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ATHENS: A BURGEONING STREET ART SCENE

TEXT / REBECCA HALL

One of the world's oldest cities with a history spanning more than 3,400 years, dedicated to and named after the goddess Athena – Athens, the birthplace of democracy, conjures up images of the Acropolis and the Parthenon. Yet in recent years, it is the burgeoning Street Art scene that also attracts visitors far and wide to this eclectic metropolis, creating a unique bridge between its ancient past and stark present.

Since the 2008 European financial crisis, of which Greece bore the brunt, Street Art has grown exponentially and most of the art you will find around the city takes on issues of a political or social nature.

Art has always existed throughout ancient Greek times, whether in the form of literature, poetry or painting. Graffiti, in some form, has always existed in this city as ancient Greek painters expressed themselves on walls. Indeed, the word originates from the Greek 'to write', so it should be no surprise that the practice has grown here over time. The political crisis of 2012 saw many political stencils crop up on the walls, yet it was in 2017 that Street Art started to grow creatively with more murals and community-funded projects.

Athens is considered by many to be a chaotic city, not following any real structure – highlighted by an architecture where a visitor will often find beautifully restored neoclassical mansions amalgamating with 1970s office blocks or next to crumbling houses whose upkeep is unaffordable due to high property taxes. Street Art in the city also follows no specific uniformity and the backdrop of these derelict buildings and ugly office blocks provides an ideal canvas for artists to express themselves, lending a beauty to otherwise underdeveloped neighbourhoods.

Tagging – originating from the 1960s and 1970s as a defiance against

dictatorial rule, throw-ups, wildstyle graffiti, political activist stencils, stickers, paste-ups and public murals created for festivals and community projects can be seen throughout.

A serious contender to Berlin, with many people maintaining Athens is becoming the 'Street Art Capital of Europe' attracting Greek and international artists, a walk through various neighbourhoods reveals top artists such as INO – the number one active muralist in the city, Yako, Kez and Achilles plus female artist M.Koan, among others featured here all focusing their unique talents on various societal and political issues, sustainability, or dreams and emotions.

Awesome Athens Experiences collaborates with artists and municipalities to bring festivals to Athens and create projects to improve local neighbourhood communities, proving that Street Art can bring positive change to a city that has undergone so much upheaval in recent years.

The five locations covered here – the first four all within walking distance of each other – are certainly not exhaustive of the variety of Street Art that can be viewed in Athens. Getting lost in the cobbled alleyways and discovering small images maybe no one else has paid attention to is all part of the mystery of unfurling this city's varied art, so don't forget comfortable walking shoes and start exploring.

GAZI AND KERAMEIKOS

It would be remiss to not start with the Athenian districts of Gazi and Kerameikos as both could be referred to as the Street Art 'capital neighbourhoods'. Gazi is the original gasworks district of the city, now revived as 'Technopolis' – a museum and exhibition space. Paviidis Chocolate Factory can be found on Pireos Street, the main artery road running through this district that boasts a huge dystopian collaboration mural by Aiva and INO entitled *Access Control*. INO's influences stem from social and political issues ever present in Greece, and *Access Control* signifies surveillance under attack from viruses. Painted on the side of the adjacent old tram building is the unmissable *Last Supper of Athens* – again by INO with his trademark blue lick of paint. His interpretation of the 'Last Supper' shows the Greek political system, the central figure where Jesus or the Prime Minister should sit is missing. His ministers sit idly by, handling bribes or falling asleep ignoring the grasping hands of the needy. Next to this, INO portrays the eyes of the Mona Lisa, her pupils reflecting a riot policeman and a rioter. Perhaps she sees what goes on, but merely watches, as her expression is unreadable. A wander on to the Kerameikos neighbourhood, just next to Gazi and taking its name from the ancient pottery workshops and cemetery located here, has some less politically motivated art in the small side streets. The Rabbit Hole Theatre on Germanikou Street, founded in 2011 and hosting a number of live performances, has a colourful mural of a girl sitting down, seemingly contemplating life with a rabbit hat on her head – artist unknown. Both Sotiris Fen and M.Koan have a love of animals, and this is reflected in their smaller murals found in the neighbourhood – a black cat and peacock respectively.

