

PORTO

Painting Porto

Wander the streets of this pretty Portuguese city and you'll discover that its present-day street art is every bit as colourful as its past

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As you stroll through Porto's cobbled streets, passing between tile-clad buildings and laced-iron balconies, don't be alarmed if you're

followed by the eyes of a giant blue cat or a pensive old man splayed flat against a wall. These curious characters are just a couple of examples of the city's incredible street art, which has grown from an underground movement to one of Porto's most prolific and positive cultural scenes.

This Portuguese city has always had a daring side. Its nickname is *Invicta*, or 'undefeated', thanks to its defiant stance throughout history. It was here that King Miguel I supporters were resisted during a siege in the early 19th century, and Porto later led an 1891 revolution that would push Portugal to become a republic in 1910.

In more recent times, Porto has used that *Invicta* mentality to fight for cultural expression, and today its victory is splashed across many of the city's granite walls. But while colourful

street art is well woven into the cityscape today, its presence comes with an interesting – and more contentious – backstory.

Ten years ago, Porto was almost unrecognisable compared to the lively city it is today. A stunted economy saw vines creeping through the windows of abandoned buildings and streets were left deserted and unloved. Unsurprisingly, some showed their dissatisfaction by dressing the crumbling walls with paint, which triggered the growth of a graffiti movement. While these early days were dominated by random tagging, a handful of artists from the University of Porto's arts faculty, among others, soon began injecting the streets with better-quality murals, which launched the local street art scene.

"We have so many talented artists in Porto," says Ana Muska, cofounder of Circus Network (circusnetwork.net), which acts as a street art and illustration agency, co-working space and gallery. "It's a bit unusual for such a small city, so maybe there's something in the water," she laughs.



ANNA MUSKA AND
André Carvalho (top
left) established Circus
Network to champion
Porto's street artists

Muska herself is a graduate of Porto's fine arts faculty, and along with her partner André Carvalho (a former medical student) she has played a key role in the city's street art scene. Having coordinated a number of events as part of a university project, the duo decided to launch Circus Network in 2012 to bridge the gap between artists and clients interested in commissioning murals, portraits or illustrations.

However, it was a difficult time to be operating in Porto's cultural arena. The mayor back then was a less-than-enthusiastic supporter of the arts. "When we started out, city hall was not understanding or appreciative of street art, so they usually removed everything," says Muska. "If you asked if you could paint a mural they'd likely say no."

With legal street art out of the question, artists continued on their own initiative, triggering the municipality to establish a dedicated anti-graffiti brigade. Under this plan, removing tags was generally accepted, but when the patrol began destroying the works of one of Porto's best-loved artists – Hazul – people fought back.

"Artists started spraying lines across the freshly painted walls and sometimes added taglines like 'keep painting,'" remembers Muska. The ensuing cat-and-mouse game proved that the artists weren't going to be easily dissuaded, and racked up a rather hefty public bill.

"I never stopped. We never stopped," says one of the city's most recognisable artists, Nuno Costah, whose whimsical, colourful creations can be seen →

NUNO COSTA (right) is one of Porto's most popular artists, known for his colourful murals



all over the city. “Perhaps what the politicians didn’t understand is that street art can tell a lot about a city. Everywhere there is paint on walls. Look at prehistoric cave paintings, wall art by the Egyptians, art in churches – it tells the stories of humans. I can see why they removed the tags, but the good work – I don’t know why they wanted to remove that,” he says.

While the artists retaliated on the streets, the wider community took to social media to voice their disdain. “Everybody was sharing the news that the city’s art was being destroyed and the local press got involved,” says Muska. “Everyone was siding with the artists, so when the new mayor came into office in 2014 he noticed all the noise and started investing in street art. The graffiti wars caused a change.”

Circus Network also prompted a gear shift in 2013 when they facilitated the painting of the city’s first official mural



by three local artists on Rua Miguel Bombarda. “In the beginning, everyone was doing it out of love,” says Muska. “The project was crowdfunded and nobody made any money. I remember it was cold and raining, but we all worked so hard and I think it changed things a lot, as people loved the end result.”

