

Walks in Port Phillip

MIRKA'S ST KILDA



Exploring the local artistic and community
legacy of Mirka Mora



MAP NOT TO SCALE

TRAIL KEY

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. TOLARNO BISTRO AND HOTEL | 5. PALAIS THEATRE | 10. NATIONAL THEATRE |
| 2. ALFRED SQUARE | 6. DOGS BAR | 11. GREAT WALL OF ST KILDA |
| 3. ST KILDA PIER MOSAIC | 7. ACLAND STREET | 12. 116 BARKLY ST |
| 4. DONOVANS | 8. READINGS | 13. MIRKA LANE |
| | 9. CICCiolINA | 14. ST KILDA LIBRARY |

This walk is a celebration of the life of enigmatic artist Mirka Mora and the contribution she made to the City of Port Phillip during the years that she lived, worked and played in the local area and beyond.

An artist with an unmistakable style, Mirka Mora left distinctive brush marks across Melbourne, from Flinders Street Station to Heide Museum of Modern Art. But nowhere was her touch more significant – or more visible – than in St Kilda, an area in which she lived, worked, and made art for decades.

Born in France in 1928 to a Lithuanian father and a Romanian mother, she narrowly escaped Auschwitz concentration camp as a young girl. After World War Two, she married French resistance fighter Georges Mora and came to Australia with their son Philippe in 1951. The family initially lived in the heart of Melbourne at 9 Collins Street, where the Sofitel now stands, but soon relocated to St Kilda, an area Mirka would hold an affinity with for the rest of her life.



Mirka Mora, St Kilda, 1982. St Kilda Festival poster competition winner, City of St Kilda, 1983.
© Mirka Mora. Courtesy of the Artist and William Mora Galleries.
Port Phillip City Collection

From the moment she arrived in Melbourne, Mirka captivated the Australian imagination with her distinctive imagery, extraordinary use of colour, and sense of joy and wonderment.

After first opening Mirka Café in Elizabeth Street and the restaurant Balzac in East Melbourne, Mirka and Georges took over the **Tolarno Bistro and Hotel (1)** in St Kilda in 1964. Tolarno was not only a restaurant but also an art gallery, studio and home for the couple and their three sons, Philippe, William and Tiriël. Breakfast and dinner were taken in the bistro at “the family table” and the boys grew up with refined taste in food. Between 1965 and 1978, Mirka painted a series of murals over the walls and windows of the restaurant, bistro, hallway and toilets. The subject matter of the artworks is deeply personal, drawing on Mirka’s heritage, her interest in literature and history, and the lives of her three children. The hotel became a favourite of Melbourne’s artistic and bohemian set, and a series of remarkable art exhibitions were held here, including Sidney Nolan’s Ned Kelly series. The restaurant changed hands several times after 1970, though Georges continued to run the Tolarno gallery until 1979.



*Mirka's studio, Tolarno Hotel, 1967. Photographer unknown.
Courtesy: The Estate of Mirka Mora*

In 1982, the St Kilda Festival engaged Mirka to appear at **Alfred Square (2)** and create a Children's Mural, which is now on the walls of the St Kilda Library. The following year, Mirka designed the artwork to promote the 1983 St Kilda Festival.

In 1993, after recovering from cancer, Mirka completed the **St Kilda Pier Mosaic (3)**. With no onsite storage near the jetty and because she did not drive, she chose to wheel her heavy tools in a large baby pram from her home every day. After a long day of working on the mosaic, Mirka would head home along the foreshore, pushing her pram of materials. She would regularly stop for dinner at Jean Jacques by the Sea, which later became **Donovans (4)**. It was here that she often sat writing her autobiography, *Wicked but Virtuous: My Life* (2000), in the late 1990s.

In May 2007, a \$300 million development was proposed for the triangle of Crown land on the foreshore of St Kilda. The local community, including Mirka, united to oppose the development and its impact on the beautiful **Palais Theatre (5)**. When Mirka passed away in 2018, her state memorial service was held here.



