



# The best public art in NYC

*Sculptures, murals, and everything in between*

By Amy Plitt @plitter Aug 6, 2018, 12:00pm EDT

[New York City's museums](#) aren't the only places to find beautiful or thought-provoking art. Since 1967, when the [first public art program](#) was established in the city, a diverse array of agencies and institutions—including the [MTA](#), the Public Art Fund, and the NYC Parks Department—have worked to enrich New Yorkers' lives by adding whimsical, colorful, and occasionally controversial artworks throughout the five boroughs.

Some of the city's best public art wasn't even sanctioned, at least not at first; witness many of Keith Haring's early pieces—including his famed "Crack Is Wack" mural—which was created without official consent. But whether it's city-backed or not, one thing is certain: New York would be a very different place without public art.

Here, we've gathered 20 of the best public artworks in New York City; unlike the [temporary installations](#) often found along the High Line or in other high-traffic areas, these are pieces that have stood the test of time, and will remain in place for years to come.

## 1. "Cabin," Rachel Whiteread

Governors Island  
New York, NY 11231

In 2016, Turner Prize-winning artist Rachel Whiteread installed this piece, a concrete cast of a wooden shed, on one of Governors Island's new hills. "I was really thinking about Thoreau and the American Romantics, as well as the opposite of that—the grimmer, darker underbelly of America and the idea that some lonely person might live in a different way," she told [the Guardian](#) at the time. "I worked very hard to make something that wasn't screaming for attention, but something that would hopefully draw emotions." Mission accomplished—the shed amid a pastoral landscape is in contrast to the skyscrapers of Manhattan beyond, and evocative of a place other than New York.

## 2. "Charging Bull," Arturo di Modica

Broadway & Morris St  
New York, NY 10004

When Arturo di Modica first installed "Charging Bull" in front of the New York Stock Exchange in 1989, he intended it to be "a way to celebrate the can-do spirit of America and especially New York." In the more than two decades since, it's also become one of the most popular tourist spots in the Financial District—if you walk by the statue, now situated at Bowling Green, on a random weekday, you're likely to encounter someone

taking a photo of it's, um, rear end. Interest in the statue was renewed when ad agency installed “Fearless Girl” across from it in 2017, and Di Modica registered his displeasure over the addition to the landscape.

### **3. “Group of Four Trees,” Jean Dubuffet**

One Chase Manhattan Plaza  
New York, NY 10005

The street-level public space at 1 Chase Manhattan Plaza (recently rebranded as 28 Liberty Street) is a harmonious union of works by several modern masters. The building itself is a Gordon Bunshaft design; below, there's the famed “sunken garden” by Isamu Noguchi. On the plaza itself, Jean Dubuffet's “Four Trees”—made from aluminum and covered in fiberglass, and painted with squiggles and loops—is a whimsical counterpoint to Bunshaft's modern skyscraper.

### **4. “Red Cube,” Isamu Noguchi**

140 Broadway  
New York, NY 10005

Isamu Noguchi's massive steel sculpture is a site-specific installation on the plaza of 140 Broadway, a Modernist gem designed by Gordon Bunshaft for Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill. It balances, seemingly improbably, on one corner, drawing the eye to its placement within the building's public plaza (a byproduct of the city's zoning laws, which allowed for a taller skyscraper in exchange for open space). No less a critic than Ada Louise Huxtable [called it](#) a “brilliant accent” against the dark steel of Bunshaft's tower.

### **5. “The Sphere,” Fritz Koenig**

155 Cedar St  
New York, NY 10006

German sculptor Fritz Koenig designed this 25-foot bronze sculpture, which resembled a head covered in a helmet in its pristine state, as a counterpoint to architect Minoru Yamasaki's sleek modernist towers at the original World Trade Center. It was badly damaged on 9/11, and for years had a temporary home in Battery Park. Last year, it [moved](#) permanently to Liberty Park within the new WTC; now, amid the megaproject's gleaming glass towers, it serves as a reminder of what came before.

