Exploring

GRAFFITI AND STREET ART

World of Art

Meryl Loonin

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What Is Graffiti Art?

On a blustery December day in 1976, a New York City subway train made its daily runs while painted top to bottom, end to end in bold, multicolored graffiti art. From subway platforms in the city's poshest districts to the elevated tracks over its most run-down and poverty-stricken areas, "it was a showstopper,"[3] artist Lee Quiñones recalls. Quiñones, known simply as Lee, and the other members of his Fabulous Five crew—Mono, Slave, Doc, and Slug—had pulled off a feat of incredible daring and skill. The crew had covered ten 50-by-8-foot (15.2 by 2.4 m) metal cars with their designs overnight while the train was in a layup, out of service on the middle tracks between stations. The Fabulous Five's train was the first fully painted subway line in graffiti art history to run on the tracks, carrying passengers through the city.

At the time, Lee was only sixteen years old, but he was already one of the best-known writers on the graffiti scene. For nearly a year, he had dreamed of painting a whole train that would carry his art through the city like a museum on wheels. At nine o'clock that night, the members of the Fabulous Five crew had arrived at the layup, carrying a heavy suitcase and shopping bags loaded with 110 cans of spray paint and supplies. On the first car, Lee spray-painted his name in rainbow-colored block letters surrounded by a jagged red starburst and shimmery orange-yellow flames. The other crew members each tagged and painted a car. Working quickly, Lee covered several more cars with his

brightly colored designs. On the last cars, the crew worked together to paint a snowy Christmas scene featuring Santa Claus and his reindeer. As a finishing touch, they wrote, "Merry Christmas to New York." and "We have finally succeeded."[4]

WORDS IN CONTEXT

tag: A graffiti writer's custom signature, usually a short, clever name or nickname, written or spray-painted to assert the tagger's identity and say, "I was here"

Tired but exhilarated from painting through the night, Lee returned to the subway platforms for the morning rush hour. His fellow graffiti writers spotted the train first. "A whole train!" they shouted. "It's *bad* style Lee!"[5] Lee and the crew chased the train through the city, shouting, pointing, and snapping photos with their Instamatic cameras. But by the next day, the Christmas Train, as it came to be known, had been split apart. Lee reflected years later, "I did not know I was doing something beyond other people's scope that would change the course of art history."[6]

Writing on the Walls

At the time the Christmas Train made its historic run, New York City's booming graffiti art movement was less than a decade old. But it was rooted in a human instinct that stretches back thousands of years. The word *graffiti* comes from the Italian *graffiare*, meaning "to scratch." In its modern context, graffiti is used to describe everything from anonymous political statements written in a public square to lewd messages scrawled in a bathroom stall—and from the markings of violent street gangs warning rivals away from their turf to declarations of love carved into a tree. These types of graffiti are typically executed without permission, and if caught, offenders might face vandalism charges.

But vandalism laws do not deter many people from writing on walls. "Humans have a long-standing obsession with leaving their mark,"[7] writes journalist Adrienne LaFrance. Graffiti has been discovered in the ancient Roman city of Pompeii, preserved in volcanic ash after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius almost two thousand

A graffiti writer sprays paint on a wall. Throughout history, people have had a desire to leave their mark somewhere, and modern graffiti writers often turn their marks into elaborate tags and designs.

years ago. “Sheep-faced Lygnus struts about like a peacock, giving himself airs,”[8] scratched one citizen of Pompeii trash-talking another. Centuries later, during World War II, American soldiers scrawled “Kilroy was here” wherever they were stationed around the world. They often added a drawing of a bare-headed man with cartoon face and hands peeking over a wall. Kilroy was one of the most popular memes of the pre-internet era.

The graffiti art movement that began in the late 1960s was invented by US teenagers, many of them from poor, neglected urban neighborhoods. They devised their tags to say, “I was here.” These signatures were usually short, clever words or a combination of a nickname and street number, which the teens scrawled

with markers or spray paint. In Philadelphia the name Cornbread was the first to pop up on subway platforms, stairwells, walls, and street signs. In New York the trend started with a teenager who signed his nickname, Taki, and street number 183 wherever he traveled in his job as a delivery boy. For Cornbread, Taki, and contemporaries like Julio 204, Super Kool 223, Phase 2, and Cool Earl, the goal was to get their names up quickly, in as many locations as possible, to earn street cred with their peers. They called themselves "writers," and that label stuck. While some of the early writers added a logo to their tags, they were not looking to create memorable works of art. But as more young people joined their ranks, a spirit of competition took hold. Writers earned the greatest fame for not only getting their names up but also doing it with style and skill. The media labeled it "graffiti art."

A New Art Movement Arises from City Streets

The next wave of young writers who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s stayed focused on the tag, while turning their signatures into works of art. Their designs grew larger, bolder, and

The Iconic Aerosol Spray-Paint Can

The aerosol spray-paint can is an iconic symbol of the graffiti art movement. It was invented in 1949 for industrial use. In the 1960s early writers like Cornbread began using spray paint to leave their tags. For the New York City writers, spray paint was ideal for working under time pressure in the subway yards and layups overnight. It was portable, dried quickly, and adhered to the metal sides of the trains. The two American spray-paint manufacturing giants, Krylon and Rust-Oleum, refused to cater to the illegal graffiti market by upgrading their valves or offering new colors. But writers devised a way to swap out the nozzles with other aerosol products like oven cleaner and hairspray. A fat cap emitted a thick, soft spray for filing in backgrounds. A skinny cap was best for outlines and detail work. Mastering spray-paint technique took hours of practice. The best writers created effects like color blending, layering, and fading and produced crisp, drip-free lines. In the 1970s spray paint was lead based and toxic. Writers endangered their health by inhaling the fumes. Although spray paint is no longer lead based, it still contains hazardous chemicals. Today's street artists often wear gloves and masks to protect themselves.

Source Notes

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