Mirka Mora, *St Kilda Pier*, 1970. Oil on board, 630 x 630 mm. Courtesy: William Mora Galleries
© The Estate of Mirka Mora

The **Dog's Bar (6)** at 54 Acland Street features one of Mirka's murals framing its open kitchen. Restaurateur Donlevy Fitzpatrick commissioned the painting in 1990, recognising that Mirka's work embodied the vibrant, modern, and very European sensibility he wanted to evoke.

When the Moras first moved to the area in the 1960s, **Acland Street (7)** was a Jewish cultural hub. Mirka loved going to Acland Street and listening to the old men speaking Yiddish, recalling her childhood and family memories.

Helen and Jack Halliday owned Cosmos, now **Readings (8)**, and Metropolis book shops in Acland Street. Their shops were a mecca for Mirka, who bought extensively in the areas of art and non-fiction. About a year after opening Cosmos, Helen and Jack commissioned Mirka to paint a mural on the round column near the entrance, which is still there today.



*Mirka at Harley Court, St Kilda, 1991. Photographer unknown.
Courtesy: The Age*

Mirka preferred to work in the mornings and early afternoons, after which she'd have a long lunch which she said was "really my breakfast, lunch and dinner in one go". A favourite lunch spot was **Cicciolina (9)** at 130 Acland Street. On the wall of the restaurant is a portrait of Joy Hester that Mirka painted during Joy's funeral. It was gifted to Sweeney Reed, Joy's son, and later purchased by the owners of Cicciolina.

As a young woman Mirka studied theatre and mime in France and, while she later turned her focus to visual arts, she always retained a love of the stage. She created costumes for plays and ballets and left her mark on the **National Theatre (10)**, where she painted a mural on the collection box in 2008.

In 2010, the City of Port Phillip commissioned the creation of the **Great Wall of St Kilda (11)**. This piece features 207 large tiles by artist Camille Monet and 600 smaller tiles made by local community members, including Mirka Mora.



*Mirka at Tolarno, 1969. Photographer unknown.
Courtesy: The Age*

In late 1981, Mirka bought **116 Barkly St (12)** with the help of Georges - a one-storey, single-fronted Victorian terrace, built c.1890. Mirka was delighted to return to St Kilda and also thrilled to have the security of her own home. In *Wicked but Virtuous: My Life*, she writes, "I fell in love with it as it had a wood stove...It warmed the house and made a lovely noise. In the petit jardin I painted several times." Mirka lived here until 1999, after which she moved into the Richmond townhouse and gallery with her son William and his wife Lucy.

In 2001, **Mirka Lane (13)** was named in commemoration of the artist's connection to the area. It is located off Barkly Street, near to where she lived.

Inside the **St Kilda Library (14)** one can view the Children's Mural that Mirka created for the 1982 St Kilda Festival, which was later purchased by the City of St Kilda.

Mirka's legacy lives on in St Kilda and beyond through the art she created, the stories she told, the community who embraced her, and the many ways in which we continue to celebrate her ongoing contribution to the colour and culture in our lives.

This trail map was produced by the City of Port Phillip and the Jewish Museum of Australia, and in partnership with the Estate of Mirka Mora & William Mora Galleries.

This trail is one of a series that explores the art and heritage treasures in the City of Port Phillip.

Visit www.portphilip.vic.gov.au for more cultural heritage, art and local history programs, and to see more Mirka Mora works in the Port Phillip City Collection.

Visit www.jewishmuseum.com.au for more information about MIRKA the exhibition.

Visit www.stkildahistory.org.au to explore more of the world of Mirka Mora.

Cover image: Henry Talbot, Mirka Mora, 1985. Donated by Henry Talbot. Jewish Museum of Australia Collection 796

START	Tolarno Bistro and Hotel, Fitzroy Street
FINISH	St Kilda Library, Carlisle Street
LENGTH	4 kilometres (approx)
TIME	60 minutes (approx)
REFRESHMENTS	There are numerous cafes along the route

Please note that some sites on this trail are not open for public access as they are private dwellings or commercial premises with patron entry only.

Council respectfully acknowledges the Yaluk-ut Weelam Clan of the Boon Wurrung. We pay our respect to their Elders, both past, present and emerging. We acknowledge and uphold their continuing relationship to this land.

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