

The Renovated LaGuardia Airport Abounds With Artwork

After an \$8 billion renovation that dramatically improved the once-decrepit travel hub, its gleaming new terminals have become a veritable showcase of New York City's creative talents.

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"The Worlds We Speak" by Mariam Ghani. Image courtesy Queens Museum

LaGuardia has long been considered the armpit of New York's airports. President Joe Biden famously compared its decrepit facilities to a "third-world country," and *Travel & Leisure* noted that it "has the dubious honor of ranking the worst" for the check-in and security process, baggage handling, providing Wi-Fi, staff communication, overall design, and cleanliness." Responding to these criticisms, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey announced in 2015 an \$8 billion revamp of its passenger infrastructure over the next decade. The first phase, which saw the 56-year-old airport's central terminal reopen in 2020, jettisoned its cramped facilities for an airy replacement filled with sunlight and public art.

With the recent completion of Terminal C, which serves Delta Air Lines, LaGuardia's revamp is mostly finished. Beyond state-of-the-art facilities that are 85 percent more spacious than their predecessors, the gleaming new 37-gate terminal features a distinctive collection of artworks by local talents selected by Delta in partnership with the Queens Museum. Large-scale permanent installations by Mariam Ghani, Rashid Johnson, Aliza Nisenbaum, Ronny Quevedo, Fred Wilson, and Virginia Overton lend dynamism to the new terminal while offering passersby a peek inside the minds of some of the city's most renowned artists. "All these works are very rooted in what it means to live in New York," says Queens Museum president and director Sally Tallant.

Creating site-specific works for LaGuardia required each artist to dial up their scale to grander proportions—and ruminate on the fraught state of travel as the pandemic wanes. Rashid Johnson’s towering mosaic depicts 60 frenetic faces looming over passersby in the arrivals and departures hall. “It kind of feels like all of us,” he tells the *New York Times*. An epic group portrait by Aliza Nisenbaum, meanwhile, celebrates Delta’s labor force, from security guards to flight attendants. Fred Wilson, who seeks deeper meaning in the color black, reveals luminous globes with darkened oceans that speak to water pollution.

Public art collections have become common as airports seek to assuage passenger anxieties in today’s fast-paced, post-9/11 world. And calm passengers make the experience smoother for everyone. The results can stun, in every sense—Janet Echelman’s delicate layers of pinkish netting soothe the nerves in San Francisco, while the late Luis Jiménez’s towering, demonic *Mustang* (nicknamed “Blucifer”) in Denver does the opposite. For artists, having a piece acquired by an airport can offer immense value given the millions of passengers that travel through them each year. “In 2019, we had over 56 million passengers,” says Lilian Rambo, the chief terminal management office for the Houston Airport System, which has one of Texas’s largest collections of public art at 350 pieces across three locations.

“When situated in an airport, the role of public art is given another dimension,” writes Alex Irrera, a civic art and design coordinator for the Houston Arts Alliance. “In addition to symbolizing a place, the work now serves the traveler—welcoming, grounding, or inspiring them. As passengers do look up from the busy activity of a trip, thoughtfully curated artworks can be humanizing reminders of travel’s gift of discovery.”

LaGuardia has taken note. Over at Terminal B, which was completed in 2020 following an \$8 billion renovation, public art abounds. A crucial part of the revamp involved four site-specific artworks by Jeppe Hein, Sabine Hornig, Laura Owens, and Sara Sze commissioned by the Public Art Fund. They run the gamut from sinuous steel benches that resemble balloons to a dreamy mural of New York City lore. Nicholas Baume, the Public Art Fund’s director and chief curator, noted how these new artworks ushered in the much-needed transformation of LaGuardia into “a powerful civic landmark where art is an essential part of the building itself.” The artworks one terminal over take that notion one step further.

So are the gleaming new facilities and blue-chip artworks enough to soften harsh attitudes toward LaGuardia? While the Port Authority’s efforts to revitalize the decrepit airport are commendable and admittedly a huge improvement, other countries that tend to put infrastructure first still have the United States beat.

The Jewel Changi Airport in Singapore, completed in 2019 by Safdie Architects, features a torus-shaped glass dome containing an idyllic paradise garden. And though it’s not new by any means, Adolfo Suárez Madrid–Barajas Airport by Rogers Stirk Harbour+ Partners and Studio Lamela continues to put passengers at ease with a billowing bamboo ceiling punctuated by skylights and light-filled “canyons.” Luckily for travelers passing through LaGuardia, viewing art is much more enjoyable—and free—because having a beer still costs \$27.