

Faces Behind Graffiti

My research focused on an in depth consideration of the graffiti community and history behind street art. I investigated different types, styles and artists as well as the roots of street art and graffiti. For the visual component, I decided to focus less on graffiti itself and more on the communities formed around it. In my drawing, I focused on my friends in Minneapolis who are graffiti artists. I picked one of these people to represent the faces behind graffiti, playing with the idea of it being an anonymous art form. My main goal was to draw a line between graffiti and the artists behind it, and consider the reality behind anonymity.

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Introduction: A Personal Connection

Graffiti is something you cannot escape in the urban world. Growing up in the Minneapolis area graffiti was something that I was constantly surrounded by. Because it was such prominent part of my subconscious I naturally became interested in it. Starting in the ninth grade I began to research and learn about the different graffiti styles as well as various historic and cultural contexts behind it. In addition, I started to dabble in spray paint myself through participating in Northfield Union of Youth mural collaborations. Graffiti art quickly went from it being in the back of my mind, to a fairly prominent aspect of my daily life and identity. I soon started to chase trains to see all of the wonderful art painted and to learn as much as I could from versed artists. After being immersed for upwards of a year I decided to get serious about spray painting and attempt to enter the graffiti world. I painted and sprayed at least once a day trying to gain skills and techniques that would advance my art work. Roughly 6 months later I joined a graffiti crew to team up on projects. Through this I learned how to work in cooperation with a group and build a tight knit community of artists sharing goals and aspirations. This group of young artists quickly became my closest most trusted friends and mentors.

While dominant culture deems graffiti as vandalism, it has also evolved and become widely acknowledged as an art form that brings people together, with 50 years of weighted history and culture. The duration of this paper will include a brief overview of the beginning of graffiti in the United States, different styles that have emerged, influential artists in the graffiti world, and the connections between graffiti and other cultures (e.g. Hip-hop, Fine arts).

History: The Emergence of Graffiti

Throughout history graffiti has been fueled by many different motivations: political protest, comedic intentions, a form for gangs to mark territory..etc. In the United States, it was not until the 1960's that a today's modern graffiti culture began to develop. One of the first recognized graffiti writes was created by a young African American man named Darryl McCray, who was gifted the nickname Cornbread from a cook who worked at a youth detention center during Darryl's stay. McCray regularly demanded that the cooks served cornbread rather than the stale white bread consistently served. While the cornbread was never delivered, McCray's nickname quickly transformed into his graffiti tag. McCray shared his cornbread tag with other young men who stayed at the detention center as a way to battle drug and gang violence issues. He would spend much of his time uniquely writing his name over the detention center walls covering up gang symbols that were formerly written. The nickname stuck and fueled McCray's first graffiti bombing in the city of Philadelphia. McCray's tagging of the word "Cornbread" on obscure places such as various cop cars, the Jackson 5 plane, and an elephant in a local zoo quickly gained attention from the local community and press. This tagging project was Philadelphia's first, and started a trend that traveled throughout the city. Soon enough



there were dozens of writers walking around Philadelphia with spray paint cans and markers writing their name on anything and everything. Some other well-known writers from this era were Cool Earl and Kool Kept Kid.

During this same time a parallel was happening in New York City. A young man named Taki 183 was dedicating his teenage years to writing his name around New York. The name Taki 183 came from his given name Demetrius, and his home's street number. His employment as a bike courier allowed him to tag wide areas of the city quickly. Unlike Cornbread from Philadelphia, there were many Graffiti writes in New York City, but Taki 183 was the first to start a 24/7 hobby. The article, A History of Graffiti published by Spray Planet, describes Taki 183's work:

“Armed with magic markers and spray cans, having cut a hole in his jacket that allowed him to hide his hand as he worked, Taki tagged walls, lampposts, hydrants, and subway cars across New York City, carefully choosing the spots he thought were most likely to be noticed.”

Taki 183 became the first graffiti writer in New York City to gain fame. His work was not done for artistic meaning but simply to get his name up. He not only gained wide recognition but also inspired a whole generation of graffiti artists to emerge into the 1970's.

