Secrets of Rockefeller Center

What you don't know about one of New York's top tourist attractions may surprise you, from the humble beginnings of its first Christmas tree to the famous men who once gave tours

Although it’s hard to believe it now, Rockefeller Center was a grand experiment that many people thought would fail when John D. Rockefeller Jr. began it in 1930. Today, of course, Rockefeller Center is one of the most lively and popular destinations in New York City, whether for its famed Christmas tree and ice skating in the winter, its open airy plazas and outdoor dining in the warmer months, or, of course, its year-round shopping. The mostly Art Deco complex stretches from 48th to 51st streets and 5th to 6th avenues, the now encompasses 19 buildings, including Radio City Music Hall and the NBC Studios. Read on for the curious history behind its beginnings, its bumpy acceptance as a place of architectural significance in the city, the hidden gardens that can only be seen from above and more secrets of Rockefeller Center.

It almost wasn’t built
Rockefeller Center almost didn’t even get off the ground, as the original plan to build a new home for the Metropolitan Opera derailed with the 1929 stock market crash. Rockefeller switched gears for the site to commercial and assumed sole responsibility for the financing of what, at the time, was the largest private development project in the city. The 22-acre project, completed in 1939, was amazingly built over the course of the Depression and employed 75,000 people during its construction.

At first, critics didn’t rave
Lewis Mumford — historian, urban planner and architecture critic for The New Yorker while Rockefeller Center was being built — was one of the complex’s harshest critics. In 1931, he wrote in his “Sky Lines” column, “If Radio City, as now forecast, is the best that could be done, there is not the faintest reason for anyone to attempt to assemble a big site. Chaos does not have to be planned.” In 1933, when much had already been completed, he opined, “The ornamental features are no less painful than its more utilitarian efforts. … I cannot find a word of even faint praise for any of the sculptural or graphic decoration now visible on any of the buildings. … The whole effect of the Center is mediocrity — seen through a magnifying glass.” (He particularly detested the “idiotic figure of Atlas.”) But by 1940, he had softened his opinion a bit. “In spite of all these handicaps, Rockefeller Center has turned into an impressive collection of structures; they form a composition in what unity and coherence have to a considerable degree diminished the fault of overemphasis. In other words, they get by.”

Mural madness
In 1932 Nelson Rockefeller, son of John D., wanted a mural for the lobby of what was then the RCA Building (now the GE building) at the heart of the complex. He wasn’t able to get Matisse and Picasso so eventually the famed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera was brought on to tackle the theme “Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future.” Rivera’s leftist political views were anything but secret at the time, so perhaps it shouldn’t have come as a surprise when a newspaper report revealed that the near-finished 63-foot-long fresco included a portrait of Vladimir Lenin. Rockefeller was incensed, but Rivera refused to remove the offending Soviet leader, and the mural was never displayed or finished; instead it was covered over and finally destroyed in early 1934 by ax-wielding workers. It was replaced with an even larger mural, “American Progress” by Spanish artist Josep Maria Sert. It’s still on view and includes less inflammatory figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

From tin cans to $1.5 million topper
The space in front of 30 Rockefeller Plaza is best known for its role in hosting the famed Christmas tree, but its
beginnings were humble. The first-ever Rock Center tree was hoisted in 1931 by Depression-weary workers looking for some extra hours and decorated thriftily with tin cans and scrap paper. Nowadays, the star on top is a 550-pound, $1.5 million Swarovski crystal number, and the branches twinkle with 30,000 LED lights. The tree itself is a Norway spruce measuring 65-plus feet, located each year by a helicopter crew that takes reconnaissance flights over New England. It’s not just a blank slate the rest of the year, though — the space has been home to some wild creations. In 2000, it hosted Jeff Koons’s 43-foot “Puppy,” made of 70,000 flowering plants, and in 2001 Louise Bourgeois’s decidedly more sinister “Maman,” a 30-foot-tall spider accompanied by two smaller arachnids, made an appearance.

