

The Million Dollar Art Treasure of LaGuardia Airport

By Henry M. Holden



The exterior of the Marine Air Terminal. (Port Authority photo)

The next time you have the opportunity to travel to New York City, particularly if you fly into LaGuardia Airport, take an hour, or two, to wander over to Terminal A, also known as the Marine Air Terminal. Shuttle buses between terminals are readily available and a short ride (unless you arrive on a JetBlue flight) to Terminal A is well worth the time. As you enter the main terminal area, you will be experiencing what passengers during the Golden Age of flight did, as this terminal building is the oldest continuously operated commercial air terminal.

New York's LaGuardia is a busy airport, serving domestic and regional carriers. Over 75 years ago, however, it was the first important international gateway in the New York area.

Named for the one-time mayor of New York City, Fiorello LaGuardia, it was originally a small dirt runway called North Beach Airport.

LaGuardia, a licensed pilot and aviation proponent, once flew into New Jersey's Newark Airport. To the airlines of the



Aerial view of the Marine Air Terminal with a Boeing 314 at the dock. (Port Authority photo)

day, Newark was close enough to New York City (just across the Hudson River) to be considered "New York". LaGuardia's ticket read New York, and he refused to get off the plane in Newark. His dramatic stand forced the airline to fly him across the river and land at North Beach.

Newark Airport was growing and LaGuardia's actions were calculated to illustrate the need for another airport in his city. He had plans to put New York City on the map for air commerce and to make the New York City airport the air gateway to Europe.

The Depression-created Works Project Administration (WPA) provided funds for the new airport. Ground breaking took place in September 1937 and two terminals were built. The first, which was torn down and replaced in the 1960s, handled domestic traffic. The second called the "Marine Air Terminal" handled the Pan American Airways Clippers, large Boeing 314 "Flying Boats" capable of carrying up to 74 passengers across the ocean in only 19 hours with luxurious dining and sleeping accommodations.



Above: Three Pan American Boeing 314s anchored in Bowery Bay off the Marine Air Terminal. A fourth rests on its beaching gear on the adjacent parking ramp. (Photo from the Jon Proctor collection)

The Pan American Clippers made LaGuardia Airport an instant success. Although only 12 were manufactured, they built a solid reputation for dependability and a certain romance about flying that has not been seen again. They helped LaGuardia's Marine Air Terminal become the largest and busiest seaplane base in the United States. The last Pan American flying boat flight left the terminal in February 1952, bound for Bermuda.

The mayor decided to add a touch of class to the Marine Air Terminal. During the Depression, the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project (WPA) commissioned artists to paint murals on the walls and ceilings of government and public buildings.

LaGuardia went to the WPA seeking an artist to paint something in the Marine Air Terminal Rotunda. James Brooks was commissioned and his mural, "Flight," was the largest and last of the WPA murals. It is 12 feet three inches high, 235 feet around and took three years, from 1938 to 1942, to complete. The mural was LaGuardia's way of encouraging international commerce and great art. The mural, divided into three sections, had a very specific focus, said the artist. "The aim of the design is to identify the spectator with the broad scope of man's yearning for flight and its final recognition."

The first panel has a symbol of early flight—propeller blades. The mural begins with man oppressed by the unexplained violence of nature from which he cannot escape.

The author used a sacrificial altar to depict the concept of life after death and the idea that we can escape the bonds of earth through death. The mural conjures up visions of man escaping through the flames and sparks leaping upward.

Brooks also incorporated Greek mythology to illustrate our conquest of the air. Icarus, son of Daedalus, is shown having achieved flight. A small panel symbolizes man's early failures as Icarus is seen falling with melted wings, having ventured too close to the sun.

The religious origins of man's early thoughts of flight are illustrated in the large figure studying the mysteries of the heavens. The figure is seen holding a censer, an incense vessel used in religious ceremonies.



Close-up view of a large figure studying the mysteries of the heavens. The censer in his hand, (an incense vessel) was used in religious ceremonies. (From the author's collection, AAHS-S010280)

Leonardo Da Vinci, who discovered and tried to apply the modern laws of aerodynamics is seen holding an anemometer, measuring the wind velocity. He is also shown launching a model airplane of his own design while an apprentice studies the movement of a bird's wings.

