

A Brief History of Street Painting

Artist | Architect

In cities and towns throughout the world pedestrians may see a patch of sidewalk or paved surface decorated with chalk or pastels. Although this art form is new to most countries, it has a long tradition in Europe and is thought to have originated in Italy during the 16th century.

Italian madonnari were vagabond artists noted for a life of travel between festivals, and were the visual arts counterpart of minstrels. They often lived solely from the coins tossed onto or next to their drawing as homage to the Madonna and possibly their skill. They arrived in towns and cities to paint religious pictures directly on the beaten earth or paved public squares, using chalk, brick, charcoal, and colored stones as their medium. In Italy, street painters are called Madonnari after their practice of reproducing images of the Madonna (St. Mary). Their work is tied to the rich history of Italian religious art, and is connected to icons, as well as votive and ex-voto paintings (an offering given either prior to, or in gratitude for an answered prayer or miracle).

For centuries madonnari were true folk artists, reproducing simple images with minimal materials. During the Second World War these artists suffered many hardships and were greatly reduced in number. Thanks to the International Street Painting Festival in Grazie di Curtatone in Northern Italy the art form has been revitalized. Today a growing number of artists are carrying on the tradition and are introducing new images and materials.

*International Street
Painting Festival in
Grazie di Curtatone*

Kurt Wenner has combined traditional street painting techniques along with classical

training, illusion, and performance to invent an art form all his own. This has come to be known as anamorphic, illusionistic, or 3D street painting. Wenner's development of this technique is featured in the National Geographic documentary *Masterpieces in Chalk*. Artists using this technique today can trace it back to Wenner's invention in the early 1980's. His three-dimensional images have inspired festivals and public events throughout the world, as well as others to continue the practice of bringing images of icons and popular culture to an ever changing public. While the art form continues to develop one thing has remained unchanged, madonnari and their paintings continue to vanish after a festival, or with the first rains.

