

Underground Art

Architect Andrew Mead integrates the work of local artists into the MRT transit experience

By Lynn Biondi

After hearing Andrew Mead's Monday Morning Lecture on the art programme for the North East MRT Line, some of us immediately made our way to the nearest station to experience it with a new set of 'eyes'.

An architect who specialises in the design of transit systems, Andrew was tasked with developing an integrated art programme for one of the MRT's busiest lines. He explained that MRT art must blend with the architectural design of the station, integrate with the walls, floors and ceilings, and be free of hazards. It must also be designed to last – both to resonate over a long period of time and also to resist rugged exposure to hands, feet and cleaning materials. And finally, it must also appeal to the public, or create 'a brief moment of pleasure or of reflection' for people who may never enter an art gallery, but who do use the transit system, explained Andrew. Ideally, the art should be functional in addition to being creative – that is, to subtly 'guide' travellers toward the entrances, exits and loading platforms of a station.

Andrew first developed a conceptual proposal in 1997, which expanded to a creative and innovative reality when the North East Line was commissioned in 2003. Identifying and pairing a local Singaporean artist with the individual architects for each of the 16 stations of the line presented a challenge for Andrew, a relative newcomer to Singapore when the programme was approved. Assistance came in the form of Constance Sheares, Art Coordinator for the programme and a former Art Curator of the National Museum Art Gallery. An Art Review Panel was also formed to evaluate the proposals submitted by local artists in response to advertisements inviting expressions of interest. The late Brother Joseph McNally, the founder of the Lasalle College of the Arts, served as a panel member.

The outcome is visually dynamic and reflective. Each station has a unique artistic statement, both in style and in the subject matter, which is linked to the culture and history of an area around a station. For example, Poh Siew Wah's abstract horse racers leap across the walls at the Farrer Park Station, a tribute to the old racecourse in this area. At Hougang Station, artist Seck Yok Ying collected the handprints of the community living around the station to form playful murals. Go Beng Kwan, the most senior artist participating in the programme, developed a new medium for his artwork. Previously working primarily with paper (a fire hazard in a station), Kwan was

teamed with a glass specialist to translate his art into fused glass panels for Punggol Station. "[This opened] a completely new artistic expression outlet, a new medium, for this artist," said Andrew.

The artists range from the well-known and well-established (Sun Yu-Li at Dhoby Ghaut), to promising young contemporary artists (Ian Woo at HarbourFront). The works represent a wide range of media: stained and fused glass, paint, mosaic, ceramic and metalwork.

Andrew's work in bringing art to the people of Singapore has been a great success. It makes travelling on the North East MRT line more enjoyable, even for people who don't realise the works are unique. Andrew's concepts will be included in the new Circle Line stations, giving more Singaporean citizens and visitors a chance to experience innovative public art as part of their everyday lives.

Lynn Biondi is the FOM Council Member for Member Activities and an active FOM museum docent.

Editor's Note: *A beautifully illustrated book, Art in Transit, North East Line MRT – Singapore, by Tan Su Yen with Photography by Ken Seet, covers the conception and execution of the transit art programme and is available for purchase from the Land Transport Authority (LTA).*

- ① Wang Lu Sheng honours Chinese Opera in historical Chinatown's Outram Park Station while directing travellers to the trains; photo by Ken Seet, reproduced with permission by the LTA
- ② History and Hindu Ritual: S. Chandrasekaran highlights the history of Little India with art forms inspired by the daily 'kolam' rice paste threshold art of Southern India; photo by Ken Seet, reproduced with permission by the LTA
- ③ Andrew Mead, Design Manager Architect for the North-East MRT Line and FOM Monday Morning Lecturer, viewing Sun Yu-Li's universal language art forms at the Dhoby Ghaut Station; photo by Lynn Biondi
- ④ Community involvement (background photo): Seck Yok Ying invited the people of Hougang to become part of the art and future history of their station by embedding their handprints in the wall tiles; photo by Ken Seet, reproduced with permission by the LTA

