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A Light Within the Tunnel

Local artists will display winning mural designs in new concourse.

By Marty DeVine
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Think of the new pedestrian tunnel under Duke Street and most would imagine the typical austere underground space – dark and utilitarian. However, the thousands of people soon bustling to and from Alexandria's new Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) through the pedestrian concourse under Duke Street will actually enjoy a different commuter experience. Beginning this summer, concourse users will have the pleasure of viewing vibrant murals painted by Old Town artist and resident, C. Ashley Spencer. The murals will depict historically interpreted scenes that show the progression of this "West End" area from its rural beginning through its economic importance in the present. Spencer will also paint some helpful explanatory maps.

Chair of the city's King Street Task Force and Alexandria City Council representative, Ludwig Gaines, said "I am excited about the opportunity for Alexandria to have public art, and this isn't a place you would expect to find public art. The murals will beautify the tunnels and have it come to life."

Lois Walker, former City Council member and current president of the King Street Metro Enterprise Team (KSMET), expressed a similar sentiment when she said that "public art cannot just be a statue, but must become part of our daily life, and exist under our feet and within arm reach of each of us. Adding public art to the concourse makes the path to the Metro more exciting and more inviting." Spencer's designs were selected by the Public Art Committee after a city-wide open competition for mural proposals for the tunnel this past winter. The city displayed the preliminarily selected mural samples for public comment at the Nannie Lee Center in March. The final approval will be awarded by the Alexandria City Council at its May 12 meeting.

THE DUKE STREET Concourse murals are one way the city is highlighting the significance of art. Mayor Bill Euille stated that "Alexandria's long history is built around its architecture, aesthetics and ambiance. Public art is an important expression of our city's charm and beauty." Sherry W. Brown, Chair of Agenda Alexandria said, "I see public art as every design element on the streetscape from benches to lighting to the actual layout of the space and its programming to be filled with activity that invites in residents and visitors. There was no way I could let this be a dull tunnel through which we expected people to walk twice a day. "The evolution of the concourse began with renaming it and setting a high standard for the design. I primarily wanted to provide for visuals that could be changed to give people something interesting to see as they passed through. It was Pam Cressey, the city's archeologist, who ignited the Task Force's imagination with her vivid description of the land's "life" before Carlyle. "Once we heard what her study had uncovered, we knew we wanted those visuals to tell Carlyle's "deep history" to its visitors and residents. Ashley's designs do exactly that. Everything on Alexandria's streets should be the best. The "Fun Side" of the Potomac should also be the finest." Upon being notified that her mural designs were selected, Spencer said, "I am deeply honored



Courtesy photo/Skipp Calvert
Ashley Spencer paints at the home of Mary and Skipp Calvert.

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that The Alexandria Commission for the Arts has selected me to paint these murals. I've seen a lot of beneficial changes over the 15 years I've lived and been involved in the Upper King Street area. Painting these murals is a way to celebrate all this positive progress."

AN ARTISTS AND decorative painter, Spencer appears to have been destined to paint. She worked on her first publicly displayed mural in her native New Orleans at the age of eight. In the 30-something years since then, Spencer has completed more than 250 art projects ranging from murals to decorative finishing to portraits and house renderings.

Recent publicly displayed projects include a Venetian plaster wall treatment in the resident managers room of The Guest House during the Alternative Design Show House in Del Ray and several wall finishes in four rooms in a home on the Belle Haven House & Garden Tour. Last year, she painted the theological quote and trompe l'oeil cross for St. Stephen's St. Agnes' Meditation Chapel on the high school campus.

After graduating from The University of the South (Sewanee), Spencer studied at Parsons in Paris and Corcoran Gallery of Art School. She brought this background to her work at the National Gallery of Art (Design & Installation Department), the National Museum Of Women in the Arts (Exhibition Design Department), and the Arena Stage where she was a scenic painter.

In 1988, Spencer started The Occasional Palette, her illustration business, when her oldest son, Piers (now 15), was an infant. She started her decorative art business, Casart, in 1995, when both her boys and youngest son, Jackson (now 11), were in school. Spencer has found that both her art businesses allow her to pursue her love of art and yet have the flexibility she needs for her family. Some of Spencer's other murals of flying and floating coffee cups can be seen around town at The Uptowner Coffee Shop on King Street and St. Elmo's Coffee Pub on Mt. Vernon Avenue as well as on her website.

More information about Casart, The Occasional Palette and Ashley Spencer can be found at www.ashley-spencer.com or by calling 703- 549-1622.

Marty DeVine has lived in Old Town Alexandria for almost 10 years. She is part-time Director of Development for Grace Episcopal School and does consulting. She has a BA (political science), an MA in Religion, an MA In Reformation History & Theology and a JD.

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