

# MASTERS OF INVENTION

18 May – 7 July 2019

Graffiti is writing or drawings made on a wall or other surface, usually without permission and within public view. It is hard to define as it can be scribbled, beautifully lettered, scratched, sprayed, stencilled, projected or carved; it can be crude, profound, poetic, political, philosophical and it is often an anonymous voice but also a public one. It can be wholly made of text or it can be a mix of words and pictures. It can mark territory or bring life to urban decay. The only thing that can be said with certainty is that graffiti exists the world over and humans have been writing, scratching and painting on walls since we first realised that mark-making had a *lot* of possibilities.

Graffiti comes from the Italian *graffiato*, meaning 'scratched' with the related art and ceramic term *sgraffito*, meaning to scratch through one layer to reveal another.

In the context of contemporary graffiti, it is generally agreed that it began in Philadelphia in the late 1960s and rapidly spread to New York earning its first New York Times article in 1971, when the paper published an interview with Taki 183, a young graffiti writer who utilised his job as a courier to write his name wherever he could during working hours. Unlike the graffiti of past millennia, this new graffiti had a style and daring of its own which began to evolve new forms, lay-outs and modes of operation.

Subway trains provided popular surfaces for graffiti; trains travelled across town so works were visible to large audiences but New York City council and the transport authority tried hard to stamp out the practice seeing graffiti as a cause, rather than a result, of urban decay. Barbed wire, guard dogs, heavy penalties and media campaigns entered the mix which unwittingly altered the trajectory of graffiti. Institutional repression simply didn't work as, in combination with an increasing pool of talented practitioners and their developing style, graffiti artists sought out new venues and caught the attention of more journalists, academics and eventually galleries.



It is easy to underestimate the civic fury and scorn of some of the arts media for the young graffiti writers of the 1970s and 80s, with one New York Times arts correspondent writing in 1983 'The belligerent signatures or 'tags'.... – so offensively spraycanned across subway walls and cars are now to be found on canvas, and trendy collectors - who may or may not use the trains - are taking into their living rooms (or buying for speculation) the visual mayhem that daily assaults the eyes of those who do.'<sup>1</sup> Later in the article the author listed the occupations of the graffiti writers' parents in an effort to show that the genre did not spring from a disadvantaged subculture and finished with the sentence, 'By and large, their products are as much an eyesore on canvas as they are on trains.' Perhaps, with hindsight, Grace Glueck regrets her words but the argument about graffiti is not over. Urban Nation, a new museum of street art and graffiti, opened its doors in Berlin in 2017. The opening exhibition warranted an article in The Guardian

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<sup>1</sup> Grace Glueck, The New York Times, Dec. 1983

which began with, ‘For some it is the largest and most democratic art movement the world has ever seen, for others it is unwanted visual pollution’. The museum aims to make the point that the street art movement is not a passing fad but credible, international and artistically important. ‘Whereas street art used to be viewed as an eyesore, detested by city authorities, works by Banksy now fetch upwards of a million pounds, and buildings with street art on them are fought over by councils and private corporations.<sup>2</sup> Like it or not, street art and graffiti are with us.<sup>3</sup>

### **The writing on the wall:**

The Old Testament Book of Daniel tells the story of Belshazzar’s Feast, where a drunken Belshazzar drinks wine from sacred golden cups looted by his father, Nebuchadnezzar, from the temple in Jerusalem. As the revelry progresses, mysterious words appear on the wall of the banquet hall, written large by a disembodied hand.



Image: Belshazzar’s Feast – Rembrandt, c. 1635

Too drunk or stupid to understand the meaning, Belshazzar sent for Daniel who translated the Aramaic script as ‘God has numbered thy kingdom and finished it. Thou art weighed in the balances and found wanting. Thy kingdom is divided and shall be given to the Medes and Persians.’ The prophesy, and warning, that

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, The Guardian, Sep. 2017

<sup>3</sup> Graffiti and street art are seen as entirely different things by graffiti writers

Belshazzar was about to lose his kingdom because of his sinful ways, gives rise to the phrase *'the writing is on the wall'*, words still loaded with meaning and frequently used when it's clear that a person, a regime or a *thing* has run out of credibility.



So where did the first wall writing begin and why?

Glyphs and petroglyphs are names for ancient marks on rock. Petroglyphs are found all over the world (except Antarctica) and are thought to illustrate landmarks, to communicate something about

travel or show tribal boundaries. They are also thought to be the precursor to written language systems. This image, Laxe dos Carballos in Galicia shows cup and ring marks and the deer is part of a hunting scene carved on a 60 square metre rock. Surrounded by oak woodland it has come to be known as The Deer of the Oaks, one of 80 petroglyphs found at the site, Europe's largest collection of Stone Age engravings which are more than 4,000 years old.