**Art hidden in plain sight**
It worked in Rockefeller Center’s favor that John D. Rockefeller Jr. and his wife Abby Aldrich Rockefeller were great patrons of the arts, although they disagreed on aesthetics — he never cared for the modernist works that inspired her to found the Museum of Modern Art. Thanks to their influence, however, Rockefeller Center is filled with spectacular sculptures, bas-reliefs, murals and mosaics. The golden Prometheus overseeing the skating rink and Atlas shouldering his burden on Fifth Avenue are two of the plaza’s most famous, but there are several other highlights not to miss. Look above the entrance of 1250 6th Avenue to take in Barry Faulkner’s 79-foot-long glass tile mosaic, “Intelligence Awakening Mankind,” which depicts the triumph of knowledge over ignorance. Likewise, step inside the lobby of the International Building on Fifth Avenue to be dazzled by “Light and Movement,” a gilded abstraction commissioned in 1978 by Nelson Rockefeller. Another stunner is the swooping stainless steel bas-relief “News” by Isamu Noguchi, which adorns the Associated Press building at 50 Rockefeller Plaza and features antiquated tools of the trade such as the land-line telephone.

**Rock-whats?**
Ever wonder how the Rockettes of Radio City Music Hall got its name? The troupe was originally the Roxyettes and was brought to Radio City by the showman and entrepreneur Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel, the original operator of the venue. Rothafel made his name as a movie theater impresario in 1910s and 1920s, creating a magical experience for the patrons of luxe establishments such as the Capitol and the Roxy by incorporating orchestral music and dance into an evening at the movies. He was also one of the first recognizable stars of broadcast radio.

**Secret gardens**
You won’t be able to see the secret gardens unless you go to the Top of the Rock or another lofty vantage point, but there are five rooftop gardens atop La Maison Francaise, the British Empire Building, and the setbacks of other central buildings. These meticulously planted and maintained oases were designed by the famed landscape architect Ralph Hancock and were opened to the public in 1935. According to the Hancock estate, 3,000 tons of earth, 500 tons of bricks, 20,000 bulbs, 100 tons of stone, 2,000 trees and shrubs made their way up 11 floors either via a service elevator or block and tackle to create the sanctuary. The estate reports that the first seven months the gardens were open, they attracted more than 87,000 visitors who paid $1. Despite their beauty, they closed in 1938, and their design has changed significantly over the years. These days, ordinary mortals are not generally allowed to stroll the verdant paths, so take an extra-long look from above as it’s likely the only one you’ll get.

**Famous guides**
Oh to go back in time and take a tour with actor Gregory Peck and the philosopher-monk Thomas Merton, who each served brief, improbable stints as guides at Rockefeller Center. You can still take a variety of tours today, focusing on Rockefeller Center, the NBC Studios or Radio City Music Hall. No guarantees on whether your guide will be a swoon-worthy future movie star or a great spiritual thinker, but you’ll definitely learn something new.

**Underground action**
Not all the action at Rockefeller Center is in the skyscrapers or even at street level. There’s also a bustling world underground, accessible by heading downstairs at 30 Rock. You’ll find a great viewing area for the skating rink; a full array of food and services including a shoeshine and shoe repair shop; a full post office; and even a “private service bureau” that will help you with DMV renewals, passport and visa applications, and similar dreary bureaucratic chores (for a fee, of course). You’ll also find access to several subway lines underground, and if you’re
persistent, you can proceed west all the way to 7th Avenue and the N, Q, R station there through a serene white hallway decorated with gently glowing panels of colored lights, avoiding the chaos above. It’s kind of like being on a spaceship.

The Art of Rockefeller Center: Top 10 Things Not to Miss

Rock Center is an open-air museum in the heart of NYC. Make time in your itinerary for these ten masterpieces

The annual elevation of the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center, with its 550-pound Swarovski crystal star, adds perhaps the sparkliest, and most organic, piece of art to a center already laden with them. In fact, for the Rockefellers’ original team of developers, the installation and promotion of art was an act of good citizenship. Architects Raymond Hood, Wallace K. Harrison and Max Abramovitz — who built Rockefeller Center from 1930 to 1939 — imbued a refined Art Deco design throughout the limestone buildings and an upward thrust to symbolize humanity’s progress toward new frontiers. For further artistic adornments, Rockefeller entrusted his son Nelson with bringing in and handling the world’s best artists, including the muralist Diego Rivera, whose work was perhaps the building’s most famous art controversy. But there’s no debate about the exquisite results of this open-air museum that continues to draw approximately 350,000 visitors each day, all of whom hopefully leave inspired by these artistic treasures. For an informative overview, explore the center with a Rockefeller Center Tour.

