

Street Art

When my husband and I travel, one of our favorite activities is exploring places with vibrant street art. Since the Dataw Visual Arts Club's current exhibit is called "Street Art," I thought I would share some background on street art, where to see it, and some of our top discoveries. What is Street Art? Street art is a form of visual art created in public spaces, sometimes as unsanctioned works (e.g., graffiti). Street art allows artists to engage directly with the public, free from the confines of art galleries. Street Art can trace its roots back to at least the Paleolithic period (the Stone Age), when artists painted on cave walls. The Lascaux Grottoes, for example, in southern France (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), discovered in 1940, contain 600 parietal (art in caves) wall and ceiling paintings. Their age is estimated at approximately 17,000 – 21,000 years old.



Street art in the contemporary era arose from the proliferation of graffiti in the late 1960's, concentrated in cities like New York and Philadelphia. Using materials such as aerosol paint, graffiti artists surreptitiously "tagged" bridge overpasses, subway cars, building walls, and other public spaces. Their exploits were a form of rebellion; their message was frequently political. Though the artists' real identities were often unknown, their work was often recognizable by its signature style. Graffiti was a competitive pursuit, often with the goal of covering a city with as many "tags" as possible. While the artists themselves saw their work as an expression of personal identity, city officials viewed it as urban blight, prompting aggressive campaigns to eradicate it.

Among the artists who emerged from the graffiti culture into the “mainstream” is **Keith Haring (1958-1990)**. He became popular for his drawings in New York City subways, often depicting chalk outlines of dogs or humans. He went on to create larger murals, frequently commissioned and sometimes voluntarily, for hospitals and schools. The Whitney Museum held a retrospective of his work in the late 1990s.

One of Haring’s best-known works is a poster created in 1989 for the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), a New York-based AIDS activist group. The poster’s message is the public’s ignorance of the AIDS epidemic.



Another American artist who emerged from the graffiti culture is **Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988)**. Basquiat first gained notoriety as part of the graffiti duo SAMO, scribbling enigmatic poems on buildings throughout Lower Manhattan. By the late 1970s, Basquiat was painting and selling T-shirts and postcards whose style might best be described as a combination of graffiti art and Abstract Expressionism. Graffiti marks would be an XX aspect of his work throughout his short, but stellar, career as a mature artist. The Museum of Modern Art called him a “bona fide art world star”. Basquiat died of a heroin overdose at the age of 27, having created some 600-1,000 paintings in less than 10 years, mostly reflecting his hallmark combination of imagery and text. His painting *Untitled* is one of the most expensive paintings by an American artist ever sold at public auction, \$110.5 million in 2017.



The British artist **Banksy** began as an outlaw spray painter in the 1990s and has grown into an artist whose work has sold for \$25 million at auction. To this day, Banksy's identity has never been officially confirmed, although an investigation suggested he is likely a person named Robin Gunningham. His work is still often created in public spaces without permission. In a 2013 article, *Smithsonian Magazine* referred to the artist Banksy as a "graffiti master." He was also listed among *Time Magazine's* 100 most influential people of 2010.

One of Banksy's most famous pieces is *Girl With Balloon*. This stencil-based mural was originally painted in 2002 on the Waterloo Bridge in London. In 2018, a framed copy from 2006 was auctioned at Sotheby's and sold for over \$25 million. After the gavel fell, the piece destroyed itself using a mechanical paper shredder built into the bottom of the frame by Banksy. The buyer decided to proceed with the purchase; the partially shredded work was renamed *Love Is in the Bin*. The original of *Girl With Balloon* is shown below.



To combat graffiti, a number of U.S. cities have instituted public art programs designed in part to harness creative energy and help revitalize the city and tell its stories. Today, many cities and towns in the US and abroad see street art as a significant tourist draw.

In February 2026, USA Today listed what it considered the top ten US cities for street art. Ranked from 1 to 10: Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Albuquerque, Jackson TN, Milwaukee, Detroit, Denver, San Francisco, Rapid City, and Tucson.