Moving on to ancient, settled civilisations, graffiti appears on the walls of monuments and sacred places such as pyramids and temples. This is not rude or trivial graffiti on the whole, but more likely to be marks made by pilgrims or prayers written by official scribes.

By the time we get to ancient Greece and Rome, graffiti becomes a lot more 'of the people, by the people' and includes subject matter ranging from politics and poetry, to sex and obscenities. Pompeii, preserved by the terrible disaster that befell the town and its inhabitants, has about 15,000 pieces of writing on the walls

which includes both scratched and painted graffiti. The plaster walls made a good base for scratching text and drawings and unsurprisingly the bath houses, brothels and inns showcase the rude graffiti whereas the political graffiti is out on the street.

Pompeiiian graffiti also includes Latin curses, magic spells, declarations of love, alphabets, political slogans, famous literary quotes and, according to Wikipedia, the address of a famously beautiful prostitute.



Roman election graffiti in Pompeii

Graffiti is also used as a protest, notably the anti-Soviet graffiti that appeared overnight to cover the walls of the city of Prague the night that the Russian tanks rolled in on 20 August, 1968. The Prague Spring was crushed but the invading forces were left in no doubt that their presence was hated by all – even the tanks did not escape the paint cans and determination of the people who used graffiti to express their fury and sorrow.





The Berlin Wall which divided Germany from 1961 – 1981, hosted some legendary graffiti and images. The wall was officially referred to as the Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart by the East German authorities while the West Berlin city government

sometimes referred to it as the 'Wall of Shame', a term coined by mayor Willy Brandt in reference to the wall's restriction on freedom of movement. On 9 November 1989 the wall was opened and, alongside the celebrations of the next few weeks, souvenir hunters chipped away sections and much of the historic graffiti was taken away.

Writing on walls is still seen as antisocial vandalism by some but the rise of celebrated and highly valued graffiti artists has changed our perception enormously. Some of the most desolate urban wastelands are brought to life by a riot of colour and text, and sometimes the simplest image and brief text can hit home a message more eloquently than any amount of newsprint, speeches or airwave time. The image (right) is attributed to Banksy.



Masters of Invention may not be an obvious choice of exhibition for this gallery, we are known mostly as a venue for contemporary craft. However, alongside Devon Guild's wish to provide a diverse exhibitions programme, the exhibitors and curators of the show

see their work as having a significant craft element. As Errol Donald, the curator, says, 'it's an exhibition about creative practice – maybe not in the typical craft tradition – but there is a conversation to be had given that graffiti is seen as a craft by its practitioners.'

It's clear that graffiti has moved not just off urban walls and on to canvas and 3D installations, but into functional items that fit into the broader category of visual arts.

In answer to the question, 'do you still see graffiti as having a political aspect?' Errol's reply is, 'It was born out of protest and a way for young people to be heard; then it became more creative. Some of the original artists were in gangs, but this was at odds with the developing creative side.'



The works in the exhibition speak for themselves, but in a short conversation with artist, Elk O'Sullivan, I learned of a particular case where elements of original graffiti appear in contemporary art work. Elk's painting is deeply inspired by classic New York subway graffiti's two colour fade and characteristically drippy styles. The dripping effect originally came from the fast and furtive activity of illegally writing on trains. This, and the two colour fade are both featured in the paintings Elk's showing in this exhibition.

There are no female artists in this exhibition so, as an organisation that is run almost exclusively by women, the question 'why not?' had to be asked. Errol replied, 'no real reason – the exhibition condenses the history of European graffiti via my own journey. In the 1980s, where I began, it was mostly male. There are now more women but still not many.'

Finally, Errol's aim as a curator is not just to get the work of his contemporaries into new spaces but to get the people behind the work into new areas as well.

Devon Guild of Craftsmen is very happy to be showing this work; we are lucky in our lifetime to witness the progression of a contemporary art movement that sprang from a disadvantaged, mostly black, youth culture. Early exponents of graffiti writing did not have much of a share of society's prosperity but they made new art which, alongside associated music and dance, has enriched and changed our perceptions and experience of culture.

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*We encourage visits from schools, colleges and community groups. Let us know in advance and we can arrange an introductory talk & tour of a particular exhibition.*

01626 832223    [education@crafts.org.uk](mailto:education@crafts.org.uk)

