

Chalk

it up to the **Madonnari**

Young international artists revive an ancient folk art



"I love the interaction with the crowd," says Madonna Mark Cummings seen here at work on the streets of Florence, Italy.



Photo (above and opposite page) Courtesy of Mark Cummings/www.chalkpainting.com

by Lorraine Thompson

ON THEIR HANDS AND KNEES they work in the hot sun at Grazie di Curtatone, Italy. With pigment-stained fingers they illuminate the pavements of Santa Barbara, San Rafael and Mission Viejo, California. They do it to praise God. They do it to stay clean of drugs and gang violence. They are 30-something American college students. They are 80 year old Italian artisans. They are teenage Latino tag and graffiti painters. They are *Madonnari*, a diverse group of international artists who use chalk and pastels to create large-scale sacred paintings on streets, sidewalks and piazzas around the world.

Madonnari—so-called because traditionally they painted the Madonna and other holy images—are believed to have roots that stretch back to the Middle Ages when street painters traveled from town to town following the church’s calendar of holidays and saint’s feasts. A *Madonnaro* arrived in a village piazza, set up his hand-ground pigments and began work. Crowds gathered around the compelling performance art to watch as cobbles and brick were transfigured into a holy saint or the Blessed Virgin.

OPPOSITE PAGE Vermeer’s *Girl With a Pearl Earring*, reproduced by Cummings on the pavement where city street cleaners refused to wash away the painting.

Compensation was immediate: bread, olive oil, cheese and—on a good day—coins, in

direct proportion to the painter’s ability to move, inspire and astonish the townspeople.

For hundreds of years Italy’s *Madonnari* remained anonymous and local, but the 20th century’s world wars, social upheavals and shifting borders altered the old artisans’ ways of life. Driven by homelessness and hunger, the few remaining *Madonnari* were forced to travel further and further to earn their ever-shrinking loaf of daily bread.

“By the 1970’s people thought this was a dying art form,” says Kurt Wenner, 45, a celebrated contemporary American *Madonnaro*—perhaps best known to the general public for his “Absolut Wenner” Absolut Vodka ads—and unofficial historian of street painting.

In 1972, in an effort to showcase and employ a handful of aged—and sometimes vagrant—*Madonnari*, a group of businessmen and a sympathetic journalist put together the I *Madonnari* International Street Painting Festival at Grazie di Curtatone, Italy.

From the beginning the Festival was “a huge media event,” recalls Wenner. Since then it has grown to become the most prestigious *Madonnari* gathering in the world—but it has been plagued by internal divisions over organization, financial management, and—perhaps most painfully—artistic style.

The elderly street artists’ work was iconic and

unsophisticated. Some painters still feel this artlessness defines authentic Madonnari work. “Our drawing is simple and naïve, without the research of perspective and anamorphism,” explains Gennaro Troia, 39, an itinerant street painter from Naples.

Anamorphism—an eye-bending technique that combines actual architectural elements with illusionary painting—was used extensively by Baroque painters and Wenner is considered a master of this dazzling street trompe l’oeil. “Did the new artists destroy street painting or save it?” asks Wenner rhetorically. “The future of this

art form lies with creating images that amaze.”

In an attempt to create those amazing images, **thousands of professional and amateur Madonnari pack up their pastels each year and head for Grazie di Curtatone and other festivals around the world**—art-world politics, peer sniping and lousy pay notwithstanding. Why?

For Mark Cummings, 34, an American Madonnaro who lives in Florence, Italy, street art offers a rare opportunity to paint in the classical style, “...a truer art form

BELOW “Most people don’t ever get to see artists creating their work, they only see the finished piece,” says Madonnara Tracy Lee Stum, seen here massaging colors into her street painting of Veronese’s *Santa Barbara and the Sacred Family* for the Santa Barbara Madonnari Festival 2002 in California.

Photos submitted by Art for After Hours: Art Consulting, New York/ California

Photograph by G. Voight and N. Campbell



RIGHT Japanese Madonnaro Tomoteru Saito blends pastels into the cobbles of Florence, Italy. Saito has also experimented with *brillantini*—grains of metal, flowers and leaves in his street art.

Photo courtesy of Tomoteru Saito



ABOVE Tomoteru Saito's *Madonna and Child* won the coveted 1st place Maestri Madonnari prize at the International Street Painting Festival at Grazie di Curtatone, Italy 2001

Photo courtesy of Tomoteru Saito

than a lot of the modern sham," he says. "I'm disappointed with things like dead horses selling for \$2.3 million..."—a reference to Maurizio Cattelan's taxidermied horse, sold recently at Sotheby's.

Like the ancient Madonnari, Cummings, a "Christian, not particularly attached to any denomination," considers his art an "...opportunity to glorify God."

Transcendent—if not religious—terms are frequently used by street painters to describe the process of creation. "I am really and truly only spirit when I work," says Tracy Lee Stum, 43, a Madonnara from Ventura, California. "It's like my higher self has stepped forward..."

Other Madonnari speak of the "zone," "Zen-like state of mind," or "meditative place" they experience as they work long hours out-

doors surrounded by milling, multilingual crowds.

The gritty immediacy of street painting appeals to Japanese Madonnaro Tomoteru Saito. "If you are good, you get more donations; and if you're not, you don't get any. Simple. Very simple." Saito, who was twice awarded the Maestri Madonnari 1st prize at the I Madonnari International Festival, is by all accounts beyond good.

In addition to their work in Europe, Saito, Wenner, Cummings, Stum and other Madonnari frequently donate their professional services to non-profit street painting festivals that have proliferated in the United States, especially along California's coast.

Cummings sits on the board of the Children's Creative Festival in Mission Viejo, California, a street painting event started six years ago that has netted over \$100,000



Anthony “Cowboy” Rico and Eric Roldan take five after working on a street painting at the Children’s Creative Festival in Mission Viejo, California. Rico and his brother, Albert, also created the background art for the blockbuster film *Training Day*.

Photo courtesy of Ralph “Doc” Guthrie

for local children’s fine art programs. For the last five years the festival’s featured guest artists have included Ralph “Doc” Guthrie and his students—many of them former tag and graffiti painters.

Guthrie, 61, is an instructor at Los Angeles Trade Technical Community College who teaches Sign Graphics, a rigorous two-year course that prepares graduates for careers as sign makers, movie set painters, graphic artists and layout designers.

Guthrie believes the “outlaw” talents of his mostly Latino and African American students transfer directly to sign-making and Madonnari work. “These kids are really smart and incredibly talented,” says Guthrie. “They already

have fantastic artistic skills—spatial ability, perspective, use of color—and they learn the technical and computer skills quickly.”

But they have a harder time with “life skills,” says Guthrie. “You know, show up for class. Be responsible. Finish your work on time. I’m tough on them because I have to be. I tell them ‘I’m like every fat, white asshole boss you’ll ever work for.’”

Both teenage tag painters and seasoned, classical Madonnari must come to terms with the ephemeral nature of street painting.

Artists spend hours and days creating masterpieces that wash away with the rain or fade over time.

Wenner feels that destruction of his street paintings completes the artistic process. He only wishes the end could “be more ritualized.”

Cummings is stoic: “I give my painting to the world. I really don’t care what happens after.” When Florentine street sweepers refused to destroy his reproduction of Vermeer’s “Girl with a Pearl,” however, Cummings admits to “feeling a sense of satisfaction.”

The demise of his street projects offers a metaphor for life, says Saito. “My painting lasts one day,” he remarks. “Yours? One hundred years? Ten thousand years? It will all end anyway, it’s just a matter of time.”