

INTERNATIONAL Reader's Digest

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Reunited:
A Story of
Enduring Love
PAGE 00

Outsmart the
Silent Killer
in Your Home
PAGE 00

MEET THE
**S'TREET
ARTISTS'**
REVITALIZING CITIES
PAGE 00

DRAMA IN REAL LIFE
Attacked by
Killer Bees
PAGE 00

A Fairytale
Train Journey
PAGE 00

The
Insomnia-
Depression
Connection:
Treat One,
Improve Both
PAGE 00

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF MEDICINE 00
LAUGHTER, THE BEST MEDICINE 00
WORD POWER 00



Artist MadC
of Germany.

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Graffiti Grows Up

No longer a sign of urban decay, street art is becoming prized BY Nick Morgan

PHOTO: ©MARCO PROSCH/GETTY IMAGES

In 2013, MadC singlehandedly painted this 550-square-meter wall in only seven days in Leipzig, Germany.

When Aileen Makin went to sleep in her home in Bristol, United Kingdom, on December 9, 2020, it was worth some £300,000. When she woke up, the building was worth as much as £5 million.

Overnight, renowned street artist Banksy had painted on the side of her house an old woman, sneezing so hard that her false teeth were flying out. As crowds gathered, a friend covered the artwork with protective plexiglass and security was called in to keep it safe from vandals.

The success over the past three decades of this elusive British “guerrilla” artist has changed the view that graffiti is vandalism. Riikka Kuittinen, author of *Street Art: Contemporary Prints*, says, “Street art has evolved into a new global artistic phenomenon. Where it was once just about the individual or marking territory, it now has an

outward perspective, often commenting on the community we live in.”

The best artists build huge followings on social media: art that’s scrubbed off walls the next day stays on Instagram. They can even make serious money selling prints, T-shirts, or stickers, bypassing the galleries that are the traditional gatekeepers between artists and buyers.

What does it take to excel in this new movement? Five of Europe’s best-known street artists tell us.

Millo, Italy

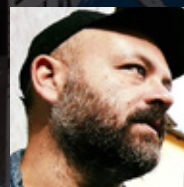
MILLO, 42, FROM Mesagne, typically starts by painting a simple black-and-white cityscape. He then adds figures the size of Godzilla. But rather than terrorizing the city, they perform activities like having a bath or a haircut.

After studying architecture, Millo (Francesco Camillo Giorgino) became disenchanted by its bureaucracy and limitations. While looking for a new direction 11 years ago he was asked to paint a wall in the village of Montone for an arts festival.



This Banksy artwork in Bristol, England, sent the building’s value into the millions.

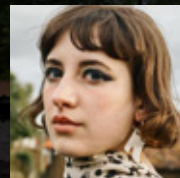
PHOTOS: (BANKSY) © GETTY IMAGES; (MILLO MURAL AND ARTIST) COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



This is one of 13 art works by Millo, who transformed building facades into canvases as part of the B.Art competition in Turin, Italy, in 2014.



Fin DAC created *Magdalena* in 2019 in Guadalajara, Mexico, to honor Mexican artist Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo.



This mural by Lidia Cao was part of the DesOrdes Creativas festival 2018 in La Coruña, Spain.

“The brick surface had capers growing on it. So I drew a giant naked character eating the plants. The local old ladies laughed at the size of his penis.”

Soon a family of characters populated the urban jungles he’d been trained to build. “Tall walls without windows make the best canvases for my city landscapes, but I still adapt my work to the surface.”

Millo has been invited to paint around the world. He sells some of his work in galleries: prints are around £500. His work often sells out in minutes—then pops up on eBay for three times the price.

Fin DAC, Ireland

FIN DAC, BORN Finbarr Notte in Cork, paints large-scale murals of modern women in traditional and ethnic garments around the world. His limited-edition prints sell out in minutes as thousands of online buyers compete.

The self-taught artist started his street-art career in 2008, but things really took off when he experimented with “masks” of splattered colour across the eyes of his figures. This quickly became his motif.

“I needed something that separated my work from others,” says the

PHOTOS: (MURAL) ©ULISES RUIZ/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES. (ARTIST) ©NICHOLAS HUNT/GETTY IMAGES

artist, now 54. “A visual identity.” He was inspired by the face painting of tribes around the world, the character Pris from *Blade Runner* and even pop star Annie Lennox. His signature mask “gives the wearers an air of quiet strength and force within.”

All of Fin DAC’s art is bound together with this look. When you glimpse his work out of the corner of your eye, you instantly know whose it is.

Lidia Cao, Spain

AT JUST 24, Lidia Cao from La Coruña is hailed as one of the most important female street artists.

She favours desaturated colours (rare in street art), and women are the theme of her powerfully narrative work. For the 2020 Pareas mural festival in Oviedo, she painted the 20th-century Spanish writer Dolores Medio, who was censored under the Franco regime. Lidia depicts her at her typewriter, but over each shoulder hover vultures, ready to pick apart her words.

In *A Stolen Childhood*, painted for the 2019 Rexenera public-art festival in Galicia, a sombre girl holds a bird-box. On it, a bird of prey has a smoking match in its beak. Lidia allows us

PHOTOS: (MURAL AND ARTIST) COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

to connect the dots, but the image is about abuse and resilience. “I use the female figure to represent life,” Lidia says, “to tell a personal story beyond simple aesthetics.”

Lidia’s work can be seen across Spain and in Portugal, Switzerland, and France.

Blek le Rat, France

XAVIER PROU STARTED his career four decades ago by covering his native Paris with an infestation of millions of rats over three years.

His inspiration came from teenagers he saw one day in 1981 in a small park behind a supermarket. They had found discarded, half-used paint pots and brushes and were splashing their names, abstract shapes, and smiling faces on a shed wall. It reminded Xavier of gang tags covering New York subway trains. But this had a more

playful, positive energy. “The two things came together.”

Later he made a simple stencil of a rat, reached for some black spray paint and hit the streets, signing his work “Blek le Rat.” “I wanted to say, ‘Yes, your city is beautiful, but beneath your feet is another city of wild animals,’” says Xavier, now 70 and still painting.

He graduated to full-size figures. Napoleon was a favourite, but twisted—followed by a sheep, or wearing a motorbike helmet. “I don’t like Napoleon,” says Xavier. “He killed millions in France. So I make him look ridiculous.”

Xavier’s work has landed him in hot water with police around the world, but he has no regrets. “We are at a turning point in art,” he says. “This graffiti art will change everything.”

MadC, Germany

AT 16, CLAUDIA WALDE, from Bautzen,

PHOTOS: (MURAL) ERIC LIN. (ARTIST) JASMIN SHAH



Shown is a portion of MadC’s 700 Wall. The massive painting along a German train line took four months.

picked up a spray can and wrote her name on a wall. “I discovered it’s difficult to use one! But I found like-minded people. I was entering a cosmopolitan world, breaking out of small-town life to create an identity and find respect through my skill.”

Claudia’s wild enthusiasm for painting earned her the nickname The Mad One, in time shortened to MadC.

She attended art school in Halle and London, but her break came in 2010 when she got permission to paint a wall almost 700 square metres in size along the train line between Halle and Berlin. “It was tough, with only ladders for four months. But I could experiment with techniques and find my own style.” Today she paints letters and words, abstracted into bright colours and translucent layers.

Now 41, MadC gets global mural commissions and exhibits canvases in galleries. “But street energy powers everything I do.” ♦

PHOTOS: (MURAL) COURTESY OF THE ARTIST. (ARTIST) MARCO PROSCH



Blek le Rat’s *Sleeping Man* (with signature rat) in San Francisco in 2008.