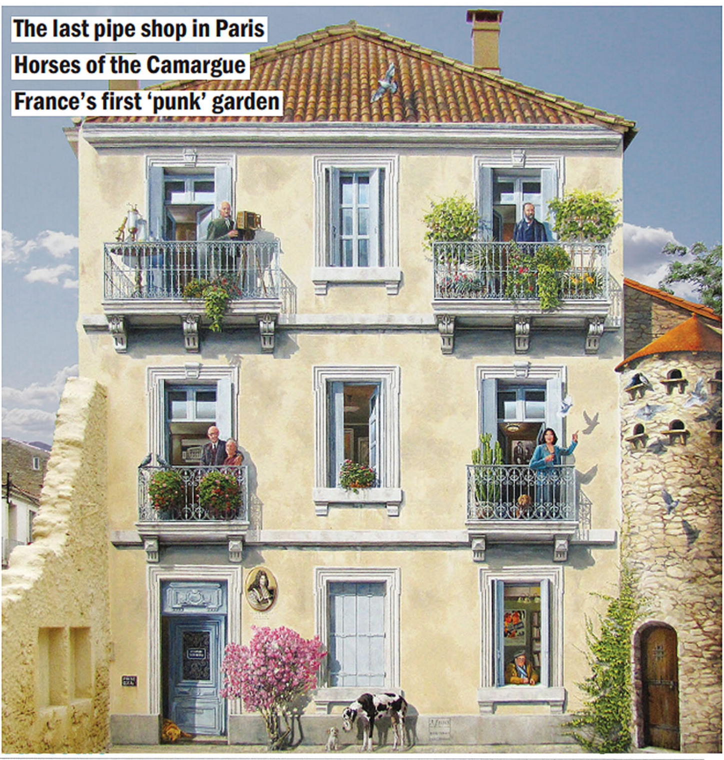
French living
Food Wine Homes Gardens Interviews Events
The Connexion

The last pipe shop in Paris
Horses of the Camargue
France's first 'punk' garden



# Paint wizard who creates smart public murals that deceive the eyes

**Samantha David** puts street art into perspective

Even if you do not recognise his name, chances are that you will already have admired his work: Patrick Commecy is a painter who exclusively designs and paints frescoes in the public domain, although he did not originally set out to decorate French buildings.

"I studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, but what I learned there was that I didn't want to work for that circuit, an international elite who see art as an investment, a way of making money. I wanted to work for people directly, creating art in the street for everyone to enjoy."

France had a tradition of street frescoes, including political slogans and advertising, which had more or less died out by the 1950s. Some ghost paintings still exist, but by 1968 the idea of painting buildings no longer existed.

"So I painted the first-ever fresco, *La Fresque Murale de la Renaissance* in Oullins, near Lyon. It still exists and has, in fact, been renovated."

At that time he also founded a cooperative association of wall painters which is now called CitéCréation, which he headed up until 2000.

Commecy and CitéCréation are responsible for many frescoes in and around Lyon, including *Le Mur des Canuts* which has become a local landmark.)

"Eventually I left the association. You know, like what happens between old couples... it got tricky so there was a divorce and I formed my new company Art Fresco."

His new group has now completed around 200 frescoes, all in France except a couple in Switzerland and Italy.

"The word artist frightens me, I prefer to say I'm an arts craftsman.

"My objective isn't to record a personal point of view... my art isn't about me. The aim is to serve the local population by creating images based on architecture, culture, and society. The frescoes I designed in Montpellier wouldn't make sense in Paris, for example.

"The point is to produce something that the public can understand and appreciate.

"I want people to find themselves reflected in my work, I want them to find their history and their stories in it. I want people to be proud of their local wall painting, and talk about it.

"That's the challenge. Whether it's art or not art, I couldn't care less.

"The essential thing is that it functions in the public space and that people can really live with it. It's quite a discipline.

"In a public space, as opposed to in a private gallery, you can't express views about anything, can't take sides in current affairs for example, because people can choose whether or not to go to a gallery but they have to live with whatever they're offered in public spaces.

"They have to live with it, so you have to address the largest possible number of people. Children, tourists, households... it's not about expressing a personal opinion. It has to be a way of expressing something about daily life in that place."

Lyon now has more than 100 frescoes and has begun describing itself as the city of murals: a massive outdoor art gallery.

Most have been designed by Commecy and more recently, by CitéCréation which these days employs a team of 80 painters, architects, landscapers and designers.

One of the largest is *La Fresque des Canuts* (the Silk Weavers' Wall) on the corner of Boulevard des Canuts and Rue Denfert Rochereau in Lyon 4.

