

La Passeggiata: Animal Neighbors of Arlington

A wheatpaste mural by Eileen de Rosas

- A stag leaps effortlessly over the Fox Branch Library doorway on Mass. Avenue, following a doe and her fawn dashing across the façade.
 - A family of bears ambles past the book drop—maybe there’s salmon or honey in there?
 - Three young foxes dash about, full of playful mischief, while their graceful mother smiles gently. Foxes are known to be good parents!
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Where have these animals come from? The imagination and paintbrush of artist Eileen de Rosas, who just completed the final public art project organized by Arlington Public Art as part of the town’s BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) pilot project, an initiative designed to improve public transportation—specifically the buses that travel along Mass Avenue. Titled “La Passeggiata; Animal Neighbors of Arlington” this large scale installation brings expressive portraits of local wildlife to the Fox Branch Library; the title refers to an Italian tradition of a leisurely walk or stroll to gather and socialize with neighbors.

According to Eileen, you don’t actually have to look very far to find animal families like these. She was inspired by a photo she saw of



a mother bear with two cubs wandering through a suburban neighborhood. They might seem out of place at first, but the artwork reminds us that bear

families need a home too. With forest habitat vanishing because of new development, more animals are likely to show up in areas where people live. If we want these beautiful and

fascinating creatures to survive, we will have to figure out how to share space with them. After all, they were here first.

Eileen’s initial project for the BRT pilot was a colorful hand-painted design of animal portraits for the bus shelter across the street from Arlington High School, including a raccoon, skunk, rabbit, local birds, and even a small coyote.

“For the bus shelter,” Eileen explained, “I wanted to emphasize the animals that would benefit from more use of public transit. Local animals would have a better life with less car traffic on the roads. There would be fewer of them squished on the road, and more of them running around. Also, I enjoy anthropomorphizing the animals to a certain degree. They are commuting on foot! In the direction of the bus, toward Cambridge, they run. The raccoon, especially, is running late to work.”

The Fox Branch Library generously hosted Eileen’s complementary art installation, and its exterior walls offered expanded space for a large-scale installation and larger animals. Eileen created artwork for the Library using a street art technique called “wheat paste”. Smaller scale originals, in this case paintings Eileen made with watercolor, are blown up and printed on big rolls of paper. Wheat paste transforms more intimate or even delicate art forms – drawings, prints and watercolors – into the scale required to boldly carry a public space.

While Eileen typically paints images of animals on ceramic bowls, plates, and pitchers, she welcomed the opportunity to go for a large impact. “I measured the building and scaled the images to the correct size. AIR Graphics in Watertown printed them on large format printers. The large images retain the wash effect of watercolor, and the looseness that watercolor imposes. It was crazy to see my sweet little bear be so large and almost as intimidating as the real thing.”

As with wallpaper, the images are pieced together and pasted to the wall. If you look closely you will see the seams in each large animal image. Shun Yamaguchi (Eileen’s husband – also an artist), Gerry Swislow (an Arlington Public Art volunteer) and Cecily Miller (the project organizer) helped with installation on a cold December Sunday, climbing ladders to reach the highest points and racing to finish while the sun was still bright so the wheat paste wouldn’t freeze.

Eileen brought graceful deer onto the wall to join her initial vision of bears. “[They] have such wonderful legs for suggesting motion, and a pleasing variety of form, so I knew they had to be on the wall,” she explained. Next, of course, came the library’s namesake fox. Finally, Eileen added two curving schools of fish swarming across the library walls on Cleveland Street. These are alewives, and their annual migration was an exciting event of her Arlington childhood: “Alewives come to spawn every year, and with the new fish ladders on the Mystic Lakes, maybe they will be more numerous in the future (fingers crossed).”

How is all of this being received by Library patrons? Ashley Waring, the Branch Manager reports: “We’re getting such great feedback from community members here at the Fox. Patrons of all ages have shared how much they love seeing the animal families on the

building. They really brighten everyone’s day.” Ashley and Eileen have come up with the idea to hand out copies of the original animal drawings so that children can write their own stories about them; just ask at the front desk.

This is the second large wheat paste project that Cecily Miller, Arlington’s public art curator, has organized for the exterior of the Fox Branch Library. “This deceptively modest neighborhood branch is actually a busy anchor of Capitol Square and a valued asset of the town’s new Cultural District” Miller explained. “It’s the perfect place to locate a major work of art and a statement about the town’s values of happy families and environmental stewardship.” Andrea Nicolay, the Director of Libraries, is also the coordinator for the Cultural District. Wearing both these hats, she stated that “From my perspective I’m thrilled the Fox exterior is being recognized and promoted as a canvas for public art projects. The poetry of a library with illustrations inside and out is just too good for words, and Eileen’s woodland animals are pitch-perfect for the season.”

The original inspiration for Eileen’s wheat paste murals came from the Arlington Department of Planning and Community Development’s important initiative to encourage residents to leave their cars at home. That message is still strong; you can reduce traffic and your carbon footprint, help preserve nature and protect animals by taking the bus. But another message shines through, which is the community’s love of its libraries. Eileen puts it simply: “The Fox Branch Library is the best library in the world.” She continues: “When my kids were young and I was at home with them, we practically lived there. Some of my best friends were made at that library....It joins all kinds of people together, from single people to families to older folks, to make a community.”