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1. Seth, commissioned work

# HIDING IN PLAIN VIEW

*Look past the tourist mainstays of Paris and you will discover a revolutionary spirit very much alive in its street art and graffiti.*

**BY RON MCDUGALL**

**PHOTOS BY RON MCDUGALL AND SUZANNE HALLIDAY**

When staying in Paris one feels culturally obligated to visit some of the most famous sites in the world: The Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, the Palace of Versailles. Approach any major attraction by foot and you can see well in advance the hordes of tourists lining up for tickets, checking their maps and milling about taking photos with selfie sticks.

But as anyone with even a fleeting knowledge of French history knows, revolution courses throughout Paris' streets and alleyways. And anything can become a flashpoint for debate and argument.

Case in point: Despite the immense affection for it now, at the time of construction the Eiffel Tower was considered a visual blight on the skyline and was expected to be dismantled after the 1889 World's Fair.

This is true for a lot of art. What is first rejected is later held up as a masterpiece. And what many people once considered vandalism is now being studied more and more on the same terms as a painting by Monet or Van Gogh—two artists very familiar with rejection.

By refocusing your eyes just a bit, past Paris' major landmarks, you can see the signs of a thriving street art culture on almost every wall. Keep looking and patterns start to emerge: Mosaic aliens, octopi with seven tentacles, an orange smiling cat, even portraits of Charles de Gaulle and Andre the Giant make their mark over and over again. The subject matter is as varied as the techniques and styles. Some are politically charged, many are humorous and others intended solely to add a bit of beauty to the urban landscape. Artists are making

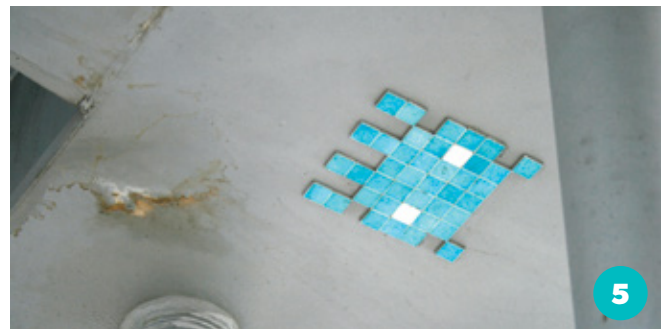




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their presence known throughout the city—and maintaining a long tradition of rebellion.

The obvious thing to keep in mind about street art is that it is illegal, so by definition it's a rebellious act. As a result, perpetrators must be quick to apply their art to avoid getting caught. Looking at the scale and detail of some of the work, one imagines a superhuman species flitting through the night with their magical spray cans. But these are hard-working people who sometimes put their wellbeing at risk to get their art out there.

The most basic form of street art is the "tag." This is a person's signature (not their real name). It's usually made with a marker. Someone can quickly pull it out of a pocket, write on a wall, tuck it back in and walk away. They have less than 10 seconds to make their mark so speed is key.

The next level of street art is "Le Flop." This is like a throw-up of sorts and for many still considered a tag, but a tag at a larger scale. Again, it's a signature but in this case it's bigger with the letters typically bulbous and swollen. They still

2. M.Chat

3. Breeze Yoko, commissioned work, this mural space is painted over every two weeks by a different artist

4. Gzup

5. Space Invader copycat, The legitimate artist Space Invader models his work on the crude pixilation of 8-bit video games



only have 10 seconds to make it but these artists are well trained. They quickly spray the wall first, usually with silver paint. They paint the outline of the letters with another colour. And then they're gone.

Beyond this, we find truly ambitious artists. They work with styles and techniques normally seen in a gallery to make stunning works of art. Regardless how one feels about the legitimacy of the act, it's hard not to admire the skill of artists like Seth, Nelio and Miss Van. Especially considering they still need to put up their work in as little time possible.

Stenciling is a popular technique used to speed up the process. The artist cuts out the design beforehand, sticks it to the wall and spray paints over. Removing the stencil reveals the final design. This is a favorite technique of Banksy, one of the most prominent street artists in the world.

Other artists have solved the need for speed by preparing their artwork in a studio or at home and then applying it to the wall with an adhesive like wheat-paste. This solves two problems. First, it takes mere seconds to make their mark, and second, if the police do catch them they don't need to pay a fine because

the art can be peeled off—there is no damage to the property. This technique is especially useful for more elaborate designs.

Artists need to be resigned to the fact that it may not last very long. This is another key aspect of street art: It is ephemeral. It is not meant to last. The most common demise of street art is painting over by the city or property owners. In Paris, insurance companies will pay to have walls painted, but only up to three meters from the ground. So artists make sure their designs are placed above that threshold. Placing them up high also prevents passersby from tearing them off as keepsakes. But more importantly, it ensures the art is as visible as possible.

For all the illegal art on Paris' walls, there is a growing number of commissioned works, art that is paid for and supported by the city or property owners. A billboard at the intersection of Rue Oberkampf and Rue Saint-Maur was often the target of graffiti, so the owners converted it to a space where artists are paid to paint a work of art. A new piece is commissioned every two weeks. The

artist merely paints over the previous artwork, erasing it forever. Ephemeral indeed.

But not everyone thinks highly of commissioned works. Many street artists believe they betray the dissident spirit of street art, with those commissioned artists merely kowtowing to "the Man." Some voice their displeasure by painting or tagging over top of the works themselves. Those who really want to make a point will write "TOYS:" Tagging Over Your Shit. To do this is essentially a proclamation of war and the instigator better be prepared for retaliation.

Street artists who do reach popular and financial success eventually have to contend with their own identity as street artists. Shepard Fairey, who first gained notoriety for his "Andre the Giant has a Posse" sticker campaign and later designed Barack Obama's "Hope" poster, now has his work in major museums, including the Smithsonian and the Museum of Modern Art.

Walking through neighbourhoods like Belleville in the east end of Paris—birthplace of many a revolution—you feel the energy of the streets these same artists



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walk. No one will fault you for visiting the Eiffel Tower; it's expected. But try seeing past the main attractions and turn your camera toward the walls. You might even feel part of the rebellious spirit that infects street artists, compelling them to defy authority and make their own mark on the world. 📷

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- 6. Philippe Herard, commissioned work
- 7. Ben Diaz, commissioned work
- 8. Alexis Diaz, commissioned work
- 9. Seth, commissioned work, with tour guide

### GETTING THERE

#### Paris, France

Fly to London's Heathrow airport to connect at Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport.



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### SEE FOR YOURSELF

Visitors to Paris can experience street art for themselves. Underground Paris offers guided tours of some of Paris' most famous street art neighbourhoods, including Oberkampf, Belleville and Ménilmontant. They also provide tours of the new mural district in the 13th Arrondissement on the Left Bank. You can even take a stab at making your own street art with one of their workshops.

*For more information visit [undergroundparis.org](http://undergroundparis.org)*