

Urban Art: Connecting beauty, meaning and identity

First graders explore the city through community art and artmaking

International School SEK Santa Isabel
Madrid, Spain

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“What do you notice about the painting?” Ruth, a first-grade teacher asks her students. Standing close together on a wide sidewalk on a windy, autumn morning, the wide-eyed students point to the large mural on a wall.

“They’re holding hands,” says Julia.

“They’re in blue dresses,” Roberto adds.

Ruth explains that this and all the murals along this wall have meanings. “What does this mean to you?” she asks.

“For me,” Anna offers, “it says that we girls are also strong and valued.” Ruth nods and invites her to explain what she sees that makes her say that. Soon students select murals they like and, crouched on the sidewalk, draw parts of them on their sketch pads.

These 26 first graders attend the International School SEK Santa Isabel, a private pre k-6th grade school of 350 students in the historic downtown center of Madrid. The students and teachers see the city as their campus and regularly explore and engage with people and places in their community through what they call learning paths.

“Empowering children to take part in their community is critical,” notes their art teacher, Ruth. “This learning path is about understanding art and social activism but more importantly our students learn that they can move freely and safely through their neighborhood.” She believes that once



children can hear, see, and feel things in their worlds they are more empowered to change it.

On the Learning Path

The students exit the school doors, each with their sketch pad and colored pencils. Ruth leads the group that includes several parents who are keen to learn and help out. Walking hand-in-hand up the cobblestone streets, the students chat and point to things they notice: a shop, a sign, trees, a recycling bin. The old narrow street winds past a pharmacy, where a worker leans on her broom and smiles widely and waves as the children pass by. After several minutes, they emerge in a sun-filled plaza, bustling with mid-day cars and people. Ruth pauses the group, reminding them to stay together as they look around. They continue on, passing pedestrians in the plaza, several of whom kindly grin. An elderly couple stops and asks them what they are doing.

“We’re artists,” replies a young boy. “We’re going to draw.”

“How beautiful, enjoy!” The old man says waving goodbye. They leave the noisy plaza along a quiet cobblestone street lined with trees and parked cars.

“This street is very narrow,” says a boy to his friend, “let’s walk closer to the wall.”

“What building is that?” another child asks one of the parents.

“Oh, look at the mini-bus,” notices another student. A boy points and tells a friend that he used to go to a playground down that street when he was little. The neighborhood’s shops catch the eyes and noses of many of the children.

“Whoa, look!” exclaims a boy while the group approaches a colorful fruit shop.

“Yeah, I can smell the fruit,” notes a girl to the parent who is walking alongside her. A few blocks later, the students turn onto a wide street adorned with vibrant murals stretching along one side. The colorful artwork catches their attention, sparking curiosity and conversation. Behind the mural-covered wall lies La Tabacalera, a building steeped in history and cultural significance.



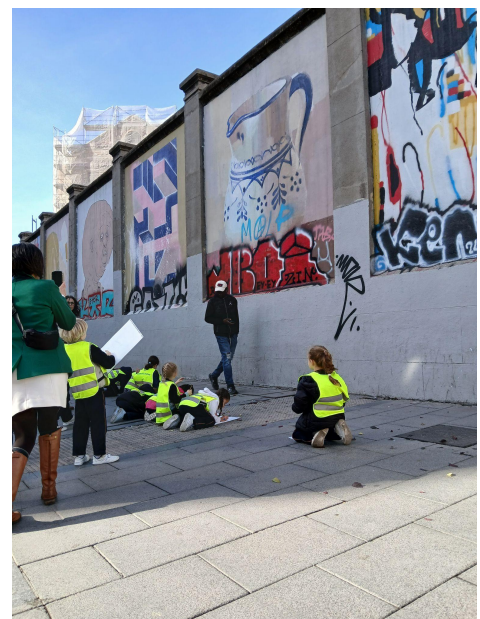
Formerly known as the Old Tobacco Factory of Madrid, Ruth explains that La Tabacalera is one of the city's most iconic industrial landmarks. In the late 19th century, Spain was home to several prominent tobacco factories, located in cities like Seville, Cádiz, Alicante, and Madrid. These factories produced a prized commodity imported from the New World. The tobacco trade, often associated with women, highlighted their remarkable skill and precision. Their smaller, nimbler hands were said to be ideal for rolling tobacco, allowing them to work faster and with greater finesse.

Beyond their craftsmanship, these women were trailblazers in advocating for their rights as workers. They organized to demand better conditions, successfully establishing nursing rooms and schools to support mothers and provide care for their children—a testament to their resilience and determination. Ruth tells the children that their joy and spirit are believed to still linger within the building today and that the surroundings are used as a public arts center focused on activism and neighborhood engagement. “It's like taking art out of museums and into the streets,” she said.

Several students pause to admire the towering, evocative murals before them. These works are part of *Muros*, a project launched by the Madrid government in 2014 to inspire emotions through urban art, using creativity as a powerful channel to ignite energy for change and transformation. Ruth selects four murals for the students to examine closely. At each one she asks, “What do you notice about the painting? How does it make you feel?” Students are eager to share. In a small corner of one mural, a few children spot a bear picking fruit from a fruit tree called *Madroño*, one of the most iconic symbols of Madrid.

“Ooh, that’s the statue near my house in Puerta del Sol!” a boy exclaims. This bear image appears on the city's coat of arms, the flag, the City Hall logo, and a famous statue located in Puerta del Sol.

At another mural that features a teapot a boy reflects, “This reminds me of my grandmother, she likes tea.” And at the mural with women in blue dresses, Roberto and Julia share what they notice and Anna adds her thoughts about it representing the power of women.



After several minutes of exploring the murals, students select one that interests them the most.

“Draw a part of the mural, practice your lines and think about the colors you use to convey the meaning it has for you,” encourages Ruth. The students settle on the sidewalk, some in pairs, others in larger groups, and pull out their sketch pads and pencils. Their heads move between the mural, their paper, and drawings emerging from their nearby friends. Many residents of the area pass by, looking at their drawings and smiling at the young artists below them.

An elderly man pauses as he passes by and says quietly, “How lovely, what beauties.” He smiles at the children and continues on his way. When they are satisfied with their drawings, the children gather up their materials and begin the walk back through the streets to school.



Reflections

Ruth is pleased with the students' thinking and their artistry. “The children like to focus on colors, places, or details. They're drawn to clarity and narratives—stories captivate them. So, I try to find compelling, meaningful insights from the art that resonate with their curiosity and their hearts. I am genuine with them; it's okay to acknowledge when something isn't pleasant. Many images carry heavy or sad messages, and they're perceptive—they notice. By recognizing these truths, they can begin to envision ways to transform them.” She designed the experience to focus on a few things, no more – the colors, the details, the place and the stories of the murals.

She was also impressed with how they connected with their local neighborhood. “Empowerment is crucial. They should feel free to move, safely of course, but with the understanding that they're in a living, breathing city, where things happen—police, people, and the rhythm of urban life. Let them observe it, but also feel empowered to engage with and change it. True empowerment is giving them the confidence to navigate their neighborhoods freely and the belief that they can make a difference.”