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Let There Be Light, and Art, in the Moynihan Train Hall

The expansion of Penn Station's concourse has an acre of glass that lets the sun pour down, and installations by Kehinde Wiley, Stan Douglas and Elmgreen & Dragset. Here's a first look.



Mr. Wiley was inspired by the space near the 33rd Street entry to create his ceiling fresco and to "think about ways bodies twirl in break dancing." Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times

Sunlight is not typically associated with the dingy basement vibe that envelops commuters passing through Penn Station.

But natural light spills across the new Moynihan Train Hall through its massive, 92-foot-high skylight ceiling and illuminates another surprise: permanent installations by some of the most celebrated artists in the world.

Kehinde Wiley, Stan Douglas and the artist duo Elmgreen & Dragset have major pieces prominently displayed in the new \$1.6 billion train hall set to open Friday, offering an expansion of Penn Station's concourse space and serving customers of Amtrak and Long Island Rail Road. The hall, designed by the architecture firm SOM, also connects to subway lines, although they are some distance away.

The 255,000-square-foot train hall is inside the James A. Farley postal building, the grandiose Beaux-Arts structure designed by McKim Mead & White in 1912, two years after the original

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SEANKELLY

Pennsylvania Station. (New Yorkers may know the Farley Building from rushing up its giant staircase to file income taxes before midnight in mid-April.)

The new hall is named for Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, who first introduced plans for a renovation in the early 1990s, but they were mired in delays for years. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, the driving force behind the project, in 2016 announced a public-private partnership for developing the hall, including Empire State Development, Vornado Realty Trust, Related Companies, Skanska and others.



Kehinde Wiley's backlit, hand-painted, stained-glass triptych called "Go" depicts sneaker-clad break dancers who appear to float across a blue sky. The woman's pointing finger nods to the Sistine Chapel's "Creation of Adam." Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times

Kehinde Wiley's backlit, hand-painted, stained-glass triptych called "Go" depicts sneaker-clad break dancers who appear to float across a blue sky. The woman's pointing finger nods to the Sistine Chapel's "Creation of Adam." Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times

The Moynihan Train Hall serves as a redemption of sorts for the doomed Penn Station, demolished in 1963 in an act deemed so heinous for the city's historical buildings it is said to have kicked off the nascent national preservation movement.

The new hall fails to solve many of New York's myriad transportation problems — congestion on the tracks, the need for a new tunnel under the Hudson River, the blight

Last updated: 13 January 2021

SEANKELLY

of the existing Penn Station, to name a few. But officials say it's a necessary step to complete other transit projects, add more train capacity and to alleviate crowding at Penn Station.

The train hall opens at a time when citizens are being asked to refrain from nonessential travel to limit the spread of the coronavirus, and at a moment when commuter train traffic is extremely low.

But the governor has pointed to the achievement of delivering a major infrastructure project on time despite a pandemic, as well as one that would transcend the Covid-19 era. Mr. Cuomo called the new hall "deeply hopeful."

"It speaks to the brighter days ahead when we will be able to congregate, to pass one another and to share the same space free of fear," Mr. Cuomo said. "It promises renewal and rebirth of civic life in New York, and points to the opportunity ahead." The completion of the project — a station meant to welcome commuters and the rest of the world to New York — serves as a bright spot at the close of a dark year for New York City where deaths from a global pandemic soared in spring and are on the uptick again, and scores of beloved restaurants and shops have shuttered as the virus pummeled the local economy.

On a recent tour of the train hall, masked workers were putting the finishing touches on blue curved benches in a walnut seating alcove in the ticketed waiting area. The hall's radiant flooring feels warm to the touch, and, for now at least, is sparkling clean. Majestic trusses and vaulted skylights nod to the elegant trceries in Penn Station's original concourse. The hall offers free Wi-Fi and a lounge for nursing mothers. A 12-foot-tall clock with a typeface designed for road and railroad signage serves as a reminder of the clock in the demolished Penn Station. Intended as a meeting point, it hangs 25 feet above the floor.

