People just need information so they can access them.”

Huetzel believes in using the Internet as a medium to reach the masses. “We can do things from a very small place, and get worldwide attention,” she says. “We are making people aware of the incredible art in the Bronx and making experiencing it attainable.”

One of the site’s biggest achievements is arranging this vast inventory of art by neighborhood, giving viewers an opportunity to go on self-guided tours. Here are some highlights:

Grand Concourse / 149 Street and 3rd Avenue Hub:
Here you'll find Adolf Weinman's Eight Statuary Groups at the Bronx County Courthouse (141 Grand Concourse), as well as Ben Shahn/Brenda Bryson Shahn's Resources in America at the Bronx General Post Office (55 Grand Concourse). You'll see Vito Acconci's Wall-slide, described above, at the 161st Street Yankee Stadium subway station. Jose Ortega's large scale mosaic tiles capture the energy of the neighborhood above and grace the walls of the 149th Street and 3rd Avenue subway station, known to locals as the 3rd Avenue "Hub." Appropriately, they are titled Una Peza, Un Mundo, Un Universo (One Piece, One World, One Universe).

Bronx Park:
Start your trip to the parks with a visit to the temporary art sculpture titled Aurora, located on the corner of East Tremont Avenue and Boston Road. The abstract wooden sculpture is the brainchild of Mexican-born New York-based artist Diego Medina. The geometric shapes, including a half-star, literally cannot be missed – the piece measures 14 feet tall by 11 feet wide! The sculpture is available for viewing until September 2010, in the center of West Farms Plaza and was unveiled by the Bronx River Arts Center (BRAC) in conjunction with the Department of Transportation. More information on this particular installation can be found on BRAC's website at bronxriverart.org.

Only a few minutes walk from Aurora is the Bronx Zoo, one of the largest zoological parks in the world. When enjoying close-up encounters with exotic animals at the zoo, you can miss Eli Harvey's Lion House – four sentinels, fashioned completely of Tennessee Marble, that regularly welcome guests. The Stone Masonry aspect of this masterpiece, crafted in 1902 – 1903, is unmatched. Anna Vaughn Hyatt Huntington's Jaguars, constructed in 1915 of limestone, have been noted for their accurate interpretation of the curious cats. It's no wonder – they're based on actual jaguar housed at the Zoo from 1902 – 1914! Perhaps the most well known piece of art at the Bronx Zoo is Biagio Catella's Rockefeller Fountain. Fabricated from Italian marble in Como, Italy in 1872, the fountain was purchased by William Rockefeller for the Bronx Zoo in 1903. In 1968, the fountain was designated an official New York City landmark.

Just a short walk from the zoo is The New York Botanical Garden where you'll find Carl Eugene Tiff's Fountain of Life, located in front of the Museum Building. The specific design for the fountain was chosen based on its lively nature, including a female nude astride a rearing horse, a startled merman, and a giant crab, to name just a few elements.

Woodlawn Cemetery:
If the turn-of-the-century sculptures at the Zoo and Garden leave you yearning for more, Huetzel always recommends strolling through The Woodlawn Cemetery. There you'll find mausoleums, intricate works of art in their own right, marking the resting places of famous historical figures, including jazz great Duke Ellington and Miles Davis, Suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Publisher Joseph Pulitzer and, dime store millionaire FW Woolworth. The funerary monuments, carefully integrated into the landscape, are worth more than just a quick look. Huetzel suggests spending a few hours, if not the whole day, among the tranquil fields and she confesses, "It's where I take my own family and friends when they're in town."

Longwood:
You'll notice Rafael Ferrer's Puerto Rican Sun just before approaching the structure. Designed as two arched palm trees surrounding...
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ing the sun, it was constructed completely of steel, and it forms a 25 foot archway at the entrance to a community park on Fox and 156th Streets. Most noticeable in Longwood is the work of Rigoberto Torres and John Ahearn. They made a huge impact in this neighborhood with three murals installed on exterior walls of buildings in the area. On Intervale Avenue and Kelly Street, you’ll find Homage to the People of the Bronx: Double Dutch at Kelly Street. Just a few paces away on Intervale Avenue and Fox Street is We Are Family and on Dawson Street and Longwood Avenue is Life on Dawson Street. Each piece is inspired by the neighborhood itself, portraying locals living their daily lives in the early 1980’s. Make sure to look up – the 3 dimensional mosaics are visible from afar.

Bedford Park:
See Ronald Baron’s masterpiece, My Time is Now, as well as Wopo Holup’s Intersections (make sure to look down) along with many others on the Lehman College Campus at 250 Bedford Park Boulevard West. Then head off campus to Walton High School (located at 2780 Reservoir Avenue) and see Janet Zweig’s Your Voices, a compilation of 12 bronze locked boxes created to solicit an array of anonymous responses from students.

With so much to see, you may have doubts about where to start. Hoeltzel’s advice is this: “Buy a Metro Card, get on the 4 train, and make all the stops.” You’ll see impressive architecture, artwork and frescos. It’s a crash course on the outstanding public art in the Bronx. So find a pair of comfortable shoes, grab your camera, and discover public art in the Bronx.