OMONIA

The edgier and more cosmopolitan area of Athens, Omonia has one of the oldest squares in the city, dating back to 1862 and featuring many neoclassical buildings. The 1960s was a popular era for Omonia Square with the construction of a huge water fountain encircled by grass and flowers that made it a perfect backdrop for Greek films of that period. But in 1992, the fountain was removed to make way for the construction of the Metro system. Thus followed a period of decline with many of the neoclassical buildings pulled down or falling into ruin, effectively turning the area into a free-flowing traffic system, and a place where people would not spend too much time due to the increasing crime rate. 2018 saw a

final transformation of the area and by 2020, a new fountain had been installed – one of the largest in Europe.

It is in this eclectic neighbourhood that you will find two mural landmarks, very well known throughout the city. Along Pireos Street heading up towards Omonia Square, you cannot help but notice the *He Is Praying for Us* collaboration mural based on an initial idea by Pavlos Tsakonas and painted by Manolis Anastasakos and the Kretsis Crew. The mural, created in 2011 during the initial stages of the Greek social, political and economic crisis, depicts the hands of God praying down to the people, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Renaissance painter and engraver Albrecht Dürer's famous *Praying Hands*. Farther along Pireos Street in Omonia, you will see another of INO's masterpieces: *Snowblind*. Painted in 2016 onto the side of an old public health building, the image depicts a faceless man. This time INO's famous blue lick indicates the man's liver is damaged, yet the man is unable to comprehend this as he is so addicted to money and power – he is 'snowblind'. Omonia is proof that Street Art can indeed provide a once run-down area of a city with the start of the facelift that was so needed.

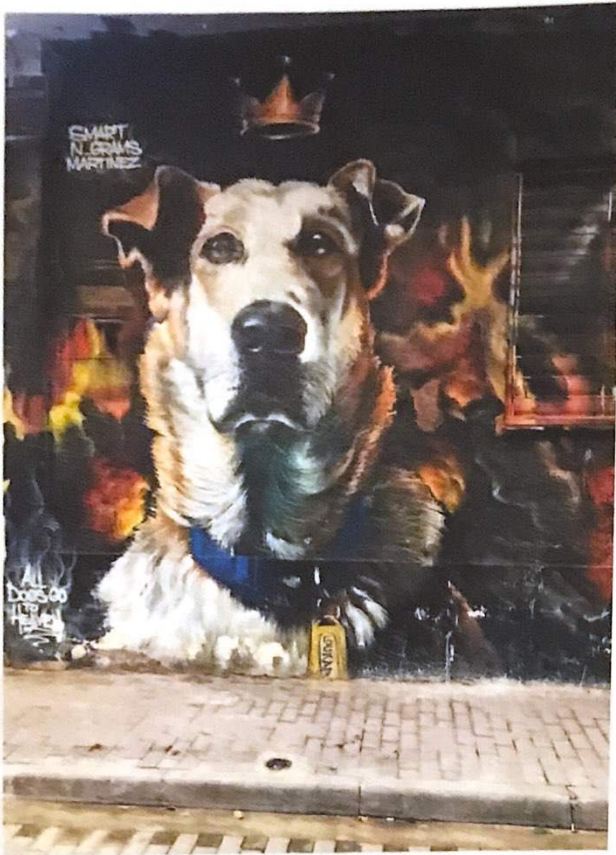


Previous page – Yiakou, *Awaking*, Korydallos Lake Park Walls, Athens (GR), 2022.
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Above – Rabbit Hole Theatre, Gazi & Kerameikos, Athens (GR).
© REBECCA HALL

Left – INO, *Snow Blind*, Omonia, Athens (GR), 2016. © REBECCA HALL





PSYRI AND MONASTIRAKI

The tourist districts of Psyri and Monastiraki are alive with bars and tavernas, the gateway to the Acropolis and Varvakious – the grand food market – can be found along Athinas Street. The area has also become a canvas to many street artists over time, from tagging to beautiful murals. Stand outside the market entrance and the mural on the side of the SOUL Athens Hotel, contrasted by a crumbling pink neoclassical building beneath it, is of a young girl with butterflies around her. The work, painted by M.Koan, an artist commissioned by the hotel, symbolises youth and sustainability. Go farther along Athinas Street and you will find the small XVIth century church of Agia Kiariki. Here, Yiakou makes his appearance with the colourful artwork beside the church, depicting two horses and a girl sitting by them, painted in 2019. But that was not the first artwork in this place. The priest encouraged Yiakou to paint here – the first piece in 2017 and a second in 2019. Both were destroyed by a zealot who thought it sacrilege to ‘deface’ a church, despite the priest encouraging it. The current form has remained, probably because of the materials used that make it hard to remove.