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While the new hall pales in comparison to the majesty of the starry-ceilinged main hall of Grand Central Terminal, it will serve as a far more pleasant welcome to commuters than Penn Station, which has been derided as "the La Guardia of train stations."

Last updated: 13 January 2021

SEANKELLY

The addition of work by well-known artists adds a celebratory vibe, a sense of pride in the public sphere and a method Mr. Cuomo has prioritized at similar transit points in four stations along the Second Avenue subway line (with pieces by Chuck Close, Jean Shin, Vik Muniz and Sarah Sze) and a new Terminal B at La Guardia Airport with installations from Ms. Sze, Laura Owens, Sabine Hornig and Jeppe Hein.

“There’s something to be said about a society gathering around an artist, around his or her vision, to say this is something we believe in collectively,” said Mr. Wiley, best known for his portrait of former President Barack Obama, which hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. “New York needs this right now.”

The space seems intended to always keep commuters looking up, from its sprawling glass skylight to two major ceiling installations at each entry way — Mr. Wiley’s stained-glass paintings of break dancers at 33rd Street and Elmgreen & Dragset’s “The Hive,” a cluster of upside-down models of futuristic skyscrapers, at 31st Street.

“It’s an opportunity for artists to stretch themselves and do something new and different,” said Nicholas Baume, director and chief curator of the Public Art Fund, which oversaw the art project.

The artists submitted their proposals in 2019, before any of them envisioned Covid-19 spreading across the world, and then executed their pieces from afar. The installations cost \$6.7 million.

Here’s a first look at the artists and their projects.

Kehinde Wiley

Mr. Wiley’s backlit, hand-painted, stained-glass triptych called “Go,” across the ceiling of the 33rd Street entrance, depicts sneaker-clad break dancers who appear to float across a blue sky.

The artist, whose paintings often reimagine well-known works with Black subjects, said he wanted to embrace the rarity of contemporary art on stained glass as well as “play with the language of ceiling frescoes” by using his installation to celebrate Black culture.

“So much of what goes on in ceiling frescoes are people expressing a type of levity and religious devotion and ascendancy,” said Mr. Wiley, who has a studio in New York but spent much of the year in his studio in Dakar, Senegal. “For me the movement and space made so much more sense thinking about ways bodies twirl in break dancing.”

Last updated: 13 January 2021

SEANKELLY



Mr. Wiley hand-painted Czech glass with joyful scenes. “The aesthetic of Black culture is the aesthetic of survival, of buoyancy and saliency and the ability to float in the midst of so much,” the artist said. Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times

One woman wears baggy yellow pants and a crop top; another is outfitted in a denim jacket. Instead of angels and gods in classical frescoes, Mr. Wiley offers Nike logos and pigeons in midflight. The outstretched finger of a young woman in camouflage shorts conjures images of “The Creation of Adam” by Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling.

“It’s this idea of expressing absolute joy — break dancing in the sky,” he said, noting that break dancing began in New York City.

Mr. Wiley toured the train hall taking note of decorative flourishes and metal work. The molding around the three panels was designed to coordinate with the metal around windows outside the building.

Mr. Wiley said he deviated from his usual method of “street casting,” or selecting strangers from the street as models, because he was pressed for time in delivering the work, and instead turned to the subjects of prior paintings.

“The aesthetic of Black culture is the aesthetic of survival, of buoyancy and saliency and the ability to float in the midst of so much,” Mr. Wiley said, adding that he hoped the work would make commuters pause and smile.

Last updated: 15 January 2021

SEANKELLY

“And I hope they recognize themselves,” he said. “I wanted to create, at the intersection of trade, commerce and transportation in the capital of the world’s economy, something that sits as a testament to Black possibility.”



Mr. Wiley pays homage to the metalwork of the James Farley Post Office in the moldings and panels of his stained-glass fresco, seen from the entrance at 33rd Street. Credit...Andrew Moore for The New York Times

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