

This trolley tour will show you why Providence is still the renaissance city



Amy Russo, The Providence Journal



It's not often one sees a didgeridoo performance and a larger-than-life Buddha in one night. But on Gallery Night, it's just another evening.

Back from their pandemic-induced virtual tours on Facebook Live, the guided treks through Providence's art scene kicked off this month.

I joined the first trip of the season, filing into the lobby of the Graduate Providence hotel, where a cluster of tourists awaited the start of our excursion.

That's where I met our captain, Frank Toti, who's been at this for about five years. Ushering passengers outside and into a white trolley, he delivered his pitch: "I love food, so think of tonight as going to a tapas bar for art."



As I consider tapas its own food group, routinely scarfing down bar bites once a week, my interest was piqued.

At the press of a gas pedal, our chariot was off. With gusto, Toti, stationed at the head of the bus, directed the driver through downtown's twists and turns to a series of murals hidden between buildings. Our guest guide, Rebecca Leuchak, offered a history of the city's murals. We navigated around Gaia's iconic "Still Here" on Custom House Street honoring indigenous history, and Shepard Fairey's "Creativity, Equity, Justice" on Clemence Street, which marked the artist's 100th mural.

Fairey, a Rhode Island School of Design graduate who drew national attention with the Barack Obama campaign poster that featured the word "hope," made his first mark on the city during the 1990 mayoral election, defacing a Buddy Cianci billboard by covering the candidate's face with the head of André the

Giant. The next day, seeing that the billboard had been fixed, Fairey went to a Kinko's, printed out an even larger head and glued it on again.



As we meander through the city, Toti and Leuchak prompt riders to marvel at the artistry of its structures, from the Greek revival-style Arcade to the Turks Head Building, where we stopped for a look at BankRI's small gallery of works by David Everett. The artist was on-scene to chat with visitors as a tourist snapped photos of every sight, studiously documenting our excursion.

Then it was back onto the trolley, which climbed the East Side for our final stops, one to see the RISD Museum's massive Japanese Buddha, and another at Fox Point's Peaceable Kingdom, a gallery and gift shop that sells tribal textiles, silver snake earrings and Tibetan singing bowls, among other items.



In a back room, amid stacks of handwoven rugs, musician David Brown, sporting an all-black ensemble, played the didgeridoo.

As Toti said, when you look at it, "the city itself is art."

For a list of Gallery Night Providence's free walking and trolley tours, visit its website, www.gallerynight.org. Tours are held one night a month through November.