

Graffiti: Is it Vandalism or Art?

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Merriam-Webster defines graffiti as, “usually unauthorized writing or drawing on a public surface.” A key word in that definition is “usually.” How is a piece of artwork defined as “unauthorized,” and how many cases fall into the “usually” umbrella? Who is responsible for determining which art is unlawful, and how do we keep them from unjustly proclaiming art to be so? Many individuals, especially those who are victims of graffiti, are strongly against it and feel the need to protest it. They say that it is a sign of gang activity or is plain rude to vandalize a person’s property. I do understand why the stigmas that are associated with graffiti are in place. The freedom of graffiti can be taken advantage of and used for negative or harmful purposes. However, art is a means of expression, and graffiti is art. Graffiti is how some artists choose to express themselves, and it allows the community to open their eyes to the ideas and emotions that artists expressed through their piece of artwork. Although many say that graffiti is vandalism and wrong, is it really? People say that it is illegal and only made with hostile intentions, but graffiti is protected by our very own US Constitution.

Graffiti is used to exploit society's issues and bring awareness to them, which scares people. Graffiti dates all the way back to prehistoric humans. In the article “What is Graffiti: Urban Artistry and Expression,” Perez (2023) explains, “Graffiti’s roots trace back to ancient times when our ancestors left their marks on cave walls. The Catacombs of Rome and the ruins of Pompeii are testament to the early human impulse to communicate through visual symbols and words. These inscriptions, though primitive by today’s standards, serve as glimpses into the lives and thoughts of those who came before us.” Graffiti has been utilized for centuries. As a modern audience, we have not been able to comprehend the broadness of it, but we can start trying. So, what are some different means of executing it? Perez (2023) continues on to describe

that graffiti includes many different sub-styles including tagging, throw-ups, blockbusters, wildstyle, stencils, poster or paste-up, stickers or slap, pieces, and calligraffiti. Tagging is the foundation of all graffiti styles and is the most simplistic. Using spray paint in just one color, artists throw up their name or a cool symbol. Throw-ups are the more complex sibling to tagging. They are bigger, use more color, and have a more complex design. Blockbusters are created in a short amount of time but take up a lot of space. Wildstyle is a more abstract style of graffiti, and stencils is just what it sounds like: graffiti using stencils. Poster or paste-up is when the artist creates the graffiti at home and pastes it up somewhere else. Stickers or slap is the same thing, just smaller. Pieces is short for masterpieces and graffiti in this style and just that. Graffiti in this style might utilize 3D effects, backgrounds, intricate details, characters, and more. Finally, calligraffiti is a mix of traditional calligraphy and graffiti. These are just some of the methods that artists take advantage of today. We now know that graffiti has been used for quite some time, but we do not know yet when it rose to popularity. According to the article “The Rise of 21st Century Street Art: Graffiti’s Evolution,” *ByKerwin* (2023) claims, “The popularity of street art in the 21st century is fuelled by social media’s global reach, urban revitalisation initiatives, and rising cultural activism.” Graffiti, although it has been used for centuries, just started gaining popularity because of the growth in social media and interest in global news. Now, although it has been on the rise, we do not see graffiti everywhere. “Graffiti Art: What Is Graffiti? Is Graffiti Art?” by Eden Gallery (2021) declares that the top ten cities to find graffiti are New York City, Bristol, Stockholm, Berlin, São Paulo, London, Paris, Los Angeles, Melbourne, and Mexico City. Now that we know about all the logistics of graffiti, we need to know why it is so important for society and artists alike. Eden Gallery (2021) explored this and found that, “Graffiti aims to be seen without being caught or to spread an important message. The end purpose of Graffiti,

like other art, is to tell a story or express oneself...Graffiti can be criminal, political, humorous, or even beautiful. Graffiti challenges societal norms and laws, and it does not aim to be legal. The thrill and risk of creating Graffiti are part of the culture.” Graffiti is used to challenge society and break it free of the prison our norms have locked it in. This is why it is so controversial and frowned upon. It scares people to be put outside of their comfort zone, and that is exactly what graffiti forces upon a community.

While there are pros to graffiti, there are also plenty of cons. One of the most impactful cons would be the effect on the environment. In “Graffiti: destruction of public property or art,” Rosen (2018) explicates that “The report also revealed that in 2007 the LA County spent, ‘more than \$30 million in graffiti removal.’ Graffiti spurs more discomfort and fear within communities, it impedes business and drives away residents to a better-maintained community...The environmental effects of graffiti can cause effects that ruins parks but also affects the air we breathe.” Graffiti not only damages our environment, but it also damages a community’s sense of safety. The article “The Frightening Impact of Graffiti on Our Local Communities” by See Brilliance (2023) elucidates how:

Graffiti is a form of vandalism that damages property, causes public safety issues and can result in liability. It negatively impacts local neighbourhoods by making public spaces appear unsafe. More often than not, graffiti is also used as a means to mark territories. Research shows that if a lot of the graffiti in an area is gang-related or offensive, then that area is more likely to obtain a larger gang presence, which would result in more crime and turf wars.

