

Madonnari Arts Festival revives chalk work with Renaissance roots

Gray clouds threatened to burst open as 42 artists crouched over 10-foot-by-10-foot cracked, oil-stained patches of South High Street Sept. 6. It was business as usual. With Little Italy's fifth annual Madonnari Arts Festival about to begin, they had to get their works of art done pronto.

Michael Kirby's Mona Lisa, at the intersection of Eastern Avenue and High, included one important change. Instead of an Italian background, the famous DaVinci subject smiled in front of a Baltimore skyline. Kirby, a co-founder of the festival, said he was paying tribute to the city and the original Renaissance man 500 years after his death.

Madonnari refers to artists who draw Madonnas, Kirby explained. An Italian, Catholic tradition begun in the 16th century, madonnari now draw secular as well as religious images, he said.

With subjects as varied as saints and Madonnas, Martin Luther King Jr. and Harry Potter, madonnari came from Italy and Belgium, Germany and Mexico, along with about 10 local artists and local students.

Ivann Garc, a Mexican painter, worked with pastels blessed in the opening ceremonies by Father Jason Worley, pastor of St. Ursula in Parkville.

Although Kirby recreated Raphael's Sistine Madonna for the inaugural festival in 2015, this year he and his children Daniela, 12, and Rafael, 10, went with Harry Potter.

"They decide on the artwork," Kirby said. "They do everything. I try to do as little as possible."

A graduate of Archbishop Curley High School who worships at St. Casimir and Holy Rosary in Baltimore, Kirby was studying in Europe 25 years ago when he encountered madonnaro Flavio Coppola as he drew on the streets of Florence.

"I started drawing right next to him," Kirby said.

Working beside Coppola, he learned the techniques of putting soft pastels to the rough pavement surfaces. "If you do it every week, you have to get better," said Kirby, who remains grateful for the patience of Coppola. "He was super nice to a stupid American," Kirby said.

Now a full-time artist and founder of the Murals of Baltimore studio, Kirby continues in the madonnari tradition as only the second American to achieve the distinction of "master madonnaro."

He likes the transitory nature of chalk art.

"It washes away," he said. "You have to deal with the weather, not just the rain but the sun as well. ... There's always complications. That's the challenge and the fun part, too, to see if you're smart enough to get around it."

In addition, madonnari work in the presence of others, on a dirty broken surface.

"You're going to see something new, something different and only for a short time," Kirby said. "If you don't go, you miss it."

In 2015, he partnered with Cyd Wolf and her husband, Germano Fabiani, a restaurant owner, to celebrate the ancient street art in Little Italy.

Wolf said she and her husband wanted to do something uplifting after the death of Freddie Gray. "What can we do to make this a better place?" Wolf remembered thinking. Her husband, a Florence native familiar with madonnari, suggested the festival.

"For years, he wanted to do this," she said.

The arts festival continues to grow, attracting tens of thousands of visitors.

"People loved it so we kept doing it," Kirby said.

Professionals work beside amateurs, Europeans next to Americans.

“We really want people to interact with each other and see what the world has to offer,” Kirby said.

Elizabeth Humphries and Gurmannat Kalra, graduate students at the University of Maryland Institute for Genome Sciences, chose brain images to fit this year’s theme of “Courage.” Their MRI images illustrated how the flight and fight responses, also called the courage and fear responses, light up the brain.

“It’s traditional in medical schools to illustrate your findings,” said Humphries, a Catholic native of Prince George’s County.

Kirby said family responsibilities kept him home in recent years, but as his children grow, that could change. In fact, in October the three of them will participate in “Chalktoberfest” Oct. 12-13 in Marietta, Ga.