


## Art Finds a New Home in Sports World

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**Kyle Stack**



Courtesy of Dallas Cowboys


Sports and art have traditionally attracted different crowds but the two are starting to converge thanks to a specific genre of venues.


Sports stadiums, arenas and ballparks have developed into ideal houses for paintings, murals, sculptures and other fine works of art. As teams spend immense sums of money on what are usually publicly-funded complexes, it's now commonplace for art to take center stage as an attraction for fans and a showcase of a venue's splendor.

Take the \$1 billion Cowboys Stadium, for example. Though the Cowboys wouldn't reveal to FanHouse how much money was invested into their impressive 19-artist, 21-piece art collection, they seemed to spare no expense in adorning the stadium's interior public spaces with eye-catching works, some of which don't even reference the Cowboys. And that was precisely the team's vision.

"Our goal was for it to not be football-related," said Gene Jones, wife of Cowboys owner Jerry Jones, who gave her free reign to lead the search for the stadium's art beginning in the spring of 2008. "We really wanted it to be contemporary art and for it to be museum-quality. So we do really feel like we have some top artists around the world who have done this art for us."

Jones knew art would be an ideal way to fill the vast corridors of the 3 million square foot stadium, but she wasn't sure exactly what path to take until she spoke with her friend, Gayle Stoffel. Stoffel, a Dallas-based collector of contemporary art, pointed Jones to Mary Zlot, an art advisor based in San Francisco. Jones and Zlot hit it off right away, according to Jones, and they formed an eight-person art council, which included curators from the Dallas Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art of Fort Worth.

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The council brought in hundreds of artists to review and discuss the vision for their projects. The stadium's concourses provided each artist with a large scale on which to work, so it was vital to find artists who understood how to take advantage of that space.

They succeeded, as evidenced by Gary Simmons' "Blue Field Explosions," a 22-foot by 70-foot mural which depicts bursting clouds against a blue background that captures the intensity and explosiveness witnessed in every football game, and Franz Ackerman's colorful "Coming Home...", an abstract collection of drawings, water colors and paintings along two walls surrounding an escalator which document the artist's journey from Berlin to Dallas.

Zlot's role in the Cowboys Stadium project is akin to the way Tracie Speca has helped mold artwork in sports complexes throughout the country. A curator by trade, Speca helped New Jersey Devils owner Jeff Vanderbeek understand how he could maximize the space within the Prudential Center, which opened in 2007.

"There was going to be a lot of space [in the arena] but I didn't have any specific expectations until I met Tracie," said Vanderbeek.

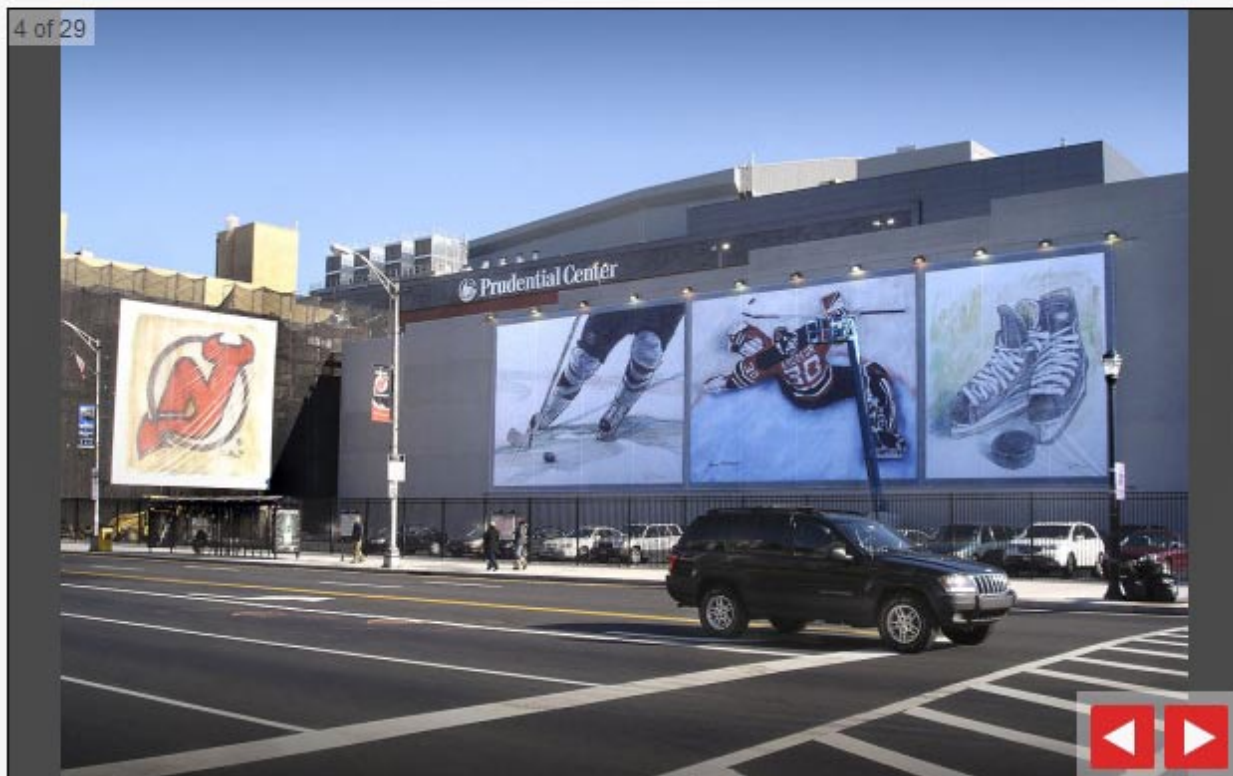
Speca, who is the founder and president of Los Angeles-based Sports and The Arts, explained to Vanderbeek that the art had to be a treasured experience.

