

Tyne and Wear Metro mural celebrates a quarter century

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A mural on the Tyne and Wear Metro featuring 14 of the region's most respected and well-loved faces is celebrating its 25th year.

The artwork, Famous Faces by former coal miner Rob Olley, has been seen by millions passing through the Monument Metro station since 1996.

Sponsored by Nexus, Metro's operator, the former pitman-turned-artist and sculptor set about painting caricatures of local personalities, shown looking out from the carriages of a train.

To convey the breadth of achievement spanning across the region, celebrities are depicted from a multitude of backgrounds, encompassing sport, entertainment, broadcasting, literature, music, acting and the church.

The famous faces painted in the mural are: Paul Gascoigne, Jimmy Nail, Sting, Cardinal Basil Hume, Mike Neville, Robson Green, Brian Johnson, Brendan Foster, Rowan Atkinson, Sir John Hall, Peter Beardsley, Dame Catherine Cookson, Tim Healy and Jack Charlton.

Olley's mural was created while he was working as an artist-in-residence at the Customs House Gallery in South Shields.

The boss of Nexus at the time, Mike Parker, loved the piece so much that he had it placed on display next to a busy staircase at Monument in the centre of Newcastle – the busiest station on the Metro network.

A film was commissioned by Nexus earlier this year to celebrate the many different pieces of public art on the Metro system over the last 40 years.

In that video, Bob Olley recounted how Famous Faces came to fruition and his feelings about the work he created.

He said: "I remember that I needed someone to open my exhibition at the Customs House and I asked the then director general of Nexus Mike Parker if he would help me out.

"I knew Mike quite well and thought if he's opening the exhibition at the Customs House for me then I'd do a painting for Nexus in return. I decided this idea of a railway carriage called famous faces, which would be a Metro carriage with all these local celebrities on board. People like Sting, Jimmy Nail and the late Mike Neville.

"When the exhibition was over with I was delighted to learn that the mural was going on permanent display at Monument Metro station – and it's still there to this day. I would love to know how many people have seen it. It's got to be in the millions.

"My family use Monument Metro station quite a lot and they always say that there's always somebody looking at the mural and trying to identify who all the people are in the carriage. The family like fact that people say 'oh, it was you're dad who painted that one'. It's nice to have something there that is your legacy."

Metro operations director, John Alexander, said: "Famous Faces is probably the most popular of the many artworks to be found dotted around our Metro and bus stations.

"We always felt the piece needed a wider audience, and it has been there now for 25 years. It sits next to one of the busiest staircases and is seen by millions of local residents and visitors to the region."