One of the artists involved, Diogo Ruas – better known by his street name Mots – recalls that it was around this

time the art culture began to open up in Porto. “Of course it was baby steps, but street art became more accepted,” he says. “We started to do some public expositions and the community really appreciated it.” Since the unveiling of the first official mural, a number of coordinated street art initiatives have been instigated, including the painting of electricity boxes on Rua das Flores and elsewhere across the city, and →



urban art maps have also been created by Circus Network and government body Porto Lazer.

One of the city's most recent street gems is a geometric-style mural beside Porto's Hard Club entertainment centre, which was completed by Mots in September following an invitation by the local government. "It was a really awesome surprise when city hall asked me to paint it, because it shows they trust my work," he says. "It was a lot of responsibility, so I'm really proud."

To create more opportunities for emerging artists, Porto Lazer also invites applications to paint one of 14 panels along the street bordering Porto's

pretty Crystal Palace Gardens, Rua da Restauração. This vibrant outdoor gallery is updated annually, with the next installation due in June 2018. Going into its fourth year, this programme shows street art has cemented itself as a serious art form in the city.

Porto resident Ricardo Cardoso supports the increased regulation of the city's art scene through such programs. "It's good that we now have projects like Restauração where everybody can apply to participate. I like that everyone has the opportunity," he says.

Mots sees such projects as a sign that people are more receptive to street art in Porto now. "It was a big fight from





ADALBERTO BRITO, AKA YouthOne (top left) is one of Portugal's first major street artists

us,” he says. “Given that many people associate graffiti with criminal activity, it definitely wasn’t easy, but now people talk about it, they ask what we’re doing and are just more curious.”

The ability of Porto’s artists to band together has also helped strengthen the urban art scene. “In other cities, I see a lot of competition between street artists, but here we respect each other and often work together,” says Costah.

For example, he and Hazel have been painting and refreshing a traditional Portuguese filigree heart on Rua Miguel Bombarda together for over 10 years, and it’s perhaps one of the city’s most loved works.

Muska also cites the collaborative attitude of the local artists as a reason Porto’s urban art scene is so strong. “It makes them grow as they learn from each other,” she says. “We also have →



VIEWS ACROSS THE CITY
and the cobble streets
are now punctuated
with colourful murals

quite a synchronised style in Porto with lots of cartoony characters. It's fun, so the art here always brings a smile and I think that's the best thing. People want to come to Porto now to experience the street art."

Visiting Porto for its urban art is just another way to feel the city's authenticity and passion, which radiates from its centuries-old architecture, warm hospitality and incredible food. While many commissioned works exist, financial gain isn't the driver for most of the artists. "I do it for the lifestyle," says Adalberto Brito, aka YouthOne, who was one of Portugal's first street artists and is known for his brightly coloured caricatures. "I've been painting since 1988 and I'll be painting until my last breath," he says. Costah agrees: he's in it for the love. "If I was thinking about the money I would have given up long ago, but making money is not my objective so I will keep going as long as I can. I can't imagine that one day I will stop." Perhaps it's down to that Invicta spirit.

 Wizz Air flies to Porto

Art adventures

Let Porto's street art murals guide you to some of the city's other beautiful attractions



Jardim do Morro

After visiting the Sé cathedral, cross the upper platform of Porto's iconic Dom Luís I bridge to Jardim do Morro for an incredible city view. Be sure to turn around to snap the old man in a hat, painted by Frederico Draw, at the bridge entrance.



Rua Miguel Bombarda

Miguel Bombarda is the hub of Porto's arts district. This is where you'll spot Porto's first legal mural by Mots, Mesk and Fedor, which depicts the story of *Don Quixote*. While you're in the area, pop into Circus Network to pick up a piece by local street artists to take home.



Foz

Walk along Porto's Douro River towards the trendy suburb of Foz to see a magical sunset. Along the way, you'll pass the giant headshot *Mira* by Daniel Eime, followed by an etched face by internationally renowned Portuguese artist Vhils.