"I sold Jeff on the fact that these new stadiums are museums," said Speca. "You have 18,000 people at an event and what do they see? They see what's on the walls."

## Striking Stadium Artwork



4 of 29



Sports and The Arts

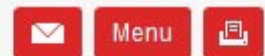


Curator Tracie Speca, who led the art design at Prudential Center: "These exterior wall banners were re-purposed images from originals housed in the Prudential Collection. The team owners wanted to bring the art from within the building to the walls outside. The images also bring color and interest to the venue as traffic passes on one of Newark's busiest streets, Broad Street."

5 of 29



Sports and The Arts



Pittsburgh-based artist Tom Mosser spent six weeks on this 200' x 30' mural, which is the largest free-form mural in the United States. Tracie Speca noted that Mosser, who paints with both hands simultaneously, labored through a 36-hour marathon painting session at one point. Speca explained that "The Mural" depicts New Jersey landmarks and New Jersey sports icons. Over 50 iterations of this mural were created before its completion.

Among the most prevalent pieces of the mural- and photography-based collection at Prudential Center is the country's largest free standing mural, appropriately titled "The Mural," by Pittsburgh artist Tom Mosser. The 200-foot by 30-foot piece was completed in six weeks in part by Mosser's ability to paint with both hands simultaneously.

Speca was taken aback by Mosser's ambidextrous impressionism. "I asked him how he could paint with both hands and he said, 'Well you can draw with two hands and you can type on the computer with two hands; the way my mind thinks, I can paint with two hands,'" Speca said.

The acceptance by sports fans of art into their stadium or ballpark experience is one which seems to grow with every project, according to Speca. "I see a father and son standing in front of a painting and they're talking about it," Speca said. "They might not go to a museum together but they're having a good experience. What we have created is a cultural experience where fans are longing for art."

In Minneapolis, Twins fans had waited over a decade for a baseball-only ballpark yet it's the art in Target Plaza which has people buzzing about newly-opened Target Field.

The Twins and Target Corporation spent \$9 million to create Target Plaza, which contains features such as a seven foot wide by ten foot tall golden glove that honors the Twins' past Gold Glove recipients; nine 40-foot tall topiaries which will be covered in hops vines by the end of the season; and a six-story wind veil that covers a parking garage with its 51,000 baseball card-sized aluminum panels.

6 of 29



Sports and The Arts



Specs: "Canadian artist Laurie Campbell created a series of oil-on-canvas paintings housed in the collection based on the 'PATH Train.' This series depicts fans interacting with local commuters on the way to both Seton Hall and NJ Devils games. The newspaper the commuters hold plays tribute to the events and contains reference to open days, etc."

The site is interactive and gives Twins fans an extended amount of time to enjoy the ballpark after a game and on non-gamedays.

"We were looking for fun art on the plaza," said Twins president Dave St. Peter.

