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Diana Al-Hadid's Nostalgic Tribute to Penn Station

Al-Hadid's new mosaic features the famed clock that hung at the entrance of the original station until the building was demolished in the 1960s.



Taylor Michael January 30, 2023



MTA New York City Transit President Richard Davey, MTA Chief Accessibility Officer Quemuel Arroyo, and MTA Arts & Design Director Sandra Bloodworth announce the completion of an entrance to Penn Station on the northwest corner of West 33 St & 7 Av, with a new elevator and glass mosaic "The Time Telling," by Diana Al-Hadid on Thursday, Jan 26, 2023. (Marc A. Hermann / MTA)

10 HAWTHORNE STREET
SAN FRANCISCO CA 94105
TEL 415 781 4629
INFO@BERGGRUEN.COM
BERGGRUEN.COM

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Some New York City commuters and tourists traveling through Manhattan's 34th Street–Pennsylvania Station will now discover Diana Al-Hadid's new mosaic "The Time Telling." The work was unveiled Thursday, January 26 by the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) Arts & Design initiative as a part of the new ADA-accessible street-level entrance to the 1, 2, and 3 subways on 33rd Street and Seventh Avenue.

"It's a nice addition to a bleak station," Kadia B., a Bronx resident, told *Hyperallergic* as she ascended the newly opened stairway. Inspired by the pioneering photojournalist Alfred Eisenstaedt's black-and-white image "A Farewell to Servicemen," (1943), Al-Hadid's artwork features the famed clock that hung at the entrance of the original Penn Station until the building was demolished in the 1960s. The Syrian-born, Brooklyn-based artist transforms the iconic shot into an abstraction while keeping the original's somber yet grandiose tone.

At nearly 15 feet, the glass mosaic greets subway riders as they approach the stairs. Taking up the entire back wall of the stairway, the clock that once adorned the original train station can be made out clearly; arches, beams, a window pane, and a light fixture mimic the Beaux-Arts architectural style of the station, which was completed in 1910. But the soldiers from Eisenstaedt's photograph, who were captured as they departed for service in World War II, are rendered as vague silhouettes.

To Nial Burke, a Brooklyn resident who was approaching the newly built elevator on a recent Friday afternoon, the mosaic looks like a cathedral or skyline. "I do like it; it's grand," Burke said.

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Diana Al-Hadid's "The Time Telling" at the 34th Street–Penn Station accessible entrance (photo Taylor Michael/Hyperallergic)

But the mosaic and new entrance can be easily overlooked, as they are surrounded by ongoing construction and scaffolding that cover Penn Station and Madison Square Garden. Many commuters looked frustrated as they walked by the entrance, seemingly searching for the escalators to the Long Island Railroad, or New Jersey Transit, which is also across the street.

Victoria Kayes was one NJ Transit rider excited to find the entrance completed, telling *Hyperallergic* that she had been watching for several days as workers installed the artwork and was waiting for a chance to see the mosaic. Kayes echoed other riders' observations that the piece is a boon for dreary commuters' spirits, adding that she will enjoy strolling by the subway to appreciate Al-Hadid's artwork before heading back to Jersey.

Al-Hadid's nostalgic tribute comes as New York State officials recently approved a major renovation for Midtown Manhattan, including Penn Station, in July 2022. The Penn Station overhaul, which is estimated to cost \$7 billion, was first conceived by former Governor Andrew Cuomo and then picked up by Governor Kathy Hochul, who hopes to transform

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the current “hellhole” into a more aesthetically pleasing commuting center. The ambitious plan has drawn criticism over proposed tax breaks for real estate developers and concerns that the state will fall short of the projected revenue needed to fund the expensive construction. Some wonder if individual taxpayers will bear that burden and worry that redevelopment efforts will displace some tenants.

“The Time Telling” joins two other mosaics by Al-Hadid created for 34th Street–Penn Station, “The Arches of Old Penn Station” and “The Arc of Gradiva,” which were installed in 2019 on the mezzanine level.



“The Arches of Old Penn Station” by Diana Al-Hadid (photo Taylor Michael/Hyperallergic)