### **6. “Subway Map Floating on a New York Sidewalk,” Francoise Schein**

110 Greene St  
New York, NY 10012

Belgian artist Francoise Schein has produced several large-scale works *in* subway stations (in Paris, São Paulo, and Stockholm, to name a few), but for this NYC work, she brought the subway out to the street. The piece, which was installed in front of 110 Greene Street in 1985, was made using stainless steel, concrete, and recessed lighting; on her website, Schein notes that it represents “the most democratic place in all cities.”

## 7. “Alamo,” Tony Rosenthal

Astor Pl  
New York, NY 10003

Colloquially known as the Astor Place Cube, this monumental work by Tony Rosenthal was originally installed in Greenwich Village for a citywide exhibit, [put on by the New York City Parks Department](#), called “Sculpture in Environment.” It was the first time that municipal agencies had come together to bring art by living artists to the urban landscape, with the goal of introducing works of art to a larger audience. It proved so popular that an anonymous donor gifted it to the city, and it’s been a crucial part of the streetscape—barring a few brief hiatuses here and there—ever since.

## 8. “Gay Liberation,” George Segal

38-64 Christopher St  
New York, NY 10014

George Segal’s “Gay Liberation”—which features four figures, two male and two female, arranged around benches in Christopher Park—has been a Greenwich Village fixture for 25 years. The sculpture was intended to honor those who participated in the 1969 Stonewall Riots, and though funding issues and opposition to the project held it up for a decade, it was finally installed in 1992. Now, it’s one of the focal points of the larger [Stonewall National Monument](#), which encompasses the park and the Stonewall Inn.

## 9. “Times Square,” Max Neuhaus

Unlike the other work on this list, Max Neuhaus’s “Times Square” isn’t an artwork you can see—it’s one you have to listen for, and amid the chaos of Times Square, no less. To find it, head to the north end of the pedestrian island between 45th and 46th streets, and open your ears to the “rich harmonic sound texture.” The work was first installed in 1977, and remained in place for 15 years; the Times Square BID brought it back in 2002, and it’s now operated by the Dia Art Foundation.

## 10. “LOVE,” Robert Indiana

W 55th St & 6th Avenue  
New York, NY 10019

The sculptural version of Robert Indiana’s iconic “LOVE” graphic sits, appropriately, around the corner from the Museum of Modern Art; the image was first commissioned by MoMA for a Christmas card in 1965. It may not be unique—there are dozens of other LOVE sculptures, including a famous one in Philadelphia—but it’s still a perennially popular spot for photo-snapping tourists. This particular sculpture was installed in 1999.

## 11. “Whirls and Twirls (MTA),” Sol LeWitt

Columbus Cir

New York, NY 10023

There's no mistaking the 53-foot by 11-foot tile mural at the Columbus Circle subway station for anything but the work of Sol LeWitt. The piece is in LeWitt's style of bright, swirling colors—it's appropriately called "Whirls and twirls (MTA)"—even though it was finished posthumously in 2009, five years after LeWitt's death. The piece is an adaptation of one of LeWitt's signature wall drawings, executed in vibrant porcelain tile.

## **12. Henry Moore, "Reclining Figure"**

50 Lincoln Center Plaza  
New York, NY 10023

Sculptor Henry Moore created this site-specific work—the only one of his pieces to be created to sit in the water—in the early 1960s, and it was installed within the complex's reflecting pool (recently renamed the Paul Milstein Pool and Terrace) in 1965. It's one of several pieces at Lincoln Center designed by prominent modern artists; Alexander Calder and Jasper Johns also have works within the complex.