Tom Oslund, a landscape architect who was responsible for the design and implementation of Target Plaza, explained that the space was intended to mirror many features of baseball itself.

"We took a series of elements that are related to baseball and made them into these elements that are sometimes over scale and other times not," Oslund said. "Instead of being so literal, our intention was to abstract them and sculpt [the pieces]."

He explained that baseball's connection with the number 'nine' is the reason for that amount of topiaries. The hops will grow up the topiaries at a pace representative of baseball's lengthy season. Mounds throughout the plaza are reminiscent of pitcher's mounds while benches require little explanation about their significance in the sport.

"If you peel the skin off a baseball, you get the form that is that sinuous form that runs through the plaza," Oslund said. "The benches are located on the seams."

Another celebrated ballpark, Safeco Field, has contained artwork since it opened to Seattle Mariners fans in 1999. Its art is the antithesis of the contemporary pieces found at Cowboys Stadium, which don't always reference the team or region. At Safeco, the art represents the spirit of baseball and the Pacific Northwest region and the connection between the two.

"Fans like the fact that it's something that can add to their experience at the ballpark," Rebecca Hale, Director of Public Information for the Mariners, said of the \$1.31 million project which was funded by Washington state as part of a state-wide public art program. "It doesn't hit them over the head and say, 'Look at me, I'm public art.' It's very integrated into the Safeco Field experience."

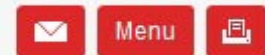


Courtesy of Seattle Mariners

## Striking Stadium Artwork



7 of 29  
Sports and The Arts



Specs: "Dane Tilghman's work brings to life his unique style of elongated realism in his subject matter. Creating a large format graphic from his original painting, we were able to bring the main concourse to life as his colorful figures seem to skate from the surface."

The point Hale makes is commonly seen as the most successful way to incorporate public art into sports venues. Philip Bess, who as Director of Graduate Studies at Notre Dame's School of Architecture specializes in baseball stadium architecture, sees art at many venues accomplishing an often unnoticed link between an artist and a community.

"The very existence of such popular art underscores what is lacking in the realm of 'higher' avant-garde art," Bess wrote in an e-mail message. He reasoned that a community with a shared story could become "sympathetic" to an artist who attempts to capture their spirit and its relationship to their team.

Gene Jones admitted that the Cowboys were conscientious of sports fans possibly being intimidated by such large, complicated pieces of artwork. Yet she said that exposing sports fans to art with which they might not otherwise have become familiar was too valuable an opportunity to let pass by.

"I think we crossed that line of forming two different groups of people that might not necessarily be exposed to the same entertainment," Jones said.

Perhaps the people most rewarded by the exposure are the artists themselves. According to the Dallas Museum of Art, 600,000 visitors walk through its doors annually. Contrast that with 100,000-seat Cowboys Stadium, which drew over 700,000 fans just for its eight regular season home games. The high-profile arena, which from February 2010 to February 2011 will have hosted the NBA All-Star Game, a Manny Pacquiao boxing match and Super Bowl XLV, provides exposure, including on television, that no museum can match.

The Seattle Art Museum and Minneapolis Institute of Art each reported an average daily attendance of roughly 2,000 people. With Seattle's Safeco Field seating up to over 47,000 people and Minneapolis' Target Field able to fit over 39,000 fans, the art in each stadium brings its artists an incredible amount of notoriety for at least the teams' 81 regular season home games.

Washington D.C.-based artist Walter Kravitz, who created and hand painted roughly 50 baseball figures for a group of four automated mobiles which are suspended from two concourse ceilings in Nationals Park, acknowledged his increased exposure by stating that his mobiles "deals at the heart of public projects."



Courtesy of Washington Nationals

Vanderbeek is similarly enthusiastic about the prospects of New Jersey Nets fans enjoying the Prudential Center's artwork when the team starts the first of its two seasons there in the fall.

"I look forward to them being as shocked at the art as the hockey fans were the first year," Vanderbeek said.

Specia has more work planned at Amway Center, the Orlando Magic's new arena which will open in October. Work which includes photography and fine art will come from local artists, which has Specia raving about the talent from Orlando's art community.

"The art we're finding is spectacular and hasn't been seen before," Specia said.

With art gaining a greater acceptance in the sports setting, the major professional sports teams who open a venue without murals, sculptures and other works are clearly outnumbered by the ones who do. At this rate, the sports and arts crowds will no longer be able to recognize one from the other.

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