Graffiti, to some people, is a sign of a dangerous presence in the area. However, it does not always need to be viewed as such. Although there are some instances where graffiti is taken

advantage of and created with bad intentions, these instances are not limited to just graffiti. There are plenty of other resources or forms of art that are taken advantage of or not used for the greater good. For instance, some forms of graffiti are sponsored by cities. A lot of times, this is to honor a deceased hero to the community or to inspire a community after a rough time. In “The Depression-era of art of the Federal Art Project in Minnesota,” Goertz (2016) explained “The Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project was a New Deal relief program to fund the visual arts. From 1935 to 1943, the Minnesota division of the FAP employed local artists to create thousands of works in many media and styles, from large works of public art to posters and paintings.” This shows how art is helpful, not harmful, for a community in just Minnesota. Art is accepted by the government to be a beneficial and optimistic means of relief and inspiration. In addition to that, there are plenty of methods of making graffiti that do not cause immense environmental damage. Spray cans are the most popular tool used by graffiti artists, but they can be easily replaced with different, more sustainable forms of paint or with a different tool. Plus, if graffiti removal is so expensive, why not leave it up if it does not have a derogatory or insulting message? Furthermore, although graffiti with negative connotations and intentions is different, removing the art from an area that would have originally been dull and bare is a waste of space that could be used for the greater good.

As I mentioned in the first paragraph, art is a means of expression, and graffiti is art. Opposers of graffiti like to argue that graffiti is just an indication of a gang presence, but graffiti is so much more than that. In general, art is so much more than meets the eye. The article “The Importance of Art” by Fernandez (n.d.) expresses that:

First, art is the barometer that measures levels of cultural sophistication...In addition to providing commentary about the larger culture, art makes life more manageable, tolerable

and enjoyable...Art forces humans to look beyond that which is necessary to survive and leads people to create for the sake of expression and meaning...Art can communicate information, shape our everyday lives, make a social statement and be enjoyed for aesthetic beauty.

The article “Graffiti Art: Why Graffiti Is Art And Not Vandalism” by Editorial Team (2023) described the importance of art in a way more specific to graffiti. They discussed how “...graffiti is an artist’s right to freedom of expression, and a way to ensure their work can be appreciated by those beyond the artistic elite...A great deal of talent is required to create brilliant artwork, and graffiti is no exception...This unbelievably complex achievement required a great deal of strategic planning and real imagination to pull off, as well as a clear understanding of color and composition.” Art itself is such a unique and personal way to evoke emotion and support from an audience. Graffiti is just another means of doing so. Censoring or protesting graffiti is censoring or protesting the artist who put a lot of hard work and dedication into their creation. How would you feel if someone decided your work was too controversial or too thought-provoking and destroyed it? How would you feel if it were because of the color of your skin? In *Street Art NYC*, Han (2020) illustrates how “Unfortunately, these murals are short-lived, either because they are immediately tagged or destroyed by dissenters who blithely deny America’s problem of racism.” The murals Han (2020) is referring to here are murals made in honor of Black Lives Matter. Store owners would tear down the artwork in a rageful fit instead of accepting that this world is damaged. The artists, in



this case, were bringing awareness to the racism in America and honoring the victims of this racism. Why should they be punished for pushing the world towards improvement and equality?

Not only is graffiti important to an artist, but it is also important for a community. Graffiti has negative connotations because of communities who refuse to see the bigger picture. Graffiti is controversial but that very quality is one of its biggest strengths. The anxiety it arouses is what makes it so important and effective. However, graffiti, like all other forms of art, is often made with purpose. For instance, it can be made to bring attention to political or social issues. *ArtLife* (2023) explored this and found that:

Many of the most renowned artworks make a powerful comment on the social and political issues of their time, and graffiti can make a huge impact in this respect. Just look at Banksy, who has become world-famous for his humorous and subversive commentaries like *Love is in the Air*, first painted on Jerusalem's West Bank barrier in 2003 as a statement in favor of Palestinian rights. Similarly, Keith Haring was able to bring mass attention to the crack epidemic through his *Crack is Wack* mural, as well as homosexuality and the AIDS crisis. Plenty of aficionados would argue that it's art's duty to shed light on such topics, and given that these themes relate to ordinary people, perhaps it's unsurprising that the most iconic examples were created on the streets the target audience live on.