History: Expanding through the 70s and 80s

During the 70s and 80s graffiti developed into to what we now see today. In the mid 70s the first colored and formed pieces started showing up in cities across the country. This radically changed graffiti from writing your name with a marker to painting big and sometimes colorful letters and images. Around this time paint artists in New York City began to paint passenger trains. Because the graffiti movement was growing quickly during this time, local governments started cracking down on the removal of paintings. This started a feud between local police precincts and graffiti writers in many cities. Graffiti writers would organize protests that consisted of “bombing” the city with graffiti art. Writers teamed up and shared knowledge, all working against the police and the government. Through these large graffiti bombings, new styles and techniques started showing up in the graffiti world.

“Writers began experimenting with new lettering styles and flourishes, embellishing their tags with stars, flowers, crowns, and eyeballs, simple tags evolving”
(<https://www.sprayplanet.com/blogs/news/a-history-of-graffiti-the-60s-and-70s>)

An artist named Phase 2, who came from the Bronx, was one of the first to do many of the styles we see today. He consistently started adding a 3D aspect and doing more interior design like bubbles, drips, highlights, etc.... Throughout the 70's and 80s graffiti transitioned



from being scribbles writings on a wall to a whole art form involving many skilled and practiced techniques. To this day graffiti has been evolving every time someone experiments with something new. Talented graffiti writers and artists have started incorporating realism to their work. This consists of making the letter characters look

Styles: Various Graffiti Types

For the 50 years that graffiti has been around many different styles have bloomed from experimentation. Like everything else it has shifts and cycles that repeat and bloom from dedicated artists. These styles are inspired and shown by way of the freight trains that travel across the whole country. Modern day social media and image sharing has made it easy for artists to build off of each other ideas and creations. Modern graffiti ideas is mostly spread through sites such as Instagram, Reddit, bombingscience.com, and other social media.

Hand style is one's name written in a personalized way. This can be written with a marker or spray paint depending on the style you are going for. This type of graffiti is most commonly used for getting ones name up around a city, allowing one to gain credit and representation in the graffiti community. Likewise to hand style, Throw Ups are done quickly and used to get ones name up around a city or on freight trains. This style is exemplified by the artist's name written in simple 3D/bubble letter style. This is very commonly refined into being a simple, but interesting looking graffiti piece. Additionally, the Blockbuster Graffiti Style is widely used for large pieces



and brought to fruition with big rollers or a tool that covers lots of space. This graffiti piece is most commonly two colors and is done in block letters. Many of these pieces are done on roofs, the tops of buildings or full train cars. The picture below depicts One United Power crew's work, out of Athens.

The Wild Style of graffiti is a modern type of street art that has been developed in the last 20 years. Some of the most well-known graffiti artists



artwork is typically in wild style but applying to their own methodology and approach. This graffiti typically has many different colors/planned color schemes. Many different modern spray paint styles and techniques are applied in wild style graffiti.



Style: Piece

This is a simple graffiti piece that is one of the most common. It is simple but has lots of detail but is undemanding of the artist. It is commonly used for getting your name up in a more intentional way than a throw up. It usually varies from having 2 to 4 different colors and is done at a medium size. (Mecro- famous freight train graffiti artist)



Style: Stencil

Stencils is a sheet of material with a cut out design that is spray painted on to a surface to get the image transferred. A big part of “stencil culture” is typically having a political statement that goes along with the stencil. A famous street artist by the name of Banksy is known for doing political statement stunts with their work. He has hinted at LGBTQ rights as well as gun control in his piece that are displayed around the world.



Conclusion: Moving forward

I have used the art form of graffiti as an outlet for my artistic creativity and have artistically evolved from the practice that goes into it. Knowing the rich history of graffiti and knowing about the current culture has influenced my art, allowing me to look at all art through new lenses. Figuring out what graffiti is and how to do it has been one of the most challenging things that I have done, but the most rewarding. Graffiti has years and years of culture behind it and is constantly changing and evolving every day.

Sources:

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