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The Timeline of the History, Artists, and Controversies of Modern New York Graffiti

Benjamin Brinzensky

How Did Graffiti Start?

The year is 1960:

- This was a period of fervent social change and artistic revolution
- A new vibrant street art emerged as a powerful form of rebellion and self-expression
- Artists wanted to break free from restrictions of traditional art spaces and work directly on the streets
- The galleries shifted from museums to city walls and the mediums shifted from paintbrushes to spray paint



Prominent Artists in 1960s

01

Julio 204 (Washington Heights)

- One of the first pioneers of **name tagging** (writing or stylizing a person's name or nickname on public surfaces through graffiti)
- Influenced future, famous taggers such as Taki 183 with his signature tag (name and street number)
- Localized influence (mainly tagged in his neighborhood)
- Driven by recognition and rebellion, not artistic complexity

Julio's signature "Julio 204" tag, the first of its kind



02

Taki 183 (New York City)

- Started Tagging in the late 1960s despite getting fame in early 1970s
- Gained notoriety for writing his name (nickname "Taki" and street number 183rd street) in subway cars and city walls
- Like julio 204, he only used minimalist tagging
- Inspired a **city-wide movement (imitators)**
- Tagging became central to graffiti art



Graffiti Controversies in 1960s

Graffiti as Vandalism

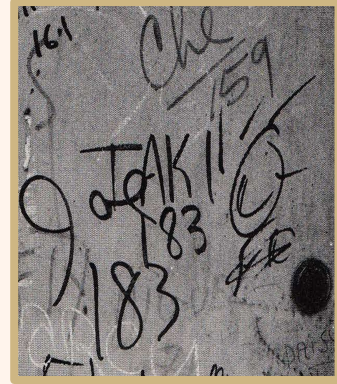
- Widely viewed as illegal defacement of property, especially in New York and Philadelphia
- Name Tagging prompted public backlash and police crackdowns (lack of artistic intent led many to consider it delinquency)

Ego-Driven Tagging

- 1960s Graffiti focused on personal branding (writers tagging their names for recognition)
- Sparked Debate: Was Graffiti a form of self-expression or narcissism

Gang Activity

- Gangs, such as the Savage Skulls in the Bronx, used name tagging on buildings and playgrounds to mark their territories
- Further solidified the public's perception of graffiti as a criminal activity



Graffiti in the 1970s

The year is 1970:

- Economic decline, social unrest, and a deteriorating infrastructure inspired rebellion and creative expression
- Graffiti, initially seen as vandalism with simple name tagging became a vibrant, rebellious art form
- A new budding style of graffiti, Wildstyle, which featured interlocking abstract forms that were hard to read but were visually striking
- City officials continued launching anti-graffiti campaigns, but through cultural intersections with hip-hop, graffiti gained recognition as a serious art form



Prominent Artists in 1970s

01

Tracy 168

- Coined the term “Wildstyle”, a more complex, visually engaging, and intricate lettering style than name tagging
- Developed graffiti into a sophisticated visual language
- Led a graffiti crew named The Wanted, where he mentored younger artists and further pushed stylistic boundaries from previous graffiti practices

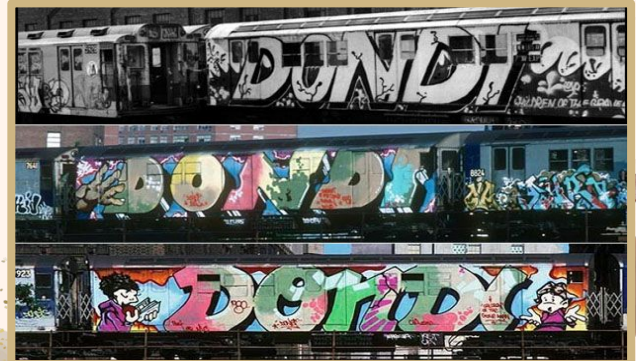
Tracy's
signature
Wildstyle
graffiti
spelling
“wildstyle”



02

Dondi White (Donald White)

- Mastered Tracy's “Wildstyle Graffiti”
- Known for his clean, readable lettering and full-car subway murals
- Painted thousands of cars, including iconic pieces like “Children of the Grave”
- Bridged Street art and Gallery art, one of the first graffiti artists to appear in exhibitions
- Emphasized precision and visual rhythm
- Influenced future generations with his work



Prominent Artists in 1970s

03

Futura 2000 (Leonard McGurr)

- Revolutionized graffiti by introducing abstract expressionism (focusing on form, motion, and color as opposed to traditional letter based graffiti)
- Broke away from the traditional, letter-based style at the time
- Painted subway trains, including the full car piece "break"
- Became one of the first graffiti artists exhibited in contemporary art galleries

Futura's signature abstract expressionism in "Break"



04

Zephyr (Andrew Witten)

