

## Is Graffiti Art?

Graffiti has loomed between the borders of true art, mindless trash and a way of solely getting your name around, and more people seeing it. Is Graffiti the everyday scrawlings of misdirected teenagers or the well-laced masterpiece by a keen eye? For years the opinions have changed and shifted. Currently there is not a consensus about whether graffiti can yet be classed as art.

Art to some people would be the great works of Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Botticelli, Matisse, Van Gogh, and Monet but in today's world anything can be classed as 'art'. Different forms and styles have arisen and most people have an opinion on what is art.

A splatter of paint on canvas; art? Brush strokes on a page; art? A collage out of rubbish; art? Who decides what is art and what is not? How can someone say "that is not art" when the creator believes it to be exquisite? Why do some people perceive graffiti as nothing but paint on a wall and not the true masterpiece that others believe it really is.

The many forms and styles of graffiti make it hard to distinguish the meaningless strokes from those that are clearly art if you choose to see them. Can some writers go over the top and do too much? Or not do enough for it to be classed as art? To understand this we have to look back at the history of graffiti.

Graffiti originated with the Romans when they started to write on the buildings of the towns they conquered and even before words were used, the cave men painted on walls. The late 1960's saw graffiti's current identity starting to form. It was used primarily by political activists to make statements and also by street gangs to mark territory. The most commonly termed graffiti begins in Philadelphia Pennsylvania, during the mid to late 60's and is rooted in bombing.

A 'bomb' is painting a name all over town to gain attention from the community and local press; to get your name out and be recognised. It was also used by gangs to state their presence in the area. It wasn't long before writers discovered that in a train yard or 'lay up' they could hit many more subway cars in much less time and with less

chance of getting caught. The concept and method of 'bombing' had been established.

The subway system proved to be a line of communication and a unifying element as during the 1970's writing started moving from the streets to the subways and quickly became competitive. At this point writing consisted mostly of 'tags' and the goal was to have as many as possible. Writers or graffiti artists, as they are more commonly known, could travel by train, hitting as many subway cars as possible.

After a while there were so many people writing and tagging that writers needed a new way to gain fame. The first was to make the tag unique. Many script and calligraphic styles were developed. Writers enhanced their tags with flourishes, stars, crosses and other designs. Some of these designs were strictly for visual appeal while others had meaning.

The tag was a name or alias. These were often short and quick to paint enabling the writer to draw their tag with immense speed and precision and then move on. The writers who bombed or tagged excessively became known as taggers. Usually taggers do nothing else except tag or bomb towns with their tag(s) and sometimes they can have more than one tag at a time.

The writers' or taggers' equipment consists of a large permanent marker that they carry around with them so that they can quickly mark their name or 'tag'. Tags are sometimes seen as someone's claim to territory, and can be related to gang graffiti, in that it establishes status and lets everyone know who they are but can often have a more ominous intent. To the more artistic and 'real' graffiti artists, tagging is a less creative way to get known or 'up'. Many writers believe you are not a true graffiti artist if all you know how to do is scribble your name repeatedly.

Graffiti is mostly seen in train station as the writers can easily get in and out of different stations with ease. The convenience of stations for writers is also that they can ride the trains to every station and tag as they go. Train stations have a lot of people travelling through them, so more people would see their tags thus their popularity grows.

Graffiti is found anywhere, from busses, walls of houses, toilets, highways, bypasses, bridges and any other places; Graffiti artists can display their work, and also places where access is not permitted. Subway cars were the canvas of choice but today writers are choosing to decorate any place where their work can be seen, in effect anything the artist can reach becomes a canvas. Graffiti art has been created to serve many moods, or function as a role model to the community, for example, the Coca Cola company has used graffiti as a means of promoting their product.

'Productions' are a more elaborate type of graffiti. Often a production is made by using special tips, which are the caps to the spray cans writers use and produce a thinner line, which can be more refined and finished by sharpening with 'cut backs' in contrasting colours. A production includes tags and illustrations. A piece is similar as it also takes time to produce but the difference is that a piece consists of a word or phrase.

The next development in graffiti history was the 'throw up'. The throw-up stands on middle ground between tags, pieces and productions. The difference between a throw up and production boils down to one thing, time. A production takes hours to 'write', the 'throw up' a few minutes. A throw up is not done as quickly and as easily as a tag, but is not as complex or as decorative as a piece. Often tagging is seen as a toy, or pointless. So when writers want to be recognised and seen in the community without tagging, throw-ups are a perfect outlet. They can be executed in a matter of minutes, while using much more space and colour. Writers use throw-ups as a way of experimenting with styles and colour. Sometimes these blueprints are for a more elaborate piece the writer has in mind.

Later on came the different hand styles and signatures and the different hand styles of writing were formed. The Broadway style involved block letters and block busters, then came softie or bubble letters, which were the earliest form of actual pieces and therefore the foundation of many styles.

Around 1974 saw the creation of works with scenery, illustrations and cartoon characters surrounding the masterpieces. This formed the basis for the mural 'whole car'.

