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Antiques

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Tile by Tile, A Mural Is Saved

At the end of a subway line in downtown Pittsburgh, the artist Romare Bearden filled a wall with ceramic scenery. Loosely based on memories of his childhood years at his grandparents' boardinghouse in Pittsburgh, his 1980s tile mural showed canoeists and ships on rivers snaking around steel mill smokestacks and crowds of soldiers and factory workers. The set of 780 tiles, 60 feet long, was cemented onto concrete walls three feet thick.

When the terminal was slated for demolition a few years ago, the mosaic was appraised for \$15 million and deemed worthy of reinstallation somewhere. But no one was quite sure how to get it down. "It's the first one we've encountered that's bonded directly to a thick concrete wall," said Robert G. Lodge, the president of McKay Lodge Conservation Laboratory in Oberlin, Ohio. On a \$1 million budget, the company has been dismantling and restoring the Bearden tiles to hang in a new station next year.

Subway system designers have been lining corridors with ceramic art for a few decades, but rarely do the installations get shifted around at a huge scale. The Bearden piece "is certainly one of the largest I've ever heard of being moved," said Sandra Bloodworth, the director of the Arts for Transit program of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in New York, which occasionally rips out and transplants ceramic seascapes, skylines and geometric patterns during station overhauls.

Mr. Lodge calls his Pittsburgh transplant strategy "somewhat experimental." When he took the assignment about a year ago, a proposal was afoot to remove the tiles in clusters along with hundreds of pounds of concrete still attached to the backs. "But I realized that's nuts," he said. "It's too much weight to deal with."



MCKAY LODGE FINE ARTS CONSERVATION LABORATORY

Romare Bearden's 60-foot mural, with 780 tiles, was cemented to walls three-feet thick; it is being painstakingly dismantled and restored by the McKay Lodge Conservation Laboratory.

He devised a plan to separate the tiles instead, after taping an identification number onto each front, he said, "or else we'd have an impossible puzzle to put back together." With diamond-coated saw blades his crews sliced between and behind each thin, brittle ceramic sheet. Bearden's tiles, made by Vermont potters on a \$90,000 budget, are about a quarter of an inch thick. Freeing them required chain saws and circular saw blades up to 36 inches wide, powered by hydraulics.

The saw operators wielded "a pretty frightening-looking piece of machinery," Mr. Lodge said. For six weeks late last year they cut grooves for 20 hours a day. The pace slowed just a few times, when the blades ran into tough

rebar sections hidden in concrete.

As the tiles were brought down, McKay Lodge packed them into 13 wooden crates lined with foam. Each crate was trucked separately to Oberlin, so the whole collection never traveled together in a single vehicle vulnerable to a highway crash. "We didn't want too many eggs in one basket," Mr. Lodge said.

His staff members are now examining each tile to finalize estimates for the project's cost and duration and to find patches of lost glaze that will require pigment touch-ups. The company will soon subject the tiles to another round of sawing to remove any concrete clinging to the backs. When the new subway walls are ready, McKay Lodge will fit the cleaned tiles into a portable aluminum frame so that the whole landscape can be popped back out someday if that station ends up obsolete too.

"Anything artistic that goes in a subway should be put on some

type of removable support," Mr. Lodge said.

His engineering for Bearden's artwork, however, is not the industry norm. When major ceramic installations have come to New York stations, like Columbus Circle's new 53-foot swath of colorful hairpin turns by Sol LeWitt, the artwork is "almost always directly on the wall," Ms. Bloodworth said. "We try to select locations where we have a good confidence level that this is permanent."

But transit systems by nature have to go with the flow. "The artists are told up front and in their contracts," Ms. Bloodworth said, "that the needs of moving people will have to come first."