- Style featured clean, readable, and energetic lettering with exaggerated curves and motion lines
- Primarily painted in subway trains to reach a citywide audience
- Connected graffiti to hip-hop and skateboarding cultures, making graffiti a central element of urban youth identity
- Transitioned into galleries, legitimizing the street art in the world of fine art



Graffiti Controversies in 1970s

Subway “Bombing” Phenomenon

- Graffiti artists like Tracy 168 began “bombing” subway cars by covering the entire trains with tags and murals
- Led to widespread public concern, framing graffiti as a symbol of lawlessness and urban decay

City Halls Anti-Graffiti Campaigns

- Mayor John Lindsay and later Mayor Ed Koch launched aggressive campaigns to clean subway cars and criminalize graffiti
- Included: Installing graffiti resistant subway cars, increasing police surveillance and arrests, and creating PSAs labeling graffiti as a threat to civic order

Art vs Vandalism

- Critics and Artists continued debating whether graffiti was vandalism or a form of expression and identity
- Debate intensified when graffiti artists began exhibiting work in galleries (challenging barriers between street and fine art)



Graffiti in the 1980s

In the 1980s decade:

- Graffiti transformed subway cars into a living breathing art gallery
- Artists more frequently pushed beyond simple tagging to more frequent wildstyle, bubble lettering, and character-based murals
- Graffiti became one of the four key pillars of hip-hop culture
- Graffiti became a tool for expressing views on political and social commentary including race, inequality, gender, and identity
- Graffiti spread beyond New York and influenced youth culture in Latin America, Europe, and Asia



Prominent Artists in 1980s

01

Keith Haring

- Style included graffiti of radiant babies, barking dogs, bold lines, and cartoon-like figures (making his work instantly recognizable)
- Brought graffiti into both galleries and public spaces
- Spread messages of love, activism, and accessibility
- Murals addressed AIDs, apartheid, drug abuse, and LGBTQ+ rights

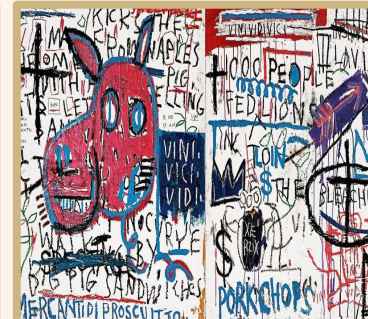
Haring's signature cartoon style to emphasize social activism



02

Jean-Michel Basquiat

- Member of SAMO®, graffiti duo creating Neo-expressionist (raw, expressive, and figurative style) graffiti with cryptic text and symbols
- Became a global art icon, merging street art with fine art while confronting race, class, and power inequities with his work
- Helped legitimize graffiti as a serious art form, inspiring museums and collectors to take street art seriously



Prominent Artists in 1980s

03

Lady Pink

- Graffiti work emphasized feminine-infused wildstyle, vibrancy and storytelling elements with themes of empowerment and resilience
- One of the first women to dominate NYC graffiti in subway cars, previously dominated by male artists
- Advocated for female representation street art and graffiti
- One of the first graffiti artists displayed in MoMA and Whitney Museum

Lady Pink's signature feminine and vibrant wild style mural



04

Daze (Chris Ellis)

- Style involved colorful, figurative elements, often merging surreal imagery with urban themes
- His work explored urban life, dreams, and social issues
- Painted across all 3 NYC subway divisions, making his work highly visible and influential
- One of the key representations of the evolution of graffiti from raw tagging to refined visual storytelling



Graffiti Controversies in 1980s

Clean Train Movement (1984–1989)

- The MTA launched aggressive campaigns to eliminate graffiti from the New York subway system
- This act led to fences and razor wires installation around train yards, use of guard dogs and surveillance, and daily cleaning of trains to discourage new artwork
- Led to the decline of subway graffiti by the end of the decade

Radicalized Policing and Youth Targeting

- Anti-graffiti enforcement disproportionately targeted black and latino youth, who were the primary creators of subway art
- Surveillance and arrests increased, contributing to concerns about racial profiling and criminalization of urban youth



Graffiti in the 1990s

In the 1990s:

- Despite still being seen as rebellious and subversive, Graffiti was increasingly embraced by mainstream media and popular culture
- With the crackdown of subway graffiti in the 80s, artists turned to independent **zines** (small-run, homemade publications sharing and documenting graffiti art)
- 90s continued letterform graffiti from the 70s with artists pushing the boundaries of stylized typography, tags, and throw-ups (bubble style letters)

Graffiti continued to expand its role political and social commentary, with walls providings canvases for voices and urban issues ignored by traditional media



Prominent Artists in 1990s

01

Twist (Barry McGee)

- Inspired by the struggles and decay of the urban environment
- Graffiti style involved droop face characters, depicting melancholy and detachment
- Aligned with his themes of homelessness, addiction, and social isolation
- Used street debris (liquor bottles, wood scraps, etc) to reflect the chaos and texture of urban environments
- Artwork exhibited in major galleries and museums

