

Miami International Airport saves iconic JFK murals

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Courtesy American Airlines

Brazilian artist Carybe won both first and second prize in a 1959 contest to create art for the old American Airlines terminal at JFK airport in New York.

By [Harriet Baskas](#), special for USA TODAY

A casual conversation between an airport skycap and a passenger heading home to Brazil ended up saving an art treasure from the trash.

Maybe you remember the two giant, colorful murals in the east concourse of the old American Airlines terminal at JFK airport in New York. Created by Brazilian artist Carybé, who won both first and second prize in a 1959 contest to create art for the terminal, the murals explore two very different themes of the Americas.

PHOTO GALLERY: [JFK murals find a new home in Miami](#)

The darker *Discovery and Settlement of the West* depicts the pioneers' journey to the American West. The more colorful *Rejoicing and Festivals of the Americas* portrays scenes from popular folkloric celebrations held throughout North, Central and South America and includes a Seminole Indian, a cowboy, a jazz musician and other characters in representational dress. When announcing why they'd chosen these Carybé works, the architects for the JFK building said that "too many of our present day buildings are dull, monotonous, lacking in warmth, joy, gaiety." They liked the artist's imagination and use of colors.

The murals had been part of the terminal since 1960, and at 17 feet tall and more than 50 feet long each, they were hard to miss. They were also hard to care for. Over the

years, the colors faded, objects the artist embedded in the pieces fell off, and layers of grime and bird droppings accumulated. So when it came time to demolish the terminal and build a new one, the plan was just to leave the site-specific murals behind and allow them to get torn down and destroyed with the building.

Saved by the bell

The idea of the murals getting demolished saddened many people who'd come to love the murals during the almost 50 years they'd been at the JFK American Airlines terminal. One of those people was Darren Hoggard. He remembered seeing those murals as a kid and, as a Skycap Captain for American Airlines at JFK, he saw them every day at work. So it was not unusual for him to chat about the murals, and their uncertain future, to passengers whom he was assisting with luggage. One of those passengers was a woman on her way home to Brazil, who looked closely at the artwork and recognized the murals as the work of Carybé, a highly respected artist from her country. She flew home determined to try to figure out how to save the murals and began calling around.

Eventually, a plan fell into place: American Airlines would donate the murals to Miami-Dade County for display in the new terminal being built at Miami International Airport. Odebrecht, the Brazilian company building the airport's new terminal, would take on the responsibility and cost of removing the murals, restoring them, transporting them to Miami and having them installed in the new terminal.

The project wasn't as easy as they thought. Turns out, the murals weren't painted on canvas, so moving them wasn't a simple task of taking down frames, rolling up canvases, and transporting them to Miami. Carybé had painted the murals directly onto the terminal walls. So to save the murals, entire walls had to be removed.

And that's what they did: Each 6-ton mural was cut into panels about eight feet long. Then each panel was carefully crated and shipped first to a New York warehouse for restoration and then to Miami for installation in the new terminal. Yolanda Sanchez, Director of Fine Arts & Cultural Affairs at Miami International Airport, says the project involved not just refreshing the paint but repairing worn parts of the mural and replacing some of the gold leaf, coins, buttons, glass, mosaic pieces, and other small objects Carybé had used for ornamentation. The restoration team also attached each panel to a metal frame so that the murals could be safely hung on the walls in the new Miami airport terminal.

Murals at home in Miami

The murals are now safely installed in their new home in Miami International Airport and will be officially unveiled at a celebration on June 25th. Unfortunately, Carybé can't be there (he died in 1997), but his wife and son will be on hand, along with JFK skycap Darren Hoggard and others involved with saving and restoring the murals. After that, the public will be able to view the murals anytime, in the pre-security area of the south terminal, on the 3rd level of the international greeters lobby area.

In addition to the iconic public artwork, passengers will also be able to see an exhibit case filled with photos of Carybé at work on the murals as well as photos and a video documenting the restoration process. And even though American Airlines flights at MIA operate out of the north terminal, not the south terminal where the murals will be displayed, AA spokesperson Martha Pantín says the airline "just feels proud that this work of art is preserved and will continue to be enjoyed by passengers."

MIA's Yolanda Sanchez considers the murals a great addition to the airport's already well-respected permanent art program, but she says these Carybé murals represent much more than that to the airport and to the community. "Not only are we bringing a bit of aviation history here to Miami airport, but we're bringing some important art history here as well. And because we consider Miami to be the capital of the Americas, these murals will tell people arriving in Miami that they've arrived in a city that welcomes all of these different cultures as well."

Harriet Baskas writes about travel etiquette for MSNBC.com and is the author of the airport guidebook Stuck at the Airport and a [blog](#) of the same name.

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