

Airport murals give colorful view of state's transportation past

By Bruce C. Smith

From Indian guides to Irish canal builders to racing cyclist Major Taylor, a mural being installed this week at Indianapolis International Airport shows the state's diversity and transportation legacy.

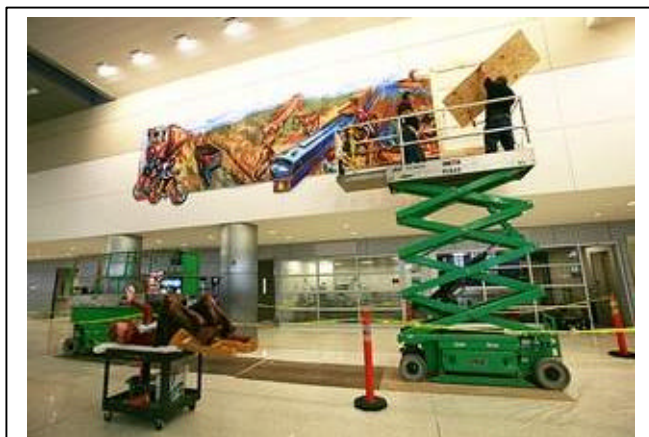
The two 7-by-30-foot panels that form the mural on the ground level of the terminal are the latest artworks by New Orleans muralist Marcus Akinlana. Airports in Denver and Philadelphia are among those also displaying his works.

The Akinlana mural, which was a \$180,000 commission, is the last of 36 major artworks to be installed inside the terminal, where nearly 9 million air travelers a year pass through.

The Airport Authority and its IND Foundation have spent nearly \$3.9 million on art, much of it distinctively flavored so visitors get the picture: You're in Indiana.

"In this mural, I am trying to capture the diverse, cultural ego of Indiana," Akinlana said.

"And I want to raise the ego a little with some of the little-known stories of the state's ancestors," he said Tuesday while hanging some of the mural's panels.



See history: Carpenters John Mathis (left) and Mark Ballman install part of a mural showing Indiana's transportation history. Waiting on the cart is a statue of Amelia Earhart, which will be bolted on the painting.
- Michelle Pemberton / The Star



Whoosh: Bicycle racing phenom Major Taylor is shown on a section of mural by New Orleans artist Marcus Akinlana (pictured). He helped with installation Tuesday in the baggage claim area of the airport's Col. H. Weir Cook Terminal.

- Michelle Pemberton / The Star

"I was asked to create murals celebrating the history of transportation in Indiana and the wide range of people who formed that history. I discovered a rich and diverse people who were deliberate tinkerers and geniuses."

Hence the title of the oil painting, "Roads to Deliberate Dreams: Indiana's Geniuses, Tinkerers and Speedsters."

Akinlana uses a narrative style in the two panels, which are hung about 17 feet up on a wall in the baggage claim area.

They have a three-dimensional quality because of two life-sized molded figures that extend from the two panels in the mural. One is an 8-foot-tall likeness of lost aviator Amelia Earhart, and

the other is flight pioneer Octave Canute, who used to hang-glide over the Indiana Dunes and was an adviser to the Wright Brothers.

Among other prominent figures on the murals are the Lewis and Clark expedition, an Indiana canal boat that seems to morph into a Monon Railroad train engine, Interurban rail cars of the early 1900s, a contemporary Indianapolis 500-Mile Race car, an astronaut's flight suit and Charlie Wiggins in his Wiggins automobile.

There's also U.S. 40 -- the old National Road -- that crosses Indiana, the Clarian People Mover elevated rail system on the Near-Northside of Indianapolis and the Borg-Warner Trophy.

And Akinlana includes Willa B. Brown, another of those forgotten stories from Indiana's transportation history.

She was a flier from Terre Haute and Gary who, with her husband, founded and ran the aviation school that trained pilots who became Tuskegee Airmen, the legendary black pilots of World War II.

Akinlana added, "I didn't know until I started the research on the people of Indiana how profound their story would be."



Unexpected: Akinlana said he was surprised to learn of Indiana's rich, diverse transportation history. He will be at a public reception Thursday.

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If you go

- » **What:** A public reception for the Akinlana mural, plus the display of temporary exhibits commemorating Black History Month.
- » **When:** 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Thursday.
- » **Where:** Lower level of Col. H. Weir Cook Terminal building.