McGee's signature style depicting the depressing nature of urban decay



Prominent Artists in 1990s

01

Twist's Bowery Mural

- Despite not originating from New York, many of his artworks blended seamlessly with New York graffiti culture
- Exemplified by the Bowery Mural, an prominent artwork on Manhattan's East village that is ever-changing
- Provided a canvas for all new york graffiti artists to portray their messages through name-tagging
- The Mural represents a creative "twist" on his main message, portraying urban transformation and evolution rather than urban decay

McGee's signature style depicting the depressing nature of urban decay



Prominent Zine Artists in 1990s

02

International Graffiti Times

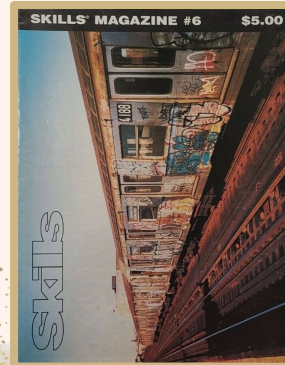
- First Zine dedicated to NYC street and subway art
- Featured various interviews, political commentary, and coverage of graffiti culture
- Became a vital archive of Graffiti history and resistance against anti-graffiti policies
- Documented the evolution of graffiti from street corners to art galleries



03

Greg Lamarche

- Founded Skills Magazine, a handmade, photocopied graffiti zine that became the center for all US graffiti writers
- Documented graffiti works, shared techniques, and built communities in a pre-internet era
- Zine served as a platform for lesser known writers
- Further bridged the gap between graphic design and graffiti



Graffiti Controversies in 1990s

Criminalization and Anti-Graffiti Laws

- Cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles ramped up anti-graffiti campaigns
- Graffiti was treated as a public nuisance and criminal offense
- Mayor Rudy Giuliani launched aggressive clean up strategies such as the "broken window" policing strategy, addressing minor offenses like graffiti to prevent more serious crimes

Commercialization of Graffiti

- Graffiti more frequently appeared in advertising, fashion, and fine art galleries
- Sparked backlash from traditional graffiti writers who viewed the shift as selling-out or co-opting street culture
- 90s boom in corporate interest in graffiti led to debates about authenticity and ownership



Graffiti in the Modern Era

In the 21st century:

- Graffiti style and influence further expanded: Graffiti murals, stencils, wheatpaste posters, and installations became far more common
- Social media platforms and digital technologies allow graffiti to be created and expanded to a large audience at an unprecedented rate
- Many cities and brands, previously opposing graffiti, now commission graffiti beautification and branding through sanctioned public works and projects
- Heavy commercialization of graffiti expanded the reach and impact of the artist's messages



Prominent Artists in Modern Era

FAUST

01

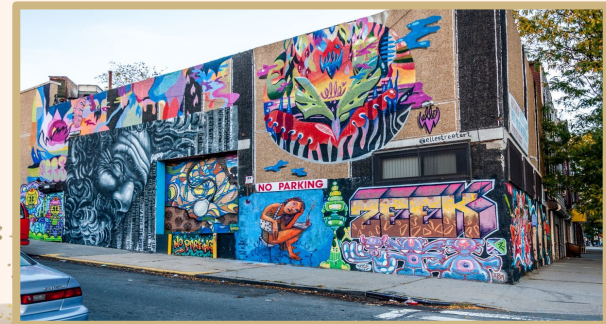
- Graffiti artist known for his elegant calligraphic handstyle in his large murals
- Commissioned by large brands such as Nike, Tiffany & Co, and Apple
- Blended graffiti aesthetics with luxury branding
- Work includes poetic messages and site-specific messages (creating a fine art out of tagging)



02

Ad Hoc Art

- Founded by Garrison and Alison Buxton
- Welcomed underground and emerging artists
- While not solely a graffiti organization, they played a pivotal role in legitimizing graffiti through exhibitions and public mural projects
- Welling Court Mural Project was a primary example of sanctioned public graffiti, emphasizing community pride, artistic diversity, and urban beautification



Graffiti Controversies: Modern Era

Demolition of 5 Pointz

- 5 Pointz in Long Island City was a world-famous graffiti mecca, featuring over 10,000 murals from graffiti artists all over the globe
- In 2013, buildings owner whitewashed the walls overnight
- Sparked outrage and led to artists suing under the Visual Artists Rights Act
- Court awarded \$6.7 million to 21 artists, recognizing graffiti as protected visual art

Policing and Public Space

- Despite graffiti gaining acceptance like never before, it is still criminalized in many parts of New York
- In 2021, MTA president Andy Byford condemned graffiti, reflecting Giuliani-era opposition towards graffiti
- Reignited debates about freedom of expression, especially during the pandemic when graffiti served as a form of social commentary



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