



"Madonnari" are artists who use chalk to draw on the street, and are known as such because they reproduced icons of the Madonna, (our lady). The street painting has a long tradition starting in Italy in the 16th century. The works are traditionally called street paintings, rather than chalk drawings or sidewalk art, because when well executed they can resemble paintings.

The artists would travel from town to town and create street paintings for traditional religious and folk festivals. These artists lived (and still live) from the coins thrown onto their work in appreciation for the image and the artist's skill.

The practice was almost a lost art form until 1972, when the village of Grazie di Curtatone staged a festival to honor the tradition of street painting. The commemoration of this vibrant art form is now celebrated throughout Italy. Santa Barbara, CA presented such a Festival Memorial Day weekend and there is one in San Rafael, (Marin County) every June.

Street painting has been recorded throughout Europe since the 16th century and is considered an important expression of popular art. As the name "madonnari" implies, Italian street painting has been a form of religious art since its inception. The history of this art form is closely tied to the long and rich tradition of Italian processional art, which includes colored sand and sawdust painting, as well as flower-petal art.

The famous Pasadena Rose Parade, for example, comes from this tradition.

Historically, madonnari have been itinerant artists noted for a life of travel and freedom. They were, however, aware of the many festivals and holidays unique to each province, and would time their arrival to join in the festivities. Today, you can still find a celebration taking place each day of the year in Italy.

Upon arriving in a town or city, the madonnari would go about their business of creating paintings directly on the sidewalk or public square using chalk as their medium. They survived from the money they received as alms, and from small commissions.

The past twenty years has not only brought a revival, but a virtual explosion of this art form. Young artists and art students worldwide began appearing on the streets

throughout Europe, bringing with them new ideas, techniques and enthusiasm for what was nearly a lost form of expression. They infused their work with fresh subject matter and innovative materials.

Gone were the days of blackboard chalk and a burnt stick of charcoal. Paintings were now being created with high quality commercial and handmade pastels. Artists began experimenting with gold leaf, silver paint, colored sand and glass, even birdseed.

With a tremendous sense of pride and newfound respect for their work, these young painters began to challenge their public with even more complicated compositions. Often they would work on a single painting for days and weeks at a time.

In 1972, the small community of Grazie di Curtatone in northern Italy started the first International Street Painting Competition. The initial purpose of the competition was to record and publicize the work of those who were considered the last exponents of this traditional art. The oldest of these painters were in their 90s.

With each successive year, the competition has drawn younger painters and larger crowds, eventually producing a spectacle never conceived of by its founders. The festival remains popular and is a model for festivals around the world.