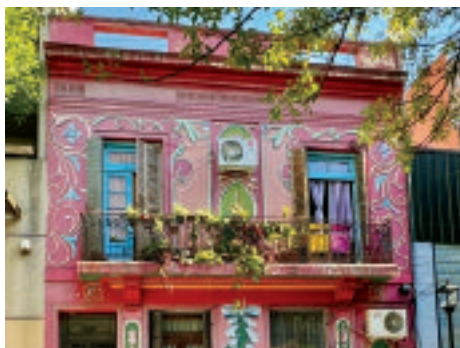


## The Lesson

By Gina DeCaprio Vercesi



I watch as Alfredo Genovese draws a long-haired paintbrush across a wooden tile, leaving a sweeping line in its wake. The Buenos Aires-based artist adds one flourish, then another, his skilled hand swiveling above his pinky as if the little finger were the point of a compass. Soon, an image materializes—a pink flower wreathed in verdigris tendrils. “You need to feel the whole brush,” Genovese says. “Make one long stroke, then turn your fingers to form the spiral.” I pick up a brush and attempt to mimic his movements. “Tranquila—go slowly,” he adds as my brush stutters over the tile. Not surprisingly, it’s much harder than it looks.

Genovese’s art form is known as *filete porteño*. The stylized painting technique, characterized by vivid colors, lavish ornamentation, and fanciful lettering, has become synonymous with the Argentine capital. One of its classic motifs is the five-petaled flower I’m painting now—a design that’s straightforward enough for beginners to replicate in the workshops Genovese teaches in his studio in Buenos Aires’s Caballito neighborhood.

*Filete* was born in the early 20th century, when Italian immigrants working in the factories that made wooden trade carts embellished the

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wagons with simple designs. Later, trucks would come to be festooned in increasingly elaborate work, and in the 1950s *fileteado* painters also began decorating the city’s buses. The military dictatorship that took power in the mid-1970s banned *filete* from the buses, however, and Buenos Aires’s *fileteadores* soon found themselves unemployed.

“*Filete* was on the verge of extinction,” Genovese says. “Without work, *filete* artists couldn’t teach the next generation.” It didn’t help that because *filete* was a popular form born on the margins of society, the artistic community didn’t consider it to have much aesthetic value; in fact, Genovese’s classmates at Prilidiano Pueyrredón

National School of Fine Arts mocked him for being interested in it. “They said, ‘That isn’t art,’” he recalls. “But for me, it was art.”

Today, though, *filete porteño* has seen a resurgence; it’s rare to walk a block or two in Buenos Aires without spotting one of the whimsical designs, and UNESCO even added the art form to its Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list in 2015.

As I work in Genovese’s studio to draw my flower, I can’t help but agree that this is a painstaking pursuit. He shows me how to embellish the design with light and shadow, adding an element of depth he refers to as “false volume.” While crude in comparison to the dazzling works he has on display, my little painting turns out to be a perfect memento of Buenos Aires.

“For me, teaching is a work of art,” Genovese says. “In this way, the art transcends. If it is transmitted to other people, *fileteado* will stay alive.”

*Workshops from \$100, fileteado.com; for a guided tour to see some of the best pieces in Buenos Aires, email local tour operator Mail0, mail0@mail0.com.ar.*

**Above:** *filete porteño* designs adorn building walls, bottles, train stations, and cars around Buenos Aires