

THE ART AND HISTORY OF STREET PAINTING

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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. Despite this, a small number of them continued working into the 1980's. Thanks to the International Street Painting Festival in Grazie di Curtatone in Northern Italy they received recognition for their efforts. They also witnessed the revitalization and transformation of their art into a worldwide phenomenon.

Parallel to this tradition in Italy, street painters began appearing in London, England in the mid-nineteenth century. These artists were called “screevers,” a term that refers to the written message that generally accompanied their works. An early reference book places the origin of the word “screeve” to Scotland or Holland, but it is as likely that the word comes from the Italian “scrivere,” pronounced scree-ver-eh, as it also links the two traditions. Although there is little documentation by the Italians regarding their madonnari, the Victorians were interested in the lower class and documented their street painters. In the 1930's both George Orwell and Pamela Lyndon Travers wrote about street painters. Travers' character of Bert the screever became further popularized in the Disney film *Mary Poppins*.





In the early 1970s, street painting began to have a small resurgence in Italy. The festival in Grazie focused attention on the art form, and European art students began to join the ranks of the surviving folk artists by creating ephemeral chalk

images and setting out their caps for donations. A few of these artists traveled to the United States, but the only artist from this decade to make a lasting contribution is Robert Guillemain, who is known as “Sidewalk Sam.”

In the early 1980s, the artist Kurt Wenner became the first American to join the ranks of the Italian madonnari. He began street painting in Rome, Italy in 1982 and worked with Manfred Stader from time to time. In the same year, Wenner returned to the United States to introduce Italian street painting at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Upon his return to Italy, it wasn't long before he became the first American artist to win the top prize at the Grazie di Curtatone competition for three consecutive years and receive the title *Master Street Painter*. By 1985 Wenner's art had captured the attention of many, including the



National Geographic Society who filmed the documentary *Masterpieces In Chalk* in that year. In 1986 Wenner started the first street painting festival in the US and called it *I Madonnari* after the Italian name for street painters. The festival was held at the Old Mission Santa Barbara, California. Over the course of the next decade Wenner went on to teach over a hundred thousand artists and students the art of street painting, and started a number of other festivals, including one in Pasadena, California that has now grown to be one of the world's largest.



From the first US festival in 1986 to the present day, street painting has grown exponentially. The majority of the American artists now participating in this field were introduced to the art form through the annual Santa Barbara festival during the 1980s. Currently there are between 50 and 100 street painting festivals in the US each year. In addition to this there are a growing number of festivals worldwide, particularly in Europe, Mexico and Australia.



THE HISTORY OF 3D STREET PAINTING

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In 1982 Kurt Wenner combined traditional street painting techniques with his classical training and understanding of illusion to invent an art form all his own. This has come to be known as *anamorphic*, *illusionistic*, or *3D street painting*. In 1985, National Geographic documented Wenner's unique and innovative works of art in their award-winning film *Masterpieces in Chalk*. Today all artists creating 3D street paintings can trace its origins back to Wenner's invention. Many incorrectly

believe that the geometry Wenner employs existed historically, however this is simply not true. There are no such existing images from the past (nor were they made and lost over time). Wenner's geometry was *inspired* by the great Roman baroque ceilings of the 17th century, but he had to work out how such an idea could be applied to a surface close to the viewer that was seen at an oblique angle.

By 1986, Wenner had created a number



of signature 3D images such as *Muses* and *Dies Irae*. The widespread use by the media of these images popularized the art form and inspired many to take it up. Brian Davis and Elise McConnell were among the very first to take up the art form. Both of these extremely talented artists inspired enthusiasm in others for this new form of 3D art. Over the next decade 3D street painting grew exponentially. Many artists such as Rod Tryon and Tracy Lee Stum began their careers by street painting at US festivals. Other artists like Genna Panzarella and Melanie Stimmel excelled in traditional street painting, which is now also called 2D street painting. In the 1990s some of these artists followed Wenner's footsteps to the village of Grazie to compete at the festival where Wenner first earned the title *Master Street Painter*. Several of these artists have won awards and a few have also been given the title *Master Street Painter*.



In 1996 Absolut Vodka commissioned Wenner as part of their artist ad series. The print ad *Absolut Wenner* launched the art form into the world of advertising. Nowadays street painting can be seen in commercials, movies, print ads, and on the street as a means of

promotion. With commissions for even larger and more complex images a shift has occurred to emphasize the art and not its ephemeral nature. Wenner has been at the forefront of transitioning street painting to pavement art, and has led the way forward with art that is more engaging and interactive. This evolution has become known as Interactive 3D Pavement Art.



As the field of street painting has grown, a few artists have used the Internet to create confusion about the authorship of images in hope of advancing the public's recognition of their personal work. This has been an unfortunate aspect of an otherwise incredible artistic movement that has become a global phenomenon over the years.