

Global Citizen

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NAME: Françoise Schein
LOCATION: Paris. Schein is originally from Brussels.
BACKGROUND: Schein is a visual artist, architect, and urban designer. She is also the founder of *Inscire* (inscire.com), a nonprofit organization that works internationally to create permanent public art installations about human rights. Inscire's projects include painted-tile murals in subway stations in Berlin, Brussels, Lisbon, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, and Stockholm.

BY SARA ROFFINO
ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN RITTER



Underground Artist

Françoise Schein transforms subway stations with thought-provoking art

About Inscire: "We work to spark discussion and reflection about human rights through art. The organization began in 1989 when I was working on a project related to the maps of Paris. I started studying the history of the city, how it was born, and I came across *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, which was signed during the French Revolution in 1789. I inserted text from that famous document into a drawing of the metro system, because I thought those ideas were part of the foundation of Paris. The declaration radically changed the city, the country, and even the world. My drawing eventually led to the design for the interior of the Concorde metro station in Paris, which is covered with tiles, each one printed with a letter from this same text. Now I am working on Inscire projects in places as far away as the favelas of São Paulo."

The point of art: "All of our projects are visible from the streets or in subway stations, because these are the most democratic places on earth. As people walk into the Concorde metro station, they see letters lining the walls. After a few minutes they realize the letters are not random, and they start to discover words. It might not be until they are in the train that they realize the text is about human rights—it's the declaration. But the goal is not to have people read the whole document. It's about creating a question in people's minds. That's the point of art—to make people think."

Place matters: "Inscire is about seeing human rights and history from a local point of view. In Rio de Janeiro, the tile works include locals' paintings that focus on slavery, indigenous people, and the destruction of the Amazon. In Stockholm, the tile murals depict the travels of 18th-century Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, as well as images of modern problems such as air pollution. In the metro in Brussels, thousands of letters from the text of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* [adopted unanimously by the United Nations in 1948] surround a zigzag line. This line represents all the borders of Europe put together, as if the countries were giving a hand to each other. We always work with the local people to decide how they want to represent their cultural themes."

A global effort: "Some Inscire projects begin because people come to my studio in Paris and are interested in learning more. Sometimes we approach schools or nonprofits in other countries. First we ask the participants about events in their lives that relate to a specific article of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. After discussing these ideas, everyone is asked to create an image that represents his or her experience of human rights. Finally, they paint these images onto ceramic tiles, which are eventually placed into the mural, along with a map of the city, neighborhood, or country, and the text of the declaration. Around the same table, you can work with middle-class people and underprivileged people, young and old, and everyone helps each other. The concept of human rights has a lot to do with all of our shared histories. These ideas go straight into people's hearts." ■