

GRAFFITI THROUGH THE AGES

Modern day graffiti can take on many forms, but the artist's motivation behind all graffiti is to leave a mark on the physical environment. A "tag" is the most familiar type of graffiti created when an artist writes their signature in the form of a name or symbol.

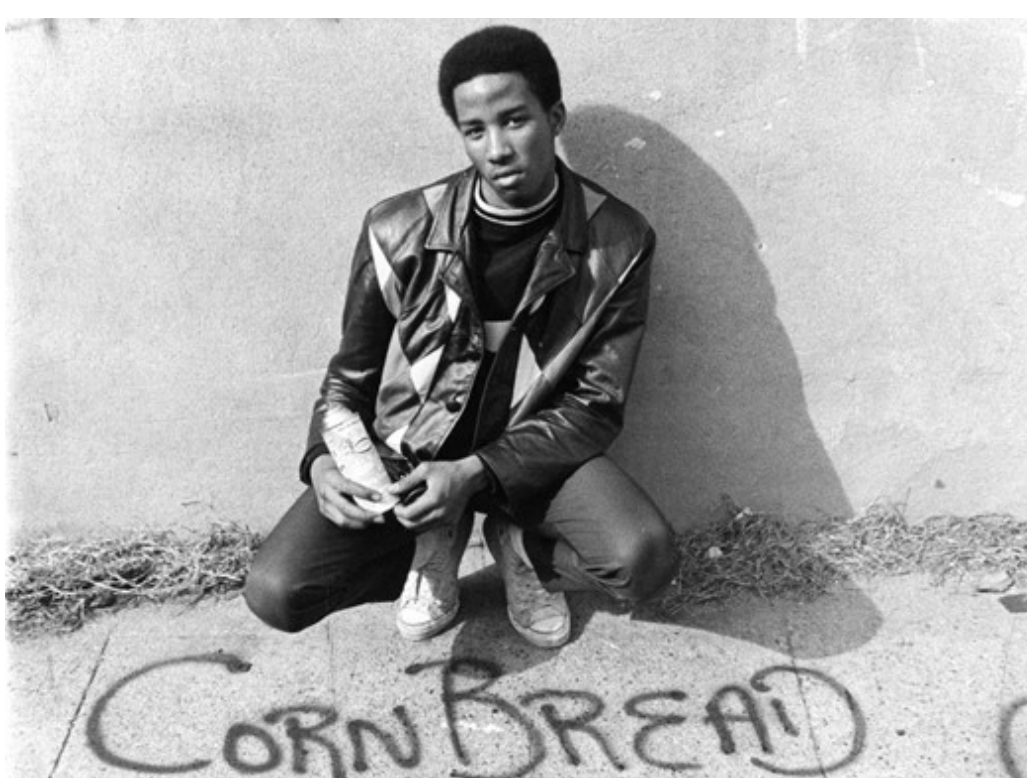
Contemporary American graffiti was once considered by many to be solely an act of vandalism and criminalized. Over time graffiti has grown from its tagging origins into an expressive medium that has often served as a way for disenfranchised groups, especially communities of color, to convey opinions and messages to society. Artists have used public spaces, often urban landscapes neglected by civic services, to create art that inspires conversation and reaction. Some artists use the term "street art," which can include traditional graffiti as well as commissioned public-space artwork. Today, more and more artists are showing their work in museums and art galleries, becoming more well known in conventional art circles. Messages have been scrawled, etched, Sharpied, and spray painted onto public spaces for millennia. Here are some examples of graffiti through the ages.



Ancient graffiti in Pompeii, in the style typical for a political campaign.



Artist at work using spray paint with respirator



Darryl McCray ("Cornbread")



Artist working on graffiti art in an art gallery



Man holding Shepard Fairey poster created for presidential candidate Barack Obama

1800s

The term "graffiti" is used for the first time to describe ancient inscriptions found scratched into the walls on the ruins of Pompeii, the site of the oldest known graffiti dated by historians to 78 B.C. Ancient inscriptions include declarations of love, remembrances, political campaign messages, and advertisements for Gladiatorial games.

1940s

Edward Seymour invents spray paint for industrial uses. It quickly becomes the ideal medium for graffiti because it is small, portable, and dries quickly.

1960s

Darryl McCray, a graffiti artist from Philadelphia known by his tag name, "Cornbread," starts tagging walls and is credited with being the first modern graffiti artist.

1980s

Galleries begin to showcase work from graffiti artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Lee Quinones.