Atlas

Defeated in the war against the Olympic gods in Greek mythology, the half-man, half-god Atlas was condemned to carry the world on his shoulders as punishment. No doubt, it’s a feeling shared by many of the workers passing by the Rock’s four-story, seven-ton bronze version that sits across Fifth Avenue from St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Conceived and designed by Lee Lawrie and Rene Chambellan, Atlas looks particularly grim underneath the 21-foot-diameter armillary sphere representing the heavens. In fact, the likeness and expression reminded many at the time of its 1937 instillation of the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, prompting painter James Montgomery Flagg to quip that it “looks too much as Mussolini thinks he looks.” Most of his contemporaries agreed, raising the issue of melting it down for scrap during World War II. Luckily, it wasn’t, and survived to find fame (and infamy) on U.S. postage stamps and covers of Ayn Rand books.
Wisdom
Another gem from architectural sculptor Lee Lawrie, this Art Deco icon leans over the entrance to the GE Building of Rockefeller Center. The prophetic spirit with the flowing beard gazes downward, with no small measure of intimidation, gripping a compass splayed open around a biblical verse from Isaiah, “Wisdom and Knowledge shall be the stability of thy times.” Modeled on the engraving Urizen by English poet William Blake, Lawrie has enlivened the polychrome bas-relief further with a swath of amber glass blocks by the Corning Glass Company and flanking figures representing sound and light — radio and television, in homage to the local media stations in the area, like NBC.

Prometheus
Probably the best-known and most photographed sculpture at Rockefeller Center, this gilded bronze 18-foot-long statue by sculptor Paul Manship dominates Rockefeller Center’s Lower Plaza (and ice skating rink). Fleeing Zeus, the lithe, naked titan carries the fire stolen from Mount Olympus to give to humans, an act that earned him an eternity of chains and liver-pecking torment. Around him, clouds swirl and brace a large golden ring depicting the signs of the Zodiac, while below a mountain peak reaches up, fixing his figure between heaven and earth. On a red-granite backdrop, an inscription of Aeschylus instructs, “Prometheus, Teacher in Every Art, Brought the Fire That Hath Proved to Mortals a Means to Mighty Ends.” Unveiled in 1934, the eight-ton work won immediate admiration from most, including the New York Times, which called it “a genuine masterpiece, beautiful in its rhythm.” Manship, however, was less enthused, wishing to redo it altogether. Its failure to draw more customers to the surrounding shops was evident in the subsequent decision to install the ice skating rink. This coupling quickly turned it into one of New York’s most popular spots.
News
When the Associated Press moved into Rockefeller Plaza, it wanted a suitably grand and heroic symbol of the business and power of journalism. Bursting from a tightly wound core above the entrance to 50 Rockefeller Plaza, five reporters enthusiastically explode in all directions in pursuit of the latest scoop — by camera, notepad, a typewriter, on the wire and on the phone. For the then-34-year-old sculptor Isamu Noguchi, the 1940 unveiling was a smashing success, not just for the technical skill of piecing together nine separate pieces cast in stainless steel (making it the largest and heaviest stainless steel sculpture in the world), but also for the undeniably dynamic effect, which launched his career (and bank account) into the big time, eventually winning special treatment at the Noguchi Museum in Astoria.