A wander through Psyri showcases a variety of art. The most famous can be found on the corner of Sarri and Riga Palamidou Street entitled *All Dogs Go to Heaven*. It depicts Riot Dog, a stray and the ‘darling’ of the protesters who would gather outside parliament to support them and join in during the financial crisis years. A collaboration by artists SMART, N_Grams and Alex Martinez, Riot Dog was the Time’s ‘Person of the Year’ in 2011. The actual dog – Loukanikos – has now passed away, but his memory lives on. Farther into Psyri, and Achilles makes an appearance with his anamorphic Street Art, and the more recent *Lord Byron in Athens* by Cacao Rocks – created in 2021, the bicentennial of the 1821 Greek War of Independence – gives a nod to the great British romantic poet who rented a room in the capital in the 1800s.

METAXOURGEO

Metaxourgeio was originally the silk district of Athens, and with many workshops and small mills it was considered a thriving, working class area. The 1970s saw many families move away. Industry shut down, and the area declined. Buildings became abandoned and the red-light district of Athens sprang up. These abandoned buildings left an open canvas for many artists and muralists, and with the annual *Petit Paris d’Athènes* festival, it has filled one of the most badly treated regions of Athens with culture and art. A community project organised by Awesome Athens Experiences, the festival covers an area where most streets have French names due to a history of foreign traditions merging with Greek ones through visiting travellers and immigrants. Its aim is to fill Metaxourgeio with culture and art and through this, it quickly became a widely celebrated ‘multi-festival’ with murals, theatre, workshops and concerts. Nowadays, Metaxourgeio is an up-and-coming neighbourhood, and the festival

has helped to create some outstanding pieces of art, one of the most well known is that of *Knowledge Speaks, Wisdom Listens* by Balinese artist Wild Drawing, inspired by a Jimi Hendrix quote. Created in 2016, the mural of the owl straddles the corners of Samou and Kon Paleologou Streets. Of the creation, Wild Drawing says, “[The] Owl symbolises wisdom and at the same time is a symbol of the goddess Athena, the one that gave her name to the city of Athens. [On] the other hand, the owl... is famous for its exceptional vision, particularly in low light. Nowadays



Greece, and not only, is experiencing a really dark phase and needs its time for us here and around the globe, to recall this creature’s wisdom.” *Ode 2, The Big Sea* by Leonidas Giannakopoulos, painted in 2021 as part of the *Petit Paris d’Athènes* Festival and located on Agiou Konstantinou Street, has a more sustainability influence. It depicts a modern Aeneas emerging from the sea wearing a boat as a crown. She represents civilisation reborn through nature’s call for help, and pays respect to the environment as it is ravaged daily.



KORYDALLOS

We move on to a different part of the city now. Korydallos is a suburb of Athens, located between the city centre and Piraeus Port. It is here that you will find one of the largest public mural projects ever undertaken in Greece. Korydallos itself is not a place frequented by tourists. There used to be a women's prison located in the heart of the neighbourhood, now earmarked for a new, modern green park. The prison building has not been demolished, rather with the co-organisation of the Municipality of Korydallos and Awesome Athens Experiences, the primary objective is to promote Athens and its suburbs through contemporary Urban Art. Korydallos certainly reflects this. Greek and foreign artists have created an outdoor gallery of large-scale murals on the walls of the prison, a total surface area of more than 1,300m². Inspired by nature, the aquatic

environment and art, imagination has run riot as you will see in the 12 murals by 15 artists. Masterpieces include Proud Lark by Platonas depicting an old man writing down his wishes and dreams with larks flying around him, larks being a symbol of freedom. Wild Drawing's The Illusion of Freedom shows people sitting on horses on a brightly coloured carousel, the title very apt as it implies that whilst we enjoy the carousel ride and the feeling it gives us, we are merely going round and round and our freedom is an illusion. It is worth heading out to the park to see for yourself how this former prison suburb has transformed the perception of the area through community support, colour and artistic talent. Take the Athens Metro Line 3 (Blue Line) to Korydallos Metro station. It is then a five-minute walk to Grigoriou Lampraki & Solomou streets. ■

Previous page, up – Billy G, N Grams, Alex Martinez, *Riot Dog*, Psyrri & Monastiraki, Athens (GR), 2015. © REBECCA HALL

Previous page, down – Wild Drawing, *Knowledge Speaks-Wisdom Listens*, Metaxourgio, Athens (GR), 2016. © WILD DRAWING

Above – Wild Drawing, *Illusion of Freedom*, Korydallos Lake Park Walls, Athens (GR), 2022. © AWESOME ATHENS EXPERIENCES