2000s

Graffiti artist Shepard Fairey creates a viral campaign poster for presidential candidate Barack Obama in 2008. It is acquired by the U.S National Portrait Gallery in 2009.

1930s

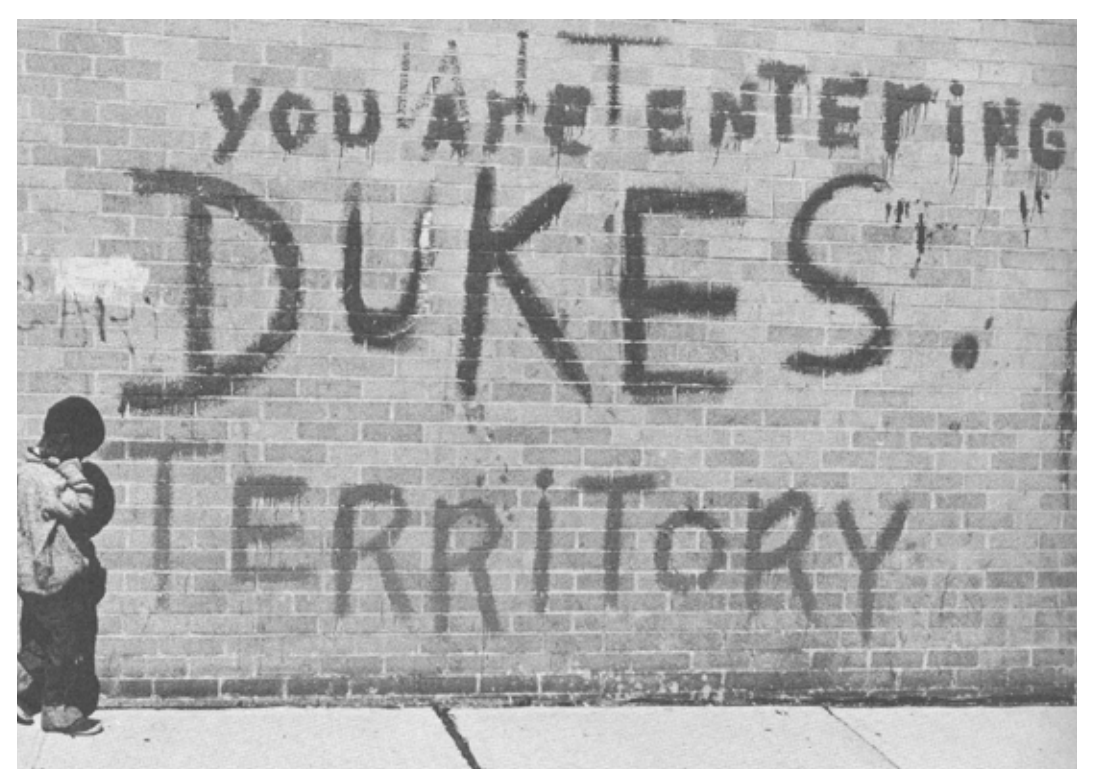
During the Great Depression, forms of name and symbol writing in chalk and coal were used on railroad cars by transients looking for work and people without housing to mark their presence and to communicate warnings and help.



A boy climbs onto a boxcar
Dubuque, Iowa

1950s

In the years after World War II, there is a migration from the popular urban centers creating large areas of blight, especially in minority neighborhoods. In places like Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and New York this leads to a rise in gang violence in under-served communities. Gangs would often tag their names to communicate and mark territorial lines.



1950s Gang Graffiti
Italian Dukes, East Harlem

1970s

Graffiti explodes in popularity, covering the buildings and subway cars of many major cities. Due to the negative reactions, in 1973, New York City spends 10 million dollars to erase graffiti throughout the city.



New York City train in 1974 with tags covering the sides and ceiling of the car.

1990s

By this time, street art is closely tied to hip hop culture. Graffiti artist, rapper, and filmmaker, Fab Five Freddy works closely with rappers and graffiti artists to combine cultures. He was interviewed about his passion for graffiti and music in The New Yorker in 1991.



Fab Five Freddy and Jean-Michel Basquiat
Photograph by Patrick McMullan

2010s

Artwork created at the start of the graffiti movement continues to be respected by the art world. A Jean Michel-Basquiat painting created in 1981 sells for \$110 Million at auction, becoming the most expensive work by any U.S. artist, the most expensive work by a black artist, and the first \$100 million USD artwork to have been created after 1980.



Untitled, a 1982 piece
by Jean-Michel Basquiat