

# 6 million

There are more than 6 million manhole covers across the city, managed by 20 entities and departments, including water services, telecommunications, electricity, public security, information technology and gas, according to Jin Xi, a maintenance engineer at the Shanghai Road Transport Development Center.

Some 20 of these emblematic manhole covers remain in situ, while others were removed during renovation and extension of Nanjing Road E.

“By ‘engraving’ Shanghai’s most notable historical and modern buildings and urban landscapes on these manhole covers, we invite people to trace the city’s historical context,” said Zheng. “They help to enhance a sense of domain and place on this iconic street.”

Shanghai is not alone in adding artistic touches to mundane infrastructure. Globally, cities are transforming manhole covers into pieces of urban art, each telling a unique story of local heritage and culture.

Tokyo celebrates its pop culture with manhole covers featuring iconic anime and manga characters. Paris has painted manhole covers to resemble vinyl records. In the Norwegian city of Stavanger, decorative sewer lids on cobbled streets blend with the city’s quaint charm.

And in China, manhole covers near the Tsingtao brewery in the eastern city of Qingdao are embossed with motifs related to the famous beer brand.

Along Wuyi Road in Shanghai’s Changning District, manhole covers feature playful elements, including graffiti of cartoon characters like SpongeBob and Captain America’s shield. The initiative there, involving 40 artworks, is part of a broader effort to infuse the historical street with reminders of past culture and present-day innovation.

“Urban revamping should encompass more than just physical renovations; it’s also about embedding culture and humanity into our cityscapes,” said Zhang Chao, an artist leading the project.

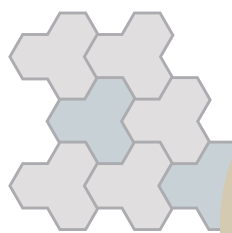
He said the artistic manhole covers crafted by eight local artists not only beautify the area but also encourage the community to appreciate their local environment.

Manhole covers aren’t only artistic;

they also can be “smart.” Many are equipped with high-tech sensors that help urban agencies monitor environmental data, including underground water levels. If data point to a problem, an alert is triggered and sensors pinpoint the exact location where maintenance crews should be dispatched.

From a technological standpoint, there is immense potential for smart manhole covers to contribute to Shanghai’s goal of a safe, efficient and eco-friendly environment, said Yu Di-ankun, a construction management staffer in the Hongkou District.

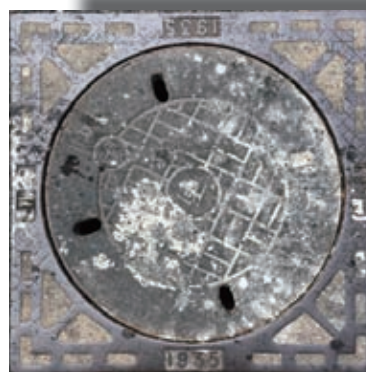
## Some of the city’s oldest manhole covers



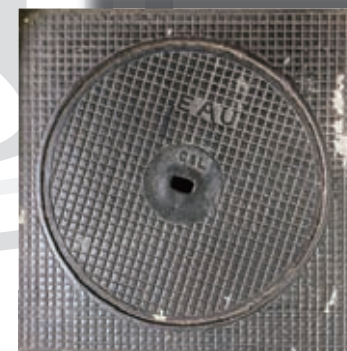
This manhole cover, crafted by the former Shanghai Waterworks Co. in 1925, stands in Huangpu District, bearing the inscription “PITOMETER.” It is one of the oldest manhole covers still in place in downtown Shanghai.



The predominant style of manhole cover in the downtown area, introduced by the former French Municipal Council in 1935, has recently been updated with newer models.



Another manhole cover in the downtown area is believed to be linked to the water supply infrastructure established by the former French Municipal Council.



A standard design manhole cover, dating back to the 1930s, was manufactured by the former US Shanghai Telephone Company.



Distinguished by its unique design, this manhole cover was produced by the former Public Works Department of the Shanghai Municipal Council.

Reflecting the design legacy of its American predecessor, a local telephone company introduced a manhole cover in the 1940s, maintaining the traditional style.



— All photos by Dong Xiongfei