

Modern art or vandalism? Whatever you think about street art, you'll learn more by reading this article.

A long history

Painting and writing on walls is nothing new. In prehistoric times, people in Africa and Europe painted pictures of animals and people in caves. Graffiti has been found at ancient sites in Greece, Italy, Syria and Iraq. In the Roman town of Pompeii in Italy, archaeologists found a lot of graffiti written in Latin, including political and romantic messages, and even some magic spells!

Modern times

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 where he lived – 183rd Street. At first, he wrote his tag on walls in his neighbourhood. Then he started writing it in subway stations on the way to school. When the subway train stopped at a station, he jumped off, wrote his 'tag' on the wall and then jumped back on the train before the doors closed. Other teenagers saw Demetrius's tag and started writing their own tags on walls, buses and subway trains all over New York: Barbara 62, Joe 182, ...

Then, some teenagers stopped using pens and started using aerosol paints. Their tags were bigger and more colourful. Aerosol paint graffiti became very popular in the 1970s and 1980s and appeared on trains, buses and walls around the world. In the 1990s and 2000s, a lot of graffiti artists started to make pictures too. Some artists were interested in politics and tried to make people think about social problems and discrimination with their pictures. Other artists wanted to make cities more beautiful. In South America, street artists started painting in poor areas. They brought colour and beauty to grey, city walls.

Art or vandalism?

Is graffiti art or vandalism? In many countries, it is a crime to paint on walls, and street artists can have problems with the police. In other countries, street art is permitted in certain places. For example, in Taiwan, there are 'graffiti zones' where artists are free to paint and write on walls. In São Paulo in Brazil, the city council allows some graffiti artists to paint on the city's subway trains.

Nowadays, street art is more popular with the public. In some cities, there are street art festivals. In Bristol in the UK, there is a street art festival in August every year. Artists paint all the buildings in a street. Lots of people come to watch the artists and take photos. Street art can be seen in galleries too. There have been exhibitions of street art in galleries in Paris, London and Los Angeles.

Who are the artists?

Some street artists have become famous. Here are three stars of the street art world:

- Os Gêmeos are identical twin brothers from São Paulo. They paint huge, colourful pictures of people on buildings. In 2007, they painted a castle in Scotland.
- Blek le Rat is from France. He started off painting rats on the walls of Paris. Nowadays, he paints pictures of homeless people in big cities. He wants city residents to look at his pictures and think about the homeless.
- Faith47 is from Cape Town in South Africa. She paints big, colourful pictures of people and animals. She likes painting in different locations and you can find her pictures on pavements, postboxes, buses, cars and, of course, on walls!

Street art and the global village

Most street artists are young people who paint in their home city or neighbourhood. Many of them use the internet to communicate and share photos of their pictures with other street artists around the world. Some street artists have become famous and their pictures can be seen in galleries or on city walls around the world. 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