## **13. "The Angel of the Waters," Emma Stebbins**

Terrace Dr  
New York, NY 10024

The bronze figure atop Central Park's Bethesda Fountain has the distinction of being the first piece of public art created by a woman—the sculptor Emma Stebbins—in New York City. It's meant to depict the Angel of Bethesda (as in the pool in Jerusalem, which is described in the Bible); Stebbins "likened the healing powers of the biblical pool to that of the pure Croton water that cascades from the fountain," according to the NYC Parks Department. It's appeared in countless movies and TV shows, from *Angels in America* to *Law & Order*.

## **14. "Swing Low," Alison Saar**

St. Nicholas Avenue and, Frederick Douglass Blvd  
New York, NY 10027

The number of historic women depicted in statues or monuments in New York City is woefully low, a wrong that the city hopes to rectify in the coming years. But in the meantime, one of the best statues of a female historical figure can be found in Harlem, where Alison Saar's "Swing Low"—a monumental artwork depicting Harriet Tubman, who led countless slaves to freedom along the Underground Railroad—is situated on Frederick Douglass Boulevard. "I wanted to depict Harriet Tubman not so much as a conductor of the Underground Railroad," Saar [explained](#), "but as an unstoppable locomotive that continued to work towards improving the lives of slaves and freed slaves for most of her 91 years of life."

## **15. "Crack Is Wack," Keith Haring**

Harlem River Dr  
New York, NY 10035

Like many of Keith Haring's iconic works, the "Crack Is Wack" mural in East Harlem wasn't originally city-sanctioned. In fact, it almost landed the artist in jail, until media attention led the city to back off. (You can read the full history of the piece [here](#).) Now, it's perhaps Haring's most famous extant NYC mural; the playground it's located in was even renamed for the piece in the 1990s. Alas, it's currently off-limits as the playground undergoes a renovation.

## 16. "Mother Hale's Garden," Shinique Smith

721 Malcolm X Blvd  
New York, NY 10039

A bus depot at the corner of 146th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem features a large-scale work created by Shinique Smith, which was inspired by a child's drawing. The depot is named for Clara Hale, who founded a Harlem charity for abandoned children. Smith incorporated materials found around the neighborhood into her piece, which was ultimately rendered on the side of the building in colorful glass mosaic.



## 17. "Luminescence," Nobuho Nagasawa

Center Blvd  
Long Island City, NY 11101

In the new Hunter's Point South Park, a collaboration between sculptor Nobuho Nagasawa and landscape architect Thomas Balsley brings the moon to Queens—sort of.



The piece, “Luminescence,” features seven huge concrete domes, which are arranged to represent the phases of the moon.

## **18. “Free Form,” Jose De Rivera**

The Unisphere may be the better known landmark that’s leftover from the 1964 World’s Fair, but Jose De Rivera’s swooping steel work, while not as huge, is no less worth a visit. The minimalist piece features a piece of curved steel placed on a black granite pedestal; there’s also a motor that allows the piece to rotate. According to the NYC Parks Department, “De Rivera’s sculptures have been compared to ‘drawing in space’”—fitting for the ’64 World’s Fair, which had many elements that nodded to the Space Race of the day.

## **19. Camille Walala mural**

274 36th St  
Brooklyn, NY 11232

French artist Camilla Walala brought one of her colorful, Memphis-inspired pieces to the side of a drab Sunset Park building this spring. Walala says that her artwork reflects an “enthusiasm for playful, graphic patterns” and draws on influences from the Memphis Design movement, the Ndebele tribe and Hungarian-French artist Victor Vasarely. “The site is bathed in the most beautiful colors at sunset, which has inspired my palette for the project,” she notes.

## **20. “Postcards,” Masayuki Sono**

Bank Street  
Staten Island, NY 10301

The [September 11 Memorial](#) on Staten Island was built in 2004 and remembers the 275 borough residents who were killed in the September 11 attacks and 1993 World Trade Center bombing. The design is the work of New York architect Masayuki Sono and is called *Postcards* after the two 30-foot pillars that are lined with plaques bearing the name and birthdate of those who perished in the attacks. The two structures frame the space on the skyline where the original World Trade Center towers once stood.