The largest mural in Europe, it depicts life in the Croix-Rousse area of the city and is regularly updated.

Another well-known mural depicts the city's great and good: *La Fresque des Lyonnais Célèbres* in Rue de la Martinière, Lyon 1, includes personalities like chef Paul Bocuse, the cinema pioneers Lumière Brothers and Emmaüs founder, Abbé Pierre. Full information is available at the tourist office.

"Painting murals is a way of introducing the public to visual creativity, which is needed because the art world is cut off from many people – it is financial, speculative, and exclusive.

"I wanted to offer something different, something everyone can enjoy.

"You can put art in the street, graffiti or a blue giraffe or whatever, but that's different. What I do is make art out of the local streets. It's not heavily codified – on the contrary, it's amusing.

"Adding a little cat or a dog makes children laugh. Adding local famous people adds another dimension, and we ensure that *trompe l'oeils* are well-integrated. People are going to have to walk past them every day after all, so we try to make them cheerful."

Commecy is aware that a large fresco, in bright cheerful colours with an amusing local theme, can improve an urban area.

Frescoes attract visitors who then use local cafés, restaurants, shops and other amenities. As local businesses thrive, property prices stabilise.

But a fresco is not a permanent addition. Even when using the best acrylic paints, a fresco matures and ages: eventually the paint will start to fade and peel.

"My clients are the local authorities, and they are always extremely happy with our frescoes because local populations love them. Suddenly the authorities are popular; they receive lots of happy letters about the frescoes. But ultraviolet light, pollution, winter weather and accidental damage means that after 15-20 years they need to be renovated, and often this doesn't happen.

"It's a shame, but people tend to think that a painting is eternal. Murals fade faster in southern, sunnier cities."

Commecy said his favourite frescoes are always the ones he is currently working on. At the moment, he's creating murals for Béziers and Prades. He does a lot of work in the south of France, and has created a series of cinema-related murals in Cannes to celebrate its connection to the Seventh Art.

Since 2002, Cannes has commissioned a series of frescoes which delight visitors and residents alike. Massive portraits of Jean-Paul Belmondo, Gérard Depardieu, Truffaut, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and Batman are all just waiting to be discovered round the next street corner.

There are also *trompe l'oeil* paintings which are so good that, unless you know where they are, you might easily walk past them thinking they are real, like the *Trompe l'Oeil Le Barbarella*, in the Place du Suquet. The balconies, the windows, the rooms with a view ... it is all fake.

Do not miss *Les Baisers de Cinéma*, which depicts some of the silver screen's most romantic moments: Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*, Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet in *Titanic*, Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh (*Gone with the Wind*), and Bogart – again – this time with Lauren Bacall in *To Have and Have Not*.

"I travel around France a lot, and of course it's nicer working outdoors in Cannes than in Lille, for example!

"I never choose the size, shape, or the geographical orientation of the wall, and those parameters have to be taken into account when designing. I work with my companion Marion Pillard, and to complete each painting, we hire a team of anything between four and 30 artists."

It took 30 people to complete the monumental, record-breaking mural, *La Fresque des Français*.

Located in the Musée en Sous-sol in the SO-OUEST underground car park in the Eiffel area in Levallois, near Paris, it is five kilometres long, covers 8,000m2 of wall space and depicts 250 of France's most famous sons and daughters. The fresco can be explored in detail on the dedicated website *www.fresques-des-francais.com*.

Knowing that the entire painting was completed in six months only makes the fresco even more impressive.

There is no dedicated art school training artists to paint murals, so Commecy tends to train people himself and has a list of artists he works with regularly.

"I believe a training course was tried in Lyon but I'm not sure it was successful, and now I think courses are being set up as the art form becomes more popular, but the best training is just doing it."

Forthcoming projects include a new work in Prades, near Perpignan, where he has already completed various projects.

"This is will be a *trompe l'oeil* painted on an ex-railway building which has been transformed into office buildings. Obviously, we're going to put a train in the picture! We've already done two frescoes in Prades.

"I like programming a series of works around a city or a town. Eventually they form a circuit which people can walk around. It attracts visitors and they can become a tourist attraction in their own right.

"Levallois has nine frescoes, there are 12 in Béziers, 10 in Cannes, for example. It makes residents proud of their city."

The frescoes in Béziers include a tribute to Molière as well as the Second World War hero, Jean Moulin.

The tourist office has a map showing a 3km stroll around the town taking in the outdoor artworks. A favourite is in Place des Bons Amis, a mural depicting sculptor Jean-Antoine Injalbert and his friend Etienne Dalou, also a sculptor.