American Progress
The interior lobby wall of the GE Building was the site of Rockefeller Center’s most infamous art scandal. Having failed to contract Picasso and Matisse, Nelson Rockefeller approached Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, who after much hemming and hawing, agreed to paint a color fresco with the theme “Man at the Crossroads Looking with Hope and High Vision to the Choosing of a New and Better Future.” Sketches were drawn up, approved and Rivera set to work. Here the story diverges sharply between the artist and employers, who looked aghast as an altogether different work took shape, which featured Vladimir Lenin, Karl Marx and, according to David Rockefeller Sr., a picture of his father “drinking martinis with a harlot.” Rivera refused to change the piece, so it was subsequently destroyed and replaced with Catalan artist Jose Sert’s American Progress, an allegorical depiction of America’s development through brain and brawn, showcasing Abraham Lincoln, Ralph Waldo Emerson and other titanic men of action.
Friendship Between America and France
The special bond between France and the United States, nurtured since the days of the Revolution, gets special tribute in this shiny gilded panel by Alfred Janniot above the main entrance to La Maison Francaise at 610 Fifth Avenue. Probably the least Deco of all the Rock’s art, the work is read top to bottom, beginning with two almost Art Nouveau-style women representing Paris (cradling Notre Dame) and New York City (sitting before skyscrapers) holding hands atop ships indicating trade between the two countries. Below, three female graces depict Poetry, Beauty and Elegance in mythical fashion — the first standing on a winged horse; the second, fully nude, releasing her long cascading hair; and the third, half-nude, cupping a blooming rosebush.

Top of the Rock Observation Deck
In 1933, the vast majority of international travelers to New York still arrived by steamship. The concept was applied to the Rock’s original observation deck, which was designed to resemble the grand (and no doubt, first class) upper decks of an ocean liner of that era, complete with deck chairs, gooseneck fixtures and vents echoing smoke stacks. The effect was enough to inspire visiting General Charles de Gaulle to ask, “Où est Coney Island?” during a 1944 visit. The roof is also the site of the famous 1932 photograph by Charles C. Ebbets of workmen dangling on a beam above the city while eating lunch. Look down to the rooftops on La Maison Francaise and the British Empire Building for a view of the Rock’s most impressive topiary art — these are “secret gardens,” currently off-limits to non-employees. Also be sure to turn the head the other way in the lobby while awaiting the elevator to the Top of the Rock for a view of Michael Hammers astonishing 14,000-crystal chandelier, which depicts an inverted view of the building itself. For more juicy tales, watch our the Secrets of Top of the Rock.
Girl and Goose
Originally, three nude statues were commissioned for the interior of Radio City Music Hall, but Samuel Lionel “Roxy” Rothafel, the theatrical impresario who installed the Music Hall inside, considered the images not to be family-friendly, despite the Rockefellers’ objections. “Mrs. Rockefeller may like them; Mr. Rockefeller may like them,” he declared, “But I don’t like them. I think they’re ugly. Take them out.” Eventually, the aluminum *Girl and Goose*, by sculptor Robert Laurent, was allowed on opening night and now stands in the first mezzanine. (The other statues, *Eve* by Gwen Lux and *Spirit of the Dance* by William Zorach were later installed.) Graceful and reserved, the statue symbolizes the coupling of man and nature — and the simple life. The tinted mirror behind reflects the back of the pale gray statue in a warm golden brown.

Acts of Vaudeville
The art of Rockefeller Center finds its most whimsical expression in these six playful bronze plaques by Rene Paul Chambellan under the marquee of Radio City Music Hall, which depict various acts of a vaudeville show, still the dominant live entertainment of the day. The ethnic makeup of 1930s New York is also on full display: Rockettes kick in precision, as does a Russian dancer below five balalaika playing minstrels. In the others, a French cellist, German accordionist, Jewish drummer, two black banjo players and a tap dancer, plus other comic touches, like dog in a clown costume, joyfully entertain the crowds, much like the performers inside the hall.
Intelligence Awakening Mankind
Perhaps nowhere in Rockefeller Center are the family’s efforts to elevate humanity more evident than in the stunning curved Byzantine-like mosaic by Barry Faulkner above the doors of the GE Building’s western entrance. Composed of more than one million glass tesserae (cube-shaped tiles) in 250 colors, the work celebrates the victory of knowledge over ignorance. The central figure of thought, eyes closed and contemplative, stands on a cloud full of radio waves above the world, flanked by two figures representing the written word (holding a quill) and the spoken (gesturing in speech). From either side, the messengers of news, politics, poetry, religion, drama and music fly out, bestowing their gifts on humanity. Beyond, figures of ignorance fall into Dantesian hellfire. The mosaic may soon find yet more exposure owing to the efforts of Tonight Show host Jimmy Fallon, who wants to replace the existing three-part marquee with a single, giving the mosaic better visibility and lighting.