Brooks used ancient towers, tall buildings and a skyscraper being built, the symbolic representation of our reaching ever upward from earth. To the right of this is Daedalus's flight.

Air currents are seen in another section moving around airborne shapes. The tear drop projectile and the spearhead are used to show a basic part of all aviation design, the study of air displacement.

Another panel shows the state-of-the-art in aviation of the day, a Pan American flying boat preparing to land at the Marine Air Terminal.

Orville and Wilber Wright are represented testing aircraft designs, followed by a basic tool of aviation, the vector chart, along with the mathematical calculations to guide air travelers. Flight engineers are also seen charting and guiding a flight.

The romance of the flying boats lasted until the end of WWII, when the land-based Douglas DC-4s and Lockheed Constellations began to replace the Clippers. The DC-4 was less glamorous but had greater range, speed and capacity. It could make Europe in 12 hours. And with the fading of an era, the Marine Air Terminal became less significant.

In 1952, Idlewild Airport also in Queens, N.Y. (now John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK)), opened and a shift in international travel began. Also in 1952, a tragedy befell the mural. For unknown reasons and authority, it was covered with a coat of white paint.

There are two versions of why this happened. One explanation can be understood if the political climate of the day is examined. It was during the McCarthy era and someone in the airport management "imagined" a hammer and sickle in the Icarus panel, so the entire mural was painted over.

Another version is the mural was considered out-of-date and offensive to the "modern 50s thinking". The reasoning was expanded to suggest the airport be cleaned up to encourage new business.



Man is shown frightened by forces of Nature he cannot explain. (From the author's collection, AAHS-S010278)



Shows man studying the flight of a bird. (From the author's collection, AAHS-S010279)



This panel shows Icarus, son of Daedalus having achieved flight. (From the author's collection, AAHS-S010275)



This panel shows DaVinci with an anemometer, measuring wind velocity. He is also shown launching a model airplane of his own design. In the background is an apprentice studying the movement of a bird's wings. (From the author's collection, AAHS-S010274)



Birds are shown in flight around the world. The black and white birds represent the aerodynamic forces of good and evil and their effects on flight. (From the author's collection, AAHS-S010277)



A figure is seen awaiting the arrival of a Pan American flying boat. To the right is the symbol of early flight, propellers. (From the author's collection, AAHS-S010276)



A modern couple is shown looking toward the heavens, the male figure has a compass in hand, as if he were plotting a course, the female has a pair of binoculars, as if awaiting the arrival of an airplane. (From the author's collection, AAHS-S010273)

For whatever reason, the mural was covered and for more than 20 years hidden from the public. In 1972, George L. “Tim” Pierce, the airport manager decided it should be restored. His wish however, was easier said than done. A great deal of money was needed for a project which he wasn’t sure would be successful.

Fate smiled on Pierce in the hand of the artist. When Brooks painted “Flight”, he used a paint combined with a glyptol and casein medium that made it impervious to moisture. It was this base that made restoration possible. The paint covering the mural was ordinary paint and because of its proximity to the salt water had begun to peel over the years.

The one-eighth inch coat of paint was still difficult to remove and had to be rubbed off a small area at a time. Moisture had aided in its removal and at the same time left the mural unaffected.

Finally, in 1977, through the efforts of Pierce, Brooks, a

\$75,000 donation by *Reader’s Digest* founders De Witt Wallace and Laurance Rockefeller, the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey and \$4,000 donated by historian and author Geoffrey Arend (*Great Airports: LaGuardia*), the mural was restored. The restoration took almost as long as it did to paint the mural and was rededicated in 1980.

Over the years the Marine Air Terminal at La Guardia has served a variety of operations include the Pan American Shuttle, Butler Aviation’s corporate jets and others. Today, JetBlue operates out of MAT and simulator provider FlightSafety International also uses the building.

When entering the terminal, one can be overwhelmed by a visual experience. “Flight” is a message of human achievement in aviation and our part in the adventure. This mural is now considered a landmark and valued at more than \$1,000,000. ➔



Various views of the Rotunda.





A larger view of the murals with the Wright brothers on the left with various airplane designs. (From the author's collection, AAHS-S010281)



Flight crewmembers are shown charting a flight with a Boeing 314 passing over. (From the author's collection, AAHS-S010282)



Various larger views of the murals.

