

Exploring Lyon's Artistic Nature through Murals, Graffiti and Street Art

Lyon is a city that prides itself on its artistic side and while it has the usual galleries, the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon being a great home of impressionism away from the capital and a favorite of the guidebooks, you need to take a different approach if you want to see what the artists of Lyon are really up to. Street art has been developing in this French city and defining its cultural identity for decades, from vast murals to small stencils and everything in between.



CitéCréation and the Visual Illusions of the City Murals

Street art in Lyon takes on a scale and meaning that goes far beyond that of most other cities and this can be seen in no better way than with the stunning murals that adorn the walls. Interestingly, it was the prominence of French art in up-scale galleries that started the original street art movement in Lyon in the 1970s when muralists with CitéCréation decided to bring art to the people and make it accessible once more. Their biggest achievement is arguably the outdoor museum of Musée Urbain Tony Garnier – a series of giant murals on the walls of a municipal housing block that includes an impressive Tower of Babel.

In addition to the murals in this housing project, there are numerous other designs to find on a walk through the streets, many of which use the art of trompe l'oeil – otherwise known as visual illusion – to create murals on a colossal scale that trick the eye. You could walk down a city street towards a quaint old bookshop only to find yourself next to an elaborately painted brick wall; the scale of the pieces, in detail, size and execution, is not the work of an anonymous artist fighting against the system – as is the case with a lot of street art and graffiti – and it requires more than a quick stencil in the dead of night. There are plenty of realistic scenes with careful attention to detail but there are also plenty of traditional tags and images popping up across Lyon that show another artistic side of the city.

Traditional, Graffiti-style Street Art and Knar's Ducks

There is a fine differentiation between graffiti and street art; the political statements in the run up to the election blurred the line a little, and were probably not kept for posterity, but there are plenty of other

images in the city that test the meaning of Art and inspire residents.

The rough scrawl of the grinning "chat" appears across town like your average tag but it has caught the imagination of residents and is greeted with delight on the "StreetArtLyon" Facebook page.

Additionally, visitors are equally impressed by the simple, stencilled quotations and political statements of Urban and Mirror's Mirrors. The latter is a series of stencilled portraits on mirrors set high above the street signs on city corners – easy to miss but well worth keeping an eye out for.

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Clearly, visitors to Lyon should be on the lookout for interesting designs and artistic pieces around every corner; however, if tourists want to find a star piece that they can brag about when they get home then they should go hunting for ducks. These quirky birds are the work of Knar and are distinctive due to their simplistic approach, thick black lines and flat, bright colors.

They have been so widely accepted by the city that the artist also sells a line of t-shirts with their images – while still remaining anonymous. The best place to see these ducks is a skate park beside the Rhone, an ideal canvas for an artist that relies on contours and a must see piece. Here he brought the ducks to their natural element beside the water while adding some style and color to the concrete.

The Joy of Graffiti in Lyon

Street art has a long history in Lyon and, as the decades have progressed, the styles and masterpieces that can be seen on the walls and pavements have become more diverse. Some artists have taken it to new levels, such as the commercial side of Knar's ducks while others stick to the city's muralist roots or choose an anonymous, political angle.

Either way, it is an expression of French art that is unique, ever-changing and a great experience for tourists; you never know when you might stumble across a hidden masterpiece.

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