

If These Walls Could Talk

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By [Marty DeVine](#)



Alexandria, home to scores of art galleries and studios, embraces art in many forms and places, from inside buildings to outdoor sculptures and murals. One of those unique, but little-known spots is in a tunnel.

Thousands of visitors and U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) employees enjoy a visual feast whenever they walk to and from the King Street Metro through the well-lit, mural-lined tunnel under Duke Street, known as the Pedestrian Concourse. Rather than have depressing, bland tunnel walls that invite graffiti, the City of Alexandria held an open competition for mural proposals. The winner of that competition, Old Town artist and resident C. Ashley Spencer, was then commissioned by the city to paint six murals with historical images.

The historically interpreted scenes in the murals show the progression of Alexandria's West End from its rural beginnings in 1755 through its economic importance today. In creating the designs, Spencer utilized a simple style for viewers' quick glances and as educational guides to facilitate remembering the overall concept of each time period. Also included in Spencer's display are six historic maps, which she researched, identified and reproduced, and then interspersed them between the murals to help orient them in time as part of the project.

As one walks towards the Metro from the contemporary USPTO, one learns about the area before its recent development by viewing the first three murals. The first is a sepia tone painting depicting the agricultural commerce that helped ignite the growth of Old Town in Alexandria circa 1755.

The next mural, also a monochromatic, shows Alexandria's early industry in the 1800s, including tanneries, slaughterhouses, tailors, taverns, a mill and the Alexandria Water Company. The last mural found on the East wall is a primarily black and white 1863 Civil War scene with Shutters Hill (where the Masonic Memorial now stands), the slave pen and the military railroad. This particular mural seems to capture the bleak, gray mood of Alexandria during the Civil War years. There are two splashes of color amidst the black and white: the red, white and blue of two American flags.

Walking back towards the USPTO and Carlyle Towers development are the final three murals on the West wall. The one nearest to the King Street Metro is dedicated to the early 1900s. This mural offers an early version of the now traffic-filled Duke Street, which 100 years ago went over Hooff's Run stream, and it also shows the Virginia Glass Company, a brewery and coal. The next mural on this side is of the last half of the 20th century with a colorful scene of transportation. There are references to the Southern Railway, the Metro and the development of the adjacent Upper King Street area. Before exiting the concourse, pedestrians pass a stylized painting of the USPTO complex. This painting has a trompe l'oeil element mimicking paper rolling off the upper left corner that causes many a passerby to do a double take.



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"I've seen lots of positive changes in the over 17 years I've lived and been involved in the Upper King Street area," Spencer said. "For me, painting these murals celebrates the changes and I am honored that The Alexandria Commission for the Arts selected me to paint the historical murals."

An artist and decorative painter, Spencer is also a business owner who appears to have been destined to paint. Her first publicly displayed mural was in her native New Orleans. There she helped paint a section of a mural at the tender age of eight. Recently, Spencer's "Lifecycles and Seasonal Changes in Nature" teaching mural on the playground of Jefferson-Houston Elementary School was responsible for the elementary school winning a 2008 Alexandria Beautification Award. Throughout an artistic career that has spanned more than 30 years, Spencer has created more than 300 art projects. Her works range from murals to decorative finishes to portraits and house renderings through her Occasional Palette business, and she has recently added wall coverings through her latest venture: CASART Coverings.

So the next time you are taking the King Street Metro or paying a visit to the USPTO Museum or a friend at Carlyle Square, indulge yourself and take an artistic stroll through Alexandria's history at the little-known Pedestrian Concourse.

For more information about Ashley Spencer's art or CASART Coverings, visit www.casartcoverings.com or call 1-888-960-5554.

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