The peak of graffiti was between 1975 - 1977 as all the standards had been set and a new generation was about to reap the benefits of the artistic foundations that were established by writers who had come before them.

New York city was broke and the transit system poorly maintained which led to the heaviest bombing in history. Around this time bombing and style began to further distinguish themselves. Writers started to paint whole cars on a regular basis, whereas before, they were a special event. This distinctive form of bombing became known as the throw up, and two letter names began appearing all over the system. Writers became very competitive; races broke out to see who could do the most throw-ups, which peaked from '75 to '77 as did whole cars. Tagging battles occurred and were indicative of rising tensions in gangs. As the graffiti on the streets and trains was in decline, writers started to look for other means to 'get their names out there' and one of these outlets was the canvas. Numerous artists painted on real canvases and earned large sums of money for their work. Subject to art-world car price (subway car) however, the trend was short lived.

Every graffiti artist goes through the phase of tagging, to graffiti art and then pieces. Artistic graffiti is a modern day offspring of traditional graffiti that has elevated its self from just scrawling words or phrases on a wall, to a complex artistic form of self expression. Taggers should not be considered untalented because scribbling on walls is not art; but rather it is unappealing and ugly. Society should note that it takes time to develop artistic ability and that taggers need to gain experience and build up their talent before moving up the ladder to become graffiti artists, and eventually artists who are recognised worldwide.

Many writers started doing graffiti when they were in their teens, growing up all across countries and in big towns. Some of them spent time working with highly skilled crews from other areas, refining their technique. Nowadays sensible writers slow down the excessive tagging of public areas and some even study art formally. They spend time putting their talent to use on canvas or painting officially sanctioned murals; sometimes called permission walls.

'Permission' is defined as formal consent and permission walls can be obtained in one of two ways. Either the

graffiti artist asks the owner of the building, or place of business or the owners themselves contact the writer asking them to do something for them.

A 'permission wall' is when the owner allows graffiti artists to paint on their property. This is legal because the actual owner is allowing the graffiti. Usually the owner is not creatively involved, but they can be. They have to see the final sketch and decide if it is acceptable and to make sure that they are making the correct choice of what is being painted on their property.

Vandalism is unauthorised painting and more recently, window etching of private or public property that vandalises roadsides, mass transit, commercial districts, and residential areas. These taggers use spray paint markers, shoe polish, rollers with paint, blades and anything else they can get their hands on to write with. This form of graffiti is seen as ugly and pointless; but the graffiti writers themselves, and some if not most of society. This is the real vandalism: - the tags, and not pieces that took skill and hours of hard work to produce. The writers should not be punished for creating such masterpieces as they are doing a favour to society and creating free art wherever they go, seeing as it actually costs them money to graffiti; they have to buy their own supplies, and they don't get paid for doing it. The writers are at risk of getting caught and sent to prison; in effect they are paying us to paint. The world is their gallery and you don't have to pay a penny to go and view it.

Graffiti may be viewed from many different perspectives, depending on that person's opinion. Either they strictly disapprove of the practice or, whether they do not mind it; whether they see it as an art form or whether they are totally for the production of graffiti. Obviously there are many variations within these rough guidelines as people have different ideas about what is graffiti.

The opinion given on graffiti also depends on where that graffiti is situated, if it is on a wall, a bus, someone's house, or a canvas in a gallery.

Many elements contribute to make the individual decide whether to them a piece of graffiti is art or not. It is very hard to come to an agreement between two persons if they are at opposite ends of the 'graffiti' scale. The people who are in favour of graffiti would be the writers

themselves as well as other ordinary people. Many writers believe that vandalism is wrong and it is totally against what they stand for as a writer. They believe that graffiti is about producing art and that they are putting up a better piece than the one they are painting over.

Writers today take pride in their work and do not show respect to most taggers as they do not class this as art. Writers have no admiration for the taggers or 'scrawlers' as they have been labelled, as scrawlers don't know what they are doing and don't have the knowledge or expertise to produce a good painting or piece. Even though they may think because they have a spray can, that they do.

The backgrounds of the writers is very varied. Some are from rough areas who spend a lot of their money on graffiti, others are middle class and just start graffiti for the hell of it; perhaps because they have nothing better to do. Or have connections with some writers, or may even be taught by them. Others come from well educated backgrounds and sometimes it is obvious in their pieces as they have discussions with other writers they may have never met. Graffiti writers can also leave social comments on what is happening in the world through their art. These can be simple and blunt, visible and easy to understand, or they can be hidden for only other writers to read, or possibly only one other particular person. The writer gives only as much information about themselves as they want and often use different tags and styles, or just stick to one, depending on what and to whom they are talking.

"98% of society looks down on graffiti and if an artist who is out writing all the time the police can track you down, if they have your real name. The police view all graffiti as one menace but it is not like that" - from a graffiti writer called WallAce Adhoc, or Adhoc.