The most famous works of graffiti are so famous because they bring awareness to or support a subject that impacts communities and sometimes even countries, continents, or the whole globe. In addition to this, it can also bring life to an area. "The Benefits Street Art in Communities 2023" by Book An Artist Team (2023) found that street art, or graffiti, can revolutionize areas in communities by representing their culture. It adds life through color to otherwise lifeless or dull

areas and can also increase the popularity of that area, which increases its economic value. Not only does graffiti force communities to acknowledge political and social issues in their area and around the world, but it also brings life to spiritless areas. Graffiti is usually full of color and vibrancy, which makes that area more prone to tourists and visitors. Mexico as a prime example. Mexico is filled with color and life which makes it a hotspot for vacations, and as I mentioned in the second paragraph, Mexico City is in the top ten cities to find graffiti.

Graffiti is extremely important for artists and communities, but that does not stop people from challenging it and deciding the negatives outweigh the positives. They will go beyond morals and declare it is unlawful and wrong. However, graffiti, although not always legal, is lawful. Editorial Team (2023) clarifies, “Art ceases to be art without freedom of expression, and perhaps graffiti exercises this right more than any other medium. Taking creativity to the streets means that the artists don’t need to worry about gallery curators, critics or potential buyers, and can therefore be completely unrestrained, and even anonymous if they so choose. Status doesn’t matter, and the lack of limitations allow graffiti artists to break conventions and push boundaries to create even more exciting — and arguably more authentic — works of art.” This quote explains how graffiti exercises the freedom of expression, which is supported by the First Amendment. According to “Art Censorship: First Amendment Violation or Free Speech?” by Leadingham (2024), “The First Amendment broadly prevents the government from censoring art (with some exceptions). But it doesn’t prevent an artist from getting harsh reviews or having their work boycotted, since anyone can use their own free speech to criticize.” Leadingham (2024) supports that the First Amendment prevents the government from unjustly censoring or ridding of art, but also mentions that it does not make it insusceptible to cruel comments or protests. Moreover, “Art Censorship” by Teninbaum (2023) adds, “In drafting the Constitution,

the framers acknowledged the importance of artistic expression, going so far as to define promotion of the 'useful arts' as one of government's purposes...The First Amendment provides significant protection to artistic expression and, as a result, severely limits the government's right to censor controversial works in most contexts." People can oppose or abhor graffiti all they want, but they cannot unjustly censor or destroy it. Just like all other forms of expression, speech, literature, dance, theater, etc., graffiti is also protected by the First Amendment making it unconstitutional to do anything to limit the artist's expression.

Graffiti is a beautiful way for an artist to communicate their thoughts or ideals for a community, but it is frowned upon by so many. Many choose to see it negatively because that is how society tends to view it, but there is immeasurably more to it than on the surface. Although the freedom of graffiti can be abused, it is mostly used to express political and social issues in an artistic manner, which, arguably, is much more impactful than an hour-long speech or ten-page article. Something I came to notice while drafting this essay is that our minds are easily warped to conform to societal norms. In the case of this essay, the societal norm is thinking graffiti is an act of rebellion and aggression. After thorough research, I have concluded that this is not the case and that we, as a community, need to be more open-minded. All we need to do is step outside of the safe box created by our parents, role models, and leaders in our communities and look further into societal issues or problems to ensure our understanding of the subject. This way, we can make our own decisions about how we want to feel about it and what we want to do to solve said issue or problem. An example of graffiti being used to influence a community is the George Floyd memorials. In 2020, George Floyd, a black man, was murdered by a white police officer. I remember watching dangerous protests on the news from the safety of my home. I have some family friends who live in the cities and was worried for them. They were just a few blocks away

from the vicious fires overtaking the police stations and the havoc wreaked by the riots and boycotts. Thankfully, they never fell victim to the violent break-ins or were close enough to be affected by the ferocious flames. I recall exactly when Black Lives Matter (BLM) became so important to so many people. I was too scared to see the memorial set up in honor of Floyd right away, but a year later I went to see it. I saw tons of murals of George Floyd and buildings tattooed with “BLM” as well as the well-known graffitied George Floyd memorial. It was incredible to see the amount of love and support Floyd received because of his unfair death. The



part that stuck with me the most was the abundance of art memorials in the place where Floyd was murdered. The store, Cup Foods, was taken over by flowers, and art was splattered across the sidewalks and roads around it. There was graffiti supporting Daunte Wright, another black man unjustly murdered by a police officer, graffiti supporting BLM, and so much more. Graffiti is so important. Creating graffiti is liberating for an artist because they can bring attention to something important to them and their community. Graffiti allows communities to come together to support a cause and encourages them to take control over their own freedoms. My advice for you is to open your eyes to the world around you and see it from an artistic perspective. Step outside of your comfort zone and learn a little more about the community you live in and the hardships it faces. Who knows, you might even learn a little more about yourself along the way.

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