

Celebration of Oregon's diversity debuts at Portland airport

By Steven Tonthat
Oregon Public Broadcasting

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — At first glance, Eugene artist Liza Mana Burns' latest mural is a bright and colorful panorama depicting Oregon's diverse landscape.

However, the work — titled "Celebrate Oregon!" — actually contains images of 127 seemingly random objects: a wine bottle, a Chinook salmon, a comic book, the Siuslaw Bridge — all on display at Portland International Airport's Concourse B, near Alaska Airlines gates.

Individually, the objects depicted in the mural might seem inconsequential. But take a step back and you'll realize that every one of them represents a part of Oregon's history.

At the bottom left corner is a beer glass, a nod to Oregon's reputation as being at the forefront of the craft beer industry.

Shift your eyes to the right, and you might find the books *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula Le Guin and *Only What We Could Carry* by Lawson Fusao Inada, two of Oregon's most prominent writers.

Suddenly, the mural's message becomes clear: Oregon isn't a homogenous place.

Much like its diverse geography, the state is a collection of different people and customs that come together to form a giant cultural mosaic.

"You think culture is opera and ballet but it's everything. It's history, it's language, it's dance, it's food, it's indigenous culture," said Burns, the mural's creator.

While working on the project, Burns said, she learned a lot about aspects of Oregon's history that she was unaware of growing up.

"I didn't know who York was, which is embarrassing to say," Burns said, in reference to the African-American man who was an integral part of Lewis and Clark's expedition. "So we got to include him. I didn't know about the city of Vanport. So I learned a lot of pieces about Oregon history."

Vanport was the state's second largest city in the 1940s, before completely disappearing after a catastrophic flood in 1948.

Burns said that the most challenging part of the project was making sure to include all aspects of Oregon's history and culture.

She admitted that being a 32-year-old white woman meant that her worldview was inherently limited. So she reached out to various community leaders to learn about what she might be missing or getting wrong. "I said, 'I would like to work with people from the community to say, OK, what symbols are we missing?'"

Burns worked with volunteer cultural content experts like Chuck Sams III, an Oregon Cultural Trust board member and deputy executive director of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. Sams was recently named head of the National Park Service.

"He was helping with selection of the indigenous symbols and he brought up the American Indian movement. So we looked up that symbol and included that symbol," Burns said.

She also worked with Linda Castillo, the Diversity, Equity & Inclusion manager at the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO).

"She came up with the hummingbird and a sunflower,



"CELEBRATE OREGON!" The "Celebrate Oregon!" artwork, created to honor the diverse cultures that call Oregon home, is a vibrant tapestry of Oregon geography into which are woven 127 symbols that depict our shared arts, history, and humanities. Large 16-foot murals of "Celebrate Oregon!" have been installed at the airports in Eugene, Medford, Redmond, and Portland. (Image courtesy of the Oregon Cultural Trust)

which are two symbols that I didn't know had cultural meaning to Hispanic Oregonians," Burns said.

The hummingbird, she discovered, is treasured for its almost magical qualities and is an important symbol for the Mexican and Indigenous communities.

The sunflower has been used in Hispanic culture as ornaments, a food source, and as medicine.

Through those conversations, as well as many others, Burns selected the 127 elements that represented a part of Oregon's culture that, when looked at as a whole, make up the entire state.

Viewers can scan a special QR code with their phone that will lead to an interactive key to help decipher the meanings of the symbols.

The mural is the result of an 18-month long project by Burns and the Oregon Cultural Trust to commemorate the trust's 20th anniversary.

The Oregon Cultural Trust was created in 2001 by the Oregon state legislature and funds multiple arts and cultural projects across the state. According to the trust's communications manager, Carrie Kikel, the fund has raised more than \$74 million for arts and culture programs.

The trust is partially funded through a cultural tax credit, where a private donor will receive a tax credit for donating to the trust and any of the 1,500 cultural organizations across the state.

"In establishing the trust, the legislature was saying to Oregonians: 'We will fund culture with state dollars, but only if Oregonians tell us it matters to them,'" Kikel said.

In 2020, the Oregon Cultural Trust looked to revamp the artwork for their custom license plate, which was created to promote the cultural tax credit.

"We wanted to create a design that truly reflected all Oregon culture and all the diversity of Oregon culture. And that was a really lofty goal. How do you reflect all of Oregon's diverse cultures in that tiny space?" Kikel said.

After an extensive search process, the trust unanimously selected Liza Burns, in part due to her artist statement.

"She decided you have to start with this place, because if not for this place, there would be no culture, there would be no people, there would be no spirit of Oregon," Kikel said. "So how do you represent so many different cultures? You give them each a little piece of the real estate."

After seeing Burn's design, officials at the trust felt that her vision deserved a much bigger and more public platform.

So Burns turned her small license plate image into four large 16-foot murals that were installed at the airports in Eugene, Medford, Redmond, and Portland.

"Having murals at airports was really about how the artwork could serve as an introduction and really communicate who we are as a people and what we value," said Kikel.

Designing this public-art project opened Burns' eyes to the richness of culture in her home state. Ultimately, she hopes that people will take the time to pay attention to the little details in her mural.

"I really encourage people to use the QR code and learn about some of those symbols. I guarantee you'll find something you didn't know about Oregon, or a piece that you thought you knew, but you can learn more about."

To view the interactive key that explains the meanings of the 127 symbols contained within the "Celebrate Oregon!" artwork, visit <https://culturaltrust.org/celebrateoregon/license-plate-narrative/>.

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