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## Traveling Through 250 Years of History

### Artist contributes to city's public art.

By Marty DeVine  
February 10, 2005

Thousands of U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) employees working in their new offices in Alexandria have a visual feast as they walk through the well lit, mural-lined tunnel under Duke Street, known as the Pedestrian Concourse, to and from the King Street Metro.

The City of Alexandria commissioned Old Town artist and resident C. Ashley Spencer to paint six murals. The Alexandria Commission for the Arts' Public Art Committee selected Spencer's work after a city-wide open competition for mural proposals for the concourse in February of 2004. Spencer's murals depict historically interpreted scenes showing the progression of Alexandria's "West End" area from its rural beginning in 1755 to its present economic importance.

As part of the project, Spencer researched, identified, and reproduced the six historic maps interspersed between the murals to help orient them in place and time. The concourse is open to the public Monday through Friday, 8 a.m.-6 p.m. and may eventually be opened on Saturdays or on the weekend as more businesses like Whole Foods Market and planned cultural activities at John Carlyle Square come to the area.

Patricia Uchello, a fellow Alexandria artist, summed up Spencer's six murals when she said that the "murals take the viewer from the early hard-scrabble, rural colonial days of Alexandria to its present, metropolitan incarnation. Her murals show us where we have been, and where we are going."

The first, a sepia tone painting, provides a glimpse of the agricultural commerce that spurred the growth of Old Town Alexandria circa 1755. The next mural is also monochromatic, showing the Alexandria's early industry in the 1800s, which included slaughterhouses, tanneries, tailors, taverns, a mill and the Alexandria Water Company. Finally, the last mural on the east side wall is a primarily black and white 1863 Civil War scene with Shutters Hill (where the Masonic Memorial now sits), the slave pen, and the military railroad. This mural captures the gray mood of Alexandria during the Civil War. The only color in the scene is the red, white and blue of two American flags.

WALKING BACK towards the PTO and Carlyle Towers development, one passes the final three murals on the west wall. The one closest to the King Street Metro captures the early 1900s by depicting an early version of Duke Street, which then went over Hooff's Run stream, and it also refers to the Virginia Glass Company, a brewery, and coal. The second mural is of 1950-2000 with a colorful scene of transportation, and it includes references to the Southern Railway, the Metro, and the development of the adjacent Upper King Street area. Before exiting the concourse, the pedestrian passes a stylized painting of the new PTO complex with a trompe l'oeil element mimicking paper rolling off the upper left corner.

Chair of the City's King Street Task Force and Alexandria City Councilman 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 beautify the concourse 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: "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."

"I SEE PUBLIC ART ... as every design element on the streetscape from benches to lighting to the

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actual layout of the space and its programming to be filled with activity that invites in residents and visitors," said Sherry W. Brown, chair of Agenda Alexandria. "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."

Also enthusiastic about Spencer's murals, former Alexandria Councilman David G. Speck said, "Ashley is a very talented artist, but what she really does for this community and the concourse in particular is to humanize it ... to make it more than a passageway, but to give it life and a little whimsy."

Marlin Lord, an architect in the nearby Del Ray community, said, "Ashley entered the competition with a creative notion and won. Since then she has graciously participated in the endeavor of bringing art visibly into our communities. She also provides leadership in her Upper King Street Neighborhood Association, the Upper King Street Task Force, and works hard on other improvements and issues critical to making Upper King a wonderful part of our city."

AN ARTIST and decorative painter, Spencer worked on her first publicly displayed mural in her native New Orleans — at the age of eight. In the thirty-something years since then, Spencer has completed over 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's 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 16 years old, was an infant. She started her decorative art business, Casart, in 1995 when both her boys, Piers and youngest son, Jackson, now 12 years old, were in school.

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 Web site. More information about Casart, The Occasional Palette and Ashley Spencer can be found at [www.ashley-spencer.com](http://www.ashley-spencer.com).

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