This idea is shared by many writers; they think that the police believe this and that they do not see the true art that the writers believe is there. Although many police men could in fact be in favour of graffiti the general stereotyping of them suggests otherwise. Some of society feels that graffiti is a form of art that lets one express his or her feelings on a wide range of issues, while others feel that graffiti is vandalism, destroying public and private property and contributing to gang activities and violence.

Some writers are considerate of others' property and become anti-graffiti when artists violate other people's property and rights. But most are pro-graffiti especially when it denotes personal expression.

With graffiti there are some guidelines that writers are advised to stick to. For example if you cover up someone else's piece you are supposed to 'top its style' and the new piece must be better than the previous one. Often someone who writes over another artist's piece will do it maliciously or out of ignorance of these unwritten rules. This is a form of 'burning' which is painting a superior piece over another. Tags and throw ups are often written over elaborate pieces which creates the same effect.

They also use a form called 'crossing out' when writers put a line or stripe through a piece and cross them out; considered disrespectful to that artist's piece.

During the early to mid 80's the writing culture deteriorated dramatically due to several factors. Some related directly to the graffiti culture itself, others to society in general. Due to drug trade increasing in America, powerful guns were readily available and the climate on the street became increasingly tense. Laws restricting the sale of paint to minors and requiring merchants to place spray paint in locked cages made shoplifting more difficult. Legislation was in place to make penalties for graffiti more severe. A major change was the increase in the Metropolitan Transit Authorities anti-graffiti budget. Yards and lay ups were more closely guarded. Many favoured painting areas became almost inaccessible. New more sophisticated fences were erected and quickly repaired when damaged. Graffiti removal was stronger and more consistent than ever, making the life span of many paintings just months if not days. This frustrated writers causing them to quit.

Others were not so easily discouraged, yet they were still affected. They perceived the new circumstances as a challenge, determined not to be defeated. Due to the lack of resources writers became extremely territorial and aggressive, claiming ownership to yards and lay ups. Claiming territory was nothing new in writing but the difference now was that threats were enforced. If a writer went to a lay up unarmed he could almost be guaranteed a beating and to be robbed of his painting supplies. At this point the

physical strength and unity of a gang became a major part of the writing experience. Cross out wars broke out, and famous conflicts arose.

On certain subway lines graffiti removal significantly decreased because the cars servicing those lines were headed for the scrap yards. This provided a last shot for writers. Writers hit the lines with burners. Burners were often blemished by marker tags that soaked through the paint. A trend had developed that was a definite step back for writing. Due to a lack of paint and courage to stay in a lay up for prolonged periods of time, writers were tagging with markers on the outside of subway cars and these tags were generally of poor artistic effort.

The days when writers took pride in their hand style (signature) were long gone. If it wasn't for the few remaining diehards the art form of graffiti could have officially been deemed dead.

By the beginning of the 90's many writers had quit and the violence had subsided. Most train lines were completely free of writing and only a select few of the last were running with pieces painted on them. Security was high and the Transit Police's new vandal squad was in full force. All that was left was a handful of committed individuals who would keep subway writing alive.

Many people are of the misconception that graffiti was dead. Around the late 80's New York set into effect a policy to remove all marked subway cars from service, the objective being that no graffiti-cars would run. This was the birth of the Clean Train Movement. City officials considered the murals to be signs of delinquency and disorder, thus the transit authority heightened security in train yards and began washing coaches with a solution of petroleum hydroxide. As artists braved razor wire, guard dogs and this new toxic chemical, tagging became a sport of subterfuge as well as a display of skill.

The efforts of the transit authority were overwhelmingly successful and many graffiti artists began photographing work they knew would be obliterated. Graffiti culture thus came to exist in photos, video tapes and fanzines as well as on the street. It spread to other cities and often demarcated the territory of different gangs.



Although the army smaller and the victories fewer, the movement lives on, continuing the tradition despite tremendous odds and low morale among their peers these committed individuals' battle on. Many of these writers bomb under the notion that walls, canvas and freights are a second rate medium and that the only 'real graffiti' can be found on trains. Many writers condemn the efforts of clean train writers, stating that it is pointless to do work that will not run. This line of thinking, however, does not discourage the clean train writer.

Participants range from diehards who are unwilling to give up the war against the 'graffiti is crime' idea, to new writers who are too young to have experienced transit bombing, to foreign writers making their pilgrimage to the birth place of aerosol art. It all seems to boil down to the thrill of it.

In recent years graffiti blasters have become as big a presence in the graffiti world as graffiti artists themselves. In Chicago their numbers are high as they have the nation's top graffiti blasting team and equipment. New technology has enabled the removal of permanent spray paint pieces from nearly any surface, through the use of highly concentrated amounts of baking soda. The thought that graffiti can be erased nowadays brings strong emotions to the writers, seeing their hard work, time and money be washed away.

Graffiti can be considered art, because it denotes meaning for the individual, and hopefully to the people that are viewing it. It is said that graffiti is a language, an image, a voice and a vision engaging the spirit when the soul of art is discovered.

There are so many hidden meanings in murals that it is hard for some people to grasp because they can not relate to it. But for those who can, the murals and graffiti are considered art.