

A British man has spent countless hours recording and researching the art found in Beijing subways

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Brian Salter takes a selfie with artwork inside the Jintailu subway station in Beijing. Photo: Courtesy of Brian Salter

If you take metros in Beijing, especially late at night, there is a good chance you may run into a tall British man walking around with a camera taking pictures of all the art and decorations within the stations. Passersby look at him strangely and curiously, but his passion for history and desire to learn about and capture every artistic element of the public transport system, keeps him going on his quest to document it all. Brian Salter, who is in his 60s, has lived and worked in Beijing for more than six years. For him, the Chinese capital city is like a fairyland full of surprises that has never ending paths to explore. Over the past year, artwork in Beijing's metro system has become the focus of his exploration.

The ignored artwork

Salter lives in the city center and takes subways and buses on a regular basis. He had always been attracted by the great diversity of the artwork, including sculptures, murals, calligraphy and special lighting in the metro stations and curious about the themes and stories behind them.

"I was mentioning this to someone one day, and I couldn't believe when she said she did not know there was any artwork in the subway. And she was a Beijinger! When I talked to a few other people, I got similar responses," he said.

As a man fascinated in art and Chinese culture, he could not bear that the delicate designs and art pieces were being ignored and wasted. Therefore, he decided to write a book about it and there started his journey full of exploration and discoveries with the Beijing metro.

In the following months, Salter would jump onto an underground train when he had free time and recorded everything in each of the stations and lines.

"Over the course of about three months, I took photographs of just about anything that could possibly be categorized as art, slowly ticking off each station as I visited it."

The project was time-consuming and in order to capture every piece of artwork, Salter had to walk up and down the linking passageways and go through every corner inside the station. To get a clear view of the artwork, he often had to wait for all the passengers to walk past, which could take a lot of time in crowded Beijing subways.

"The worst was the Beijing Zoo station, which I had to visit late in the evening when all the kids had gone home for the night," he laughed. Despite the difficulties, Salter gradually became more and more addicted to his metro project as he started to learn about the history and meanings of the art. Metro stations became a window for him to see and learn about Beijing's culture and history.



The mural in Jintailu subway station in Beijing. Photo: Courtesy of Brian Salter



A section of the mural Pastoral Sonata in Zaoyuan subway station in Beijing. Photo: Courtesy of Brian Salter



The whole art piece of the mural Pastoral Sonata is 33 meters long. Photo: Courtesy of Brian Salter