Opposite the mural is a statue by Injalbert called *Bacchante au Biniou* depicting Bacchus with musical pipes called Biniou in Breton.

Also try and spot Harlequin peeping out of a *trompe l'oeil* window on the facade of the Théâtre de Béziers.

The price of a fresco is not calculated by the square metre, but depends on the amount of preparation of the wall needed, the scaffolding, and the complexity of the design.

"A sky with a few clouds and a couple of birds is obviously cheaper than an action-packed scene depicting dozens of local personalities. On the other hand, it's not more expensive than three or four new benches or lamp-posts or a stretch of new pavement.

"As soon as you work in the public sphere, everything costs a lot.

"The price of a lamp-post is around €15,000 for example, but no-one notices those types of improvements. On the other hand, the impact of a fresco is massive, making it good value for money."

> I want people to find themselves reflected in my work, I want them to find their history and their stories in it

> Whether it's art or not art, I couldn't care less

Some of the murals Patrick Commecy has designed and worked on, including

La Fresque Murale de la Renaissance (main picture) in Lyon – which is now something of a tourist attraction

## Street art is provocative, subversive... and massively popular in France

**STREET art includes all kinds of visual creative disciplines, from sculpture to graffiti via video projections, light shows, posters, stencils, or ceramic installations.**

**It is not always officially sanctioned but is increasingly appreciated as part of contemporary urban life. Look for it on walls, pavements, park benches or monuments.**

**Street art is often provocative, subversive, critical of the government, and inspired by other movements, such as music, dance or politics.**

**The difference is not always clear to those responsible for maintaining public spaces – the works of arguably the world's most famous street artist, Banksy, have more than once been removed in error.**

**But street art is becoming so mainstream that in 2019 street art festivals were held all over France including Biarritz, Metz, Caen, Toulouse, Lille, Lyon, Marseille, Strasbourg, Paris and Grenoble.**

**One of France's best-known street artists is Jef Aérosol (Jean-François Perroy) who emerged from the graffiti movement in the early 1980s, and makes extensive use of stencils.**

**He has worked all over France, Europe, North Africa, China, Japan, and the US.**

**In 2011, an exhibition of his works was held at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille, and he was also invited to take part in the *No Man's Land* exhibition in Tokyo.**

**In 2012, he installed a monumental monochrome stencil called *Chuuuttt* (Ssshhhh) on a blank wall overlooking the famous Stravinsky Fountain in Paris, which is still in place.**

**Another street artist whose work is spotted all over Paris is Miss.Tic.**

**Her mother, brother and grandmother died in a car accident when she was 10, and her father died of a heart attack when she was 16.**

**She trained as an artist and spent some time in California before returning to France in the 1980s, when she began using stencils to leave her signature images of dark-haired women at sites all over Paris.**

**Her images are often associated with poetry related to her own life, her relationships, break-ups, dreams, fantasies and ideas.**

**Using images of women as merchandise she explores themes of women as seductresses.**

**Her work has not always been appreciated by the authorities. In 1997, she was arrested for damaging public property and fined €4,500.**

**By the mid-2000s, however, street art was becoming recognised as a valid artistic contribution and Miss.Tic's work was being shown in art galleries. In 2007, one of her pieces was bought by the Victoria and Albert Museum.**

**In 2011, French post office La Poste used her designs on a series of stamps issued to mark International Women's Day. In 2013, she designed the decor for the 5th Tramway installed in Montpellier (among the designers of the other Tramway lines were Gérard Garouste, Bonetti and Christian Lacroix.)**

**Outside Paris, Marseille is a great place to spot street art.**

**The Panier area around the Vieux-Port, and the Cours Julien are particularly rich hunting grounds to find works by artists including M. Chat, Manyoly and Nhobi.**

**With its annual street art festival, Grenoble is also well known as a city with a buzzing street art scene.**

**Lurcy-Lévis, a small village between Moulins (Allier) and Bourges (Cher) is home to Street Art City, dedicated to urban art and graffiti.**

**Artists-in-residence, who come from all over the world and usually stay for a fortnight, enjoy free board and lodging as well as free art materials.**

**The results are outstanding. Hotel 128 was originally an accommodation block at the training centre here, but now houses more than 50 rooms completely covered in street art.**

**Inside and out, the buildings are covered in street art and exploring the whole thing takes at least half a day. Tickets cost €12.90, and the profits are used to fund more artists-in-residence. Visitors to the village are often able to see artists at work.**

One of Miss.Tic's works on display at the Exposition Au delà du Street Art, Musée de la Poste, in 2013