Philadelphia's claim to fame began in 1984 with the creation of the Mural Arts Program (now Mural Arts Philadelphia), which aims to transform public spaces. Today, Philadelphia, known as the Mural Capital of the World, features over 4,000 outdoor artworks created over the past forty years. Many of these are collaborative efforts between artists and volunteers. Some have been created by former graffiti artists who faced the choice of jail or participating in the program. Here are a few photos from our Philadelphia murals walks.



You can see more photos of Philadelphia murals at <https://muralarts.org/artworks/>

Other cities in the U.S. where we have found a treasure trove of street art, not even in the top ten:

Chicago: Chicago has over 400 murals, many depicting the stories and contributions of its immigrant communities.



Richmond: Richmond, “a city that thinks of its streets as a canvas for creativity”. has over 150 murals.



Oklahoma City:

Praised by USA Today in 2025 as a “veritable outdoor gallery”, and chosen as the best for street art in 2021 and 2022, Oklahoma City has a vibrant street art scene.



Elko, NV: Despite its small population of about 20,000, Elko has an impressive amount of street art. The town features around 60 public murals, created during the 2019 Elko Mural Expo. Mostly located within a one-square-mile area of downtown, these murals depict local history and culture, such as its Basque heritage and cowboy traditions.



Then there's the rest of the world. Depending on who you ask, here are some of the best: Melbourne, Berlin, London, Paris, Valparaiso, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Sydney, Montreal, and Mexico City. But they're not the only places with amazing street art. Here are a few cities we've visited that have outstanding street art.

Lyon: More than a hundred frescos cover the walls in Lyon and retrace its history. They have been mostly created by the eighty architects, painters, and landscapers of the company CitéCréation.



Zaragoza: Besides being home to the Goya Museum and the Palacio de la Aljafería, Zaragoza hosts the annual Festival Asalto, one of the oldest street art festivals in Europe, usually held in September.



Christchurch, NZ: Christchurch's street art scene started to boom after the devastating earthquake in 2011, when local artists began decorating damaged buildings with vibrant art. Over 750 pieces of street art, including large murals, have been created by both local and international artists. The city was named a global street art capital by Lonely Planet in 2017 and has been called the Street Art Capital of New Zealand. Christchurch is also home to New Zealand's tallest mural, a 13-story piece by local artist Jacob Yikes for the Flare Ōtautahi Street Art Festival in 2025 (see first photo below). If you're planning a trip to New Zealand and love street art, Napier (North Island) and Nelson (South Island) also feature lively murals.



Although it might seem to be a contradiction in terms, there are museums devoted to Street Art. One of the best is the **STRAAT Museum in Amsterdam**. The 86,000-square-foot former warehouse contains over 180 large-scale pieces by more than 170 artists. Each piece was created on-site.





Closer to home is **Wynwood Walls**, which calls itself Miami's Original Street Art Museum, with murals covering 80,000 square feet, in addition to large-scale art installations in between. The transformation of Wynwood into a well-renowned arts district was the brainchild of the developer and arts advocate Tony Goldman, who saw potential in the empty warehouses and industrial spaces. Wynwood Walls was launched in 2009 during Art Basel and now features art of more than 100 artists from over 20 countries.





Did you know? There's a **Street Art app called Street Art Cities**. It provides maps of artwork locations in major cities, along with photos and walking or cycling tours. Street Art Cities also annually reviews the murals created during the year, with a combination of an expert jury and community votes determining the best one. The 2025 winner was KLE, a Greek visual artist, for his Kalamata mural of Maria Callas. The 2025 best street art city award went to Madrid for its '425 masterpieces.'"



Photo credits go to John McShane for Philadelphia, Chicago, Richmond, Oklahoma City, Elko, Lyon, Zaragoza, Christchurch, and the STRAAT Museum.