

Vandalism or contemporary art? Find out more about where street art has come from and where it might be heading.

A long history

People have been painting and writing on walls throughout history. In prehistoric times, people in Africa and Europe used to paint pictures of animals and people in caves. Graffiti has been found on buildings at ancient sites in Greece, Italy, Syria and Iraq. In the Roman town of Pompeii, archaeologists have found numerous examples of graffiti written in Latin. These include religious, political and romantic messages, and even some magic spells!

Modern times

In the late twentieth century, graffiti and street art became an international phenomenon. In the 1970s, young people in New York used pens to write their names, or 'tags', on walls around the city. One of the first 'taggers' was Demetrius, a teenager from a Greek family. Demetrius's tag was TAKI 183. TAKI was his nickname and 183 was the number of the street he lived on – 183rd Street. At first, he wrote his tag on walls in his neighbourhood. Then he started tagging in subway stations on the way to and from school. When the subway train stopped at a station, he would jump off, write his tag on the wall and then jump back on before the doors closed. Other teenagers noticed Demetrius's tag and started to write their own. Soon, New York's walls, buses and subway trains were covered with tags: Barbara 62, Joe 182, ...

Later on, some teenagers started writing tags with aerosol paints. Their tags were bigger, more colourful and took more time and imagination than the simple, pen-written tags. The trend spread and from the 1970s, aerosol paint graffiti became a common sight on trains, buses and walls in cities around the world. In the 1990s, graffiti continued but there was also an explosion in street art around the world. Some artists wanted to make political points and produced art that tried to make people think about war, inequality and discrimination. Other street artists were more concerned with producing beautiful, attractive work. In South America, many street artists went to work in poor areas adding colour, life and beauty to grey, city walls.

Art or vandalism?

Is graffiti art or vandalism? This depends on your point of view, but in many countries, writing or painting on public or private property is considered vandalism. Many street artists have been stopped by the police and some have had to pay fines.

Many city councils complain about the high cost of cleaning graffiti off buildings, buses and trains. In some areas, councils have tried to encourage artists not to paint randomly on walls by allowing them to work in designated areas. Taiwan is one such place and there are 'graffiti zones' where artists are free to paint and write on walls. In São Paulo in Brazil, the city council has even allowed some graffiti artists to paint on the city's subway trains.

And what does the art world think of graffiti and street art? Recently, there has been a growing recognition of its value as an art form. There have been major exhibitions of street art in galleries in Paris, London and Los Angeles. The American artist Elura Emerald organised a street art exhibition at a New York gallery in 2008. She defended street artists, saying 'artists who paint on the street are merely expressing themselves, not hurting anyone. They should be appreciated and celebrated.'

Who are the artists?

Most street artists are anonymous, but others have become globally famous. Here are three stars of the street art world:

- Os Gêmeos are identical twin brothers from São Paulo. They paint everything from tags to huge, colourful pictures of people on the sides of buildings. Their work is often so big that they need cranes to help them work. In 2007, they covered the whole of a castle in Scotland with paint.
- Blek le Rat started out painting rats on the walls of his home city, Paris. Nowadays, he tries to make people think about different social issues and problems. He paints pictures of homeless people in big cities to encourage residents to think about the problem of homelessness.
- Faith47 is from Cape Town in South Africa. She paints big, colourful pictures of people and animals and likes to explore different locations. Her work is found on pavements, in empty factories and on abandoned cars. She likes the fact that most street art is temporary and will soon be removed by weather or cleaners from the city council. For her, this reflects how life is full of change with its cycle of endings and new beginnings.

Street art and the global village

It is impossible to know how street art will develop in the future but certain trends are emerging. While most street artists are young people who paint in their city or neighbourhood, more and more street artists are travelling and working around the globe. Other artists are using the internet to talk to each other and share photos of their work. Also, the art world is giving more recognition to street art as a legitimate art form. Although we don't know what will happen to street art in the future, we can be sure that it is here to stay!

Robin Newton