

Steve Paul AUGUST 7, 2015

Kansas City's investment in public art has grown



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I'll never forget the day — 21 years ago — when I watched a helicopter slice through the downtown sky and gracefully deposit that spiky metal *thing* atop a pillar above Bartle Hall.

It was the first and largest of artist R.M. Fischer's four "Sky Stations," the sculptural conversation starter that electrified the downtown skyline. Some people howled over the "hair curlers," but in general Kansas City has come to embrace the image-shaping art. You might see it as one of the critical early steps in the long campaign to hoist art to the forefront of the city's self-identity as a "creative crossroads."

The sculpture was paid for out of the city's 1 percent for art program, which had been established a few years earlier, in 1986. For every new and renovated public building, a percent of the cost is set aside for a dedicated art piece.

At the time, the Fischer work, which accompanied a convention center expansion, cost the city a bit more than \$1.1 million, a tab including fees, materials, labor, engineering and the like. Today, according to a new report evaluating the city's public art holdings, officials might be pleased to learn the sculpture is worth about \$5 million.

That assessment comes from Rachael Blackburn Cozad, an independent fine art appraiser, who was tapped to study the city's collection of 38 works installed since the percent for art program began.

Cozad presented her report to the Municipal Art Commission last week.

"The piece is such an amazing home run in the choice that Kansas City made," Blackburn said of "Sky Stations." "It makes me so happy."

Cozad's report was requested in part to help city officials develop a five-year maintenance plan for the works, Liz Bowman, the public art administrator told me on Friday.

Cozad had noted that one installation in particular was in need of attention — Jun Kaneko's "Water Plaza," the group of large ceramic pieces in the southernmost Convention Center courtyard.

Using "replacement value" criteria, based on market data, material costs and certain other factors, Cozad determined the value of all 38 pieces at just under \$20 million.

Several works, especially those by top-tier, nationally known artists, have at least doubled in value since their installation, Cozad said. Those include Deborah Butterfield's haunting horse sculptures at the Kansas City Zoo (1995); median sculptures by Joel Shapiro (1996)

and Alice Aycock (2007) at Kansas City International Airport; and Terry Allen's occasionally controversial "Modern Communication" sculpture (1995), which has been reinstalled near Kansas City Police Headquarters.

Commissioners had several astute questions about the public art collection.

Most urgent would involve determining the fate of the celestial terrazzo floor pieces by Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel at KCI's three terminals in the likelihood that the airport will be largely overhauled or replaced in coming years. Bowman said a series of mosaic medallions in the floors were retrievable and it would be more economical to replace the starry terrazzo in the future than to try to remove and reinstall about 200,000 square feet of flooring.

In recent years the public art office has been looking for ways to expand the footprint for art in the city, beyond the limits of the 1 percent program.

One example is a new competition to choose five temporary art installations for Washington Square Park north of Crown Center. The Municipal Art Commission solicited proposals from area artists. Five winners were announced on Monday: Jake Balcom, Denise DiPiazza, Rie Egawa, Kati Toivanen, and William Vannerson. (The Art in the Square project will open with a reception from 5:30 to 7 p.m. Sept. 10.)

Cozad's report will help city staff and art champions appreciate the long-range vision of the percent for art program and spur discussions about the possibilities of expanding it, as was recommended in the recent mayor's task force report on the arts.

"The city should really celebrate this report," said Eric Bosch, the city architect. "There would be other cities that would be envious that we have art of this much value."

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