

BALLPARK MURAL INSTALLATION BEGINS



St. Paul artist Craig David works on the Fifth Street Panels public art project which will be located along the northeast side of Target Field.

After months of planning and behind-the-scenes work, installation has begun on the first of three large murals that will adorn the northeast exterior of Target Field. Created by St. Paul artist Craig David, the project is one of several major public art installations scheduled for completion by Opening Day. David, whose previous work includes murals on the new Wellstone Center in St. Paul, was selected for the Fifth Street Panels project last fall as part of a nationwide call for proposals.

Building on the Ballpark's connections to current and future rail transit, the theme of the first completed mural is "Transit—Then and Now." Framed by an old-time passenger locomotive on the left and a contemporary LRT line on the right, the mural depicts a lively sweep of people from the past and present, all moving toward the LRT line. In the foreground is a woman with a young child that nearly levitates from her arms, in joyful anticipation of Minnesota's transit future.

As with much of David's previous work, community engagement had a hand in shaping the mural's final composition. One of its central characters is a woman in a wheelchair, inspired, says David, by a real-life woman who approached him at the Ballpark's public art open house and suggested that the work should portray differently-abled people. "I thought this mural was a great place to do that, and so I placed a figure inspired by [her] front and center," says David. "Those collaborations are important to the process, and so I was thrilled to do something like that."

Because of ongoing ballpark construction, the mural site isn't currently accessible to the public, but, according to David, it's already attracting attention. "The construction guys are very interested and they're always stopping to check on the progress," he reports.

Next Up: Baseball

Even as the first installation proceeds, David is in the midst of cutting the ceramic pieces for the second panel, which has a theme of baseball in Minnesota. The mural complements the Twins' story by illuminating some of the lesser-known but compelling aspects of Minnesota's baseball history. Featured prominently will be two notable players from the past, Toni Stone and "Chief" Charlie Bender. "Toni Stone was an African-American woman from St. Paul who played professional baseball for a series of small ball clubs throughout the 1940s and 1950s," explains David. "And Bender was a Native American pitcher who was the first Minnesotan to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame."

Images of the old Lexington and Nicollet ballparks will frame the piece, and the story of rural Minnesota's Town ball leagues will also weave its way into the narrative. The mural will be peopled with images of fans from historic and contemporary eras, while silhouettes of Twins players will evoke the state's rich and continuing tradition of professional baseball. David anticipates that installation of the baseball mural will begin in the fall. The third and final mural, to be completed over the winter, will consider issues of sustainability, with a particular emphasis on Minnesota's water resources and our relationship to and dependence upon them.



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Piecing it all Together

Not surprisingly, the process of creating 85+ linear feet of public art is lengthy and complex. David begins by making small-scale sketches or “cartoons” for each mural, based on the initial schematic designs reviewed by the Public Art Steering Committee. Next he tapes together sheets of cardboard on his shop floor in the actual size of each mural, paints them white, and begins sketching out the final design. David draws freehand rather than using a grid, which allows him to improvise in response to the unfolding composition. “For me, the process remains fluid throughout, even while cutting tile, so that I have the freedom to make the changes that work for the piece,” he explains. “Basically, I let the drawing tell me where it has to go.”

After the to-scale drawing is complete, the time-consuming process of cutting individual pieces of stone to fill in the design begins. David uses a stencil system to ensure that each piece fits together perfectly. Unlike David’s past projects, the ballpark murals are made from porcelain ceramic rather than natural limestone or quartzite. Because they will be at pedestrian level on a city street, the murals must be incredibly durable and able to withstand close encounters with the viewing public, explains David. Porcelain takes twice as long to cut as natural stone, and so he has recruited his partner, Mary Aguilar, to help with that aspect of the project.

Once the finished mural is all laid out on the shop floor, David carefully documents it with several hundred photographs, marks it with chalk grid lines, and boxes it up section by section in preparation for the final on-site installation, itself a six-to-eight-week process. Assisting David with installation is his longtime friend Bob Sutherland, who will mortar each piece of tile precisely into place. The result will be built to last. “The panels that the murals are being installed on are single pieces of concrete that were craned in and welded to the superstructure of the stadium, so it will be a super-integrated piece of work,” says David. “You’d need a jackhammer to take it apart.”

Of course, no one is contemplating taking apart the murals anytime soon. To the contrary, they are destined to become a lasting fixture of the new ballpark. Bringing together the past, present and future, they will portray Minnesota’s everyday people and their baseball heroes, and their relationships to nature and the urban landscape. Still as stone, yet depicting constant change and motion, the murals will both tell stories and invite Minnesotans to find their own within their enduring frames.

For more information and photos on Craig David’s work, visit www.artdavidii.com.