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**Global vision, local design: UW-Stout students transform public spaces with murals**

**Art installations in Italy, Minnesota bring communities together**

Written by Abbey Goers, University of Wisconsin–Stout

Two UW-Stout students – **Allison Seanor** and **Megan McDowell** – recently completed two murals, half a world apart. Their public installations celebrate how art brings communities together, creating vibrant and welcoming spaces.

Seanor, an [art education major](https://www.uwstout.edu/programs/bs-art-education) from Wausau, studied abroad at Accademia Italiana in Florence, Italy, last spring. She participated in a city-wide mural festival with her artwork entitled “To Travel is to Understand.”

McDowell, an [animation and digital media major](https://www.uwstout.edu/programs/bfa-animation-digital-media) from Albertville, Minnesota, was commissioned by Koala Dental Care in St. Cloud, to create a multi-wall-to-wall mural for the office’s reception area.

**‘To Travel is to Understand’**

Seanor’s mural “To Travel is to Understand” is part of Florence’s annual [Palazzuolo Strada Aperta festival](https://portalegiovani.comune.fi.it/pogio/webzine_publish/arte_dettaglio.php?ID_REC=51458), which invites national and international street artists to work with residents to revitalize the city center through art.

Her approximately 8-by-8-foot mural is painted on a retractable metal shutter at Via Palazzuolo 76 red. When shops along Via Palazzuolo close their shutters for the evening, the street turns into an art gallery. The street, close to Santa Maria Novella Square, is seeking to revive its historical artisan character and support the local economy.

Seanor’s mural reflects on the impact of mass tourism on Florence, as seen through the eyes of an American student.

“It is a message of unity and shared respect, a reminder to travelers that to truly experience a place you must appreciate it, learn from it, connect with it, reflect on it and understand it,” Seanor said.

It is also a message to Florentines, acknowledging the challenges that tourism can bring, while offering a heartfelt reassurance: “Many of us arrive with a deep admiration for this extraordinary city and a genuine desire to honor its culture, its people and its rhythms. In Florence, we can meet not as strangers, but as human beings moved by beauty, history and respect,” Seanor added.

At the heart of the painting is a portrait of Seanor’s Italian teacher, Maria Antonietta, who motivated Seanor to do her best inside and outside of class. “Maria was my inspiration. She is a world traveler and beautiful soul, and she symbolizes the desire to learn no matter where you go,” she said.

She was also influenced by her own observations of the city. “Others might say it’s bold to comment on tourism within art, when you yourself are an American. However, my goal was to hopefully close the gap between tourists and locals in Florence,” Seanor said.

“I’m very happy with the results of this mural, with how colorful it is and how it turned out physically, but also with how it changed me as a person,” she added. “I believe this mural and studying abroad have helped me really push myself to try to achieve more, and that is something I am really proud of. It’s not so easy to leave your comfort zone to try to reach your goals, but when you do, it’s extremely rewarding.”

“To Travel is to Understand” is visible and geolocated on the [Street Art of Florence map](https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1FEPuXN9g0dXGpm-647bfqDBMWto&ll=43.7735719%2C11.246872699999999&z=13) on Google Maps.

**An engaging, abstract collage for kids and families**

McDowell’s Koala Dental Care mural was commissioned by the owner through McDowell’s aunt, who is a dentist in the office. “I am very grateful I had an inside connection and was able to jumpstart a new passion of mine,” she said.

Within the mural design, Koala asked McDowell to combine popular visuals of Minnesota with dental care objects. “These are two completely different topics, so to combine them into one cohesive design, I had to be creative. I combined the ideas in an almost abstract way to create a collage of hidden things. I added a lot of motion and fluidity into the design, making it engaging for kids at the office to look at,” she said.

McDowell had always wanted to learn about the process behind creating a mural, and two courses at UW-Stout provided her with that knowledge. Within the Digital Illustration course, McDowell worked with a group of her peers to create a mural design for UW-Stout’s [School of Art and Design](https://www.uwstout.edu/academics/colleges-schools/school-art-design). It portrayed humanoid characters interacting with elements of art and design – film, ceramics, video games, music, studio art and more – in purple, blue, orange, yellow and red hues.

Their design was chosen by university leadership to be completed by students in the Graffiti and Street Art summer class in 2024. McDowell enrolled in the class and helped bring her design to life, led by **Professor Cynthia Bland** and **Lecturer Wade Lambrigtsen**, owner and proprietor of [Vintage Sign Shop](https://www.vintagesignshop.com/) in Menomonie. It was the third 400-square-foot, student-designed, student-painted mural on campus, located on the east loading dock of the Applied Arts Building.

“I was inspired by the process. These courses allowed me to get experience outside of school, and I was able to use these skills to further my career and find a new passion,” she said.

“Megan’s Koala mural is a clear connective thread between the mural production here at Stout and setting up students to become muralists out in the real world,” Bland added.

McDowell graduated this spring and is currently doing freelance work while seeking a full-time career. She wants to continue painting murals as well. “What I love most about animation and digital media is the storytelling. Storytelling through visuals is something I greatly enjoy. I want to bring other people’s stories to life,” she said.

In summer 2026, [Murals in Menomonie](https://exploremenomonie.com/murals-in-menomonie/), featuring the Walldogs, will transform and uplift the community through public art, helping make Menomonie a more joyful and vibrant place to live.

The animation and digital media program is part of the [School of Art and Design](https://www.uwstout.edu/academics/colleges-schools/college-arts-human-sciences/school-art-design/furlong-gallery), one of the largest public art schools in the Midwest. Art education is offered through the [School of Education](https://www.uwstout.edu/academics/colleges-schools/college-arts-human-sciences/school-education).