



Beyond Removal

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Beyond Removal: Determining Significance for the Preservation of Graffiti

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Fig. 1.

Yuma Territorial Prison Museum, Yuma, Arizona, 2022. The building ceased operation as a prison in 1914. This visitor graffiti dates to the 1930s. All photographs by the author unless otherwise noted.



Fig. 2.

Pre-printed graffiti on United States Postal Service Label 228, 2021.



Introduction

The preservation of graffiti remains a controversial topic rooted, in part, in discomfort that its preservation may be validating an illegal act of vandalism. Yet, when the reasons why it was created are examined, an argument can be made that some graffiti can be as worthy of saving as any “legitimate” decorative finish—perhaps more so. Even crude graffiti can uniquely reflect a given moment in history, be it a Civil War soldier’s doodle from 150 years ago or a Black Lives Matter protester’s mural created as part of recent social-justice protests. The matter also becomes complicated when acting proactively to preserve graffiti recently created as part of a clearly historic, if contemporary, phenomenon. Even when sticking to the traditional 50-year definition of “historic,” there are pieces of urban art and street art nearing that magic age of eligibility for consideration.

General academic and preservation professional groups such as ICOMOS and UNESCO are beginning to define graffiti as either a tangible or intangible form of cultural heritage, somewhere in between the two, or both.¹ In 2004 the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) developed a graffiti policy statement acknowledging that graffiti on historic buildings is “detracting” and stating that “graffiti in such places be strongly discouraged.” However, the statement also admitted that “some forms of street art had social significance and should be recorded and protected.”² Here in the United States, there are multiple properties on the National Register of Historic Places, such as the Graffiti House in Brandy Station, Virginia, that were listed in great part due to the presence of historic graffiti.³ The Association for Preservation Technology (APT) held a workshop entitled “Graffiti Management in a Changing World: Should it Stay, or Should it Go?” as part of its 2021 annual conference. The workshop examined not just graffiti removal but also how to assess its

historical, social, and physical significance and provide alternatives to immediate removal. However, these discussions have been more like tentative first steps toward establishing firmer guidelines for best practices.

This Practice Point is intended to assist architects, conservators, engineers, other preservation professionals, and building owners in establishing the significance of graffiti and determining when it is worthy of preservation. Examples of where the decision was made, not always easily, to preserve the graffiti in some form or another are included, as well as information on terminology, materials, and options for documentation and preservation.

What Is Graffiti?

As the history of graffiti can be found in many other publications, it will not be included here. However, as the idea of graffiti preservation and conservation moves closer to the mainstream, understanding what it is and how it is created becomes important. Preservation professionals need to be able to describe it accurately. A list of graffiti materials and terminology can be found in the sidebars.

From a legal standpoint, graffiti is any etching, painting, covering, drawing, or otherwise placing of a mark upon public or private property that is unsanctioned and uncommissioned.⁴ This difference sets it apart from aerosol art murals that are done with permission. True graffiti is created for many different reasons, ranging from self-

expression to boredom to disrespect. It can be thoughtful, crude, political, humorous, simple, artistic, territorial, offensive, creative, or any combination thereof.

There are two main types of graffiti. The first is text-based and focuses on lettering; it can be someone’s name, a street name in the form of a “tag,” a message, or just a way to say “I was here” (Fig. 1). Text graffiti can also be ideological, a highly visible way of speaking out on political, social, and economic issues. This type is generally created using pencil, charcoal, crayon, permanent marker, or spray paint. It can also be carved into wood, stone, or masonry, or it can be scratched into glass, a form known as “scratchiti.”

The second type of graffiti, sometimes called “urban art” or “street art,” is more image-based. It encompasses multiple types of medium and can be as elaborate as a full-color, full-height wall mural, or as simple as pencil doodles inside a jail cell. While most often created using spray paint, it can also be produced using stencils, mosaic tiles, converted fire extinguishers, and even yarn. Pre-drawn graffiti on stickers, often using either “HELLO my name is” stickers or United States Postal Service Label 228, are an inexpensive and quick way to mark a surface (Fig. 2). Most creators of image-based graffiti do not consider their art to be defacing public or private property; rather they see it as “beautifying” and adding color to the neighborhood (Fig. 3).⁵ Many “graffiti artists” started out as “graffiti writers,” and many consider themselves to be simply “artists.”⁶

Graffiti is one of the most universally common forms of vandalism committed today. A graffiti writer interviewed for the documentary *Bomb It* stated this clearly: “If you put a pen into any child’s hand, naturally, he’ll go to the wall.”⁷ Graffiti can have both positive and negative economic impact. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that “nationally, the annual cost of monitoring, detecting, removing, and repairing graffiti damage has been estimated to be as high as \$15 to \$18 billion.”⁸ At the same time, however, many large cities offer walking tours showcasing graffiti, and neighborhoods with a large street-art scene have some of the fastest rates of gentrification along with rising home prices.⁹ Street art is even being dismantled from the sides of buildings and sold in art galleries.¹⁰ Graffiti writers and artists have also had a powerful influence on conventional art, and many, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Banksy, and Shepard Fairey, have successfully moved into the mainstream art world.

Fig. 3. Stencil graffiti by Queens artist Uncutt discovered on a New York City sidewalk, 2023.



Financial incentives aside, there's no denying that the cultural acceptance of some forms of graffiti has increased greatly over the last 20 years. It can be seen as the voice of the unheard, a vehicle for social engagement, or just as the beautification of public space. Decades of academic articles, opinion pieces, and master's theses have firmly established graffiti and street art as a form of cultural heritage that can be evaluated as "aesthetic, historical, and local forms of value."¹¹ Preservationists are also beginning to understand that graffiti can possess an intimate "human scale," where people can occupy the same spot as the individual who created it, just at a different moment in time. In most instances, that mark may be the only immediate clue of that person's existence, lending a vernacular "everyman" appeal to its preservation. Sometimes, more complex examples of graffiti can be viewed as a form of folk art. If it can be accepted that some graffiti can be worthy of preservation, navigating the complexities of assessment criteria becomes increasingly critical to this aspect of the preservation profession.

Determining Significance

Although a range of subjective considerations is often involved, it is possible to create guidelines and standards for graffiti preservation and conservation. The groundwork for determining significance has already been laid. The Burra Charter defines "cultural significance" as "aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations."¹² Additionally, the U.S. federal government includes criteria in *National Register Bulletin*, number 15, entitled "How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation" that can be applied to graffiti. This *Bulletin* states that eligible examples must possess "integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and:

- A. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
- B. That are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
- C. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinctions; or

Types of Graffiti

Incised. Cut or carved with a knife or similar blade.

Scratched. Using a point such as a nail.

Painted. Using a pigment such as paint, ink, or chalk.

Written or drawn. Using ink, pencil, charcoal.

Punched. Using a punch or similar tool and hammer.

Solder. Using plumbers' solder to leave a raised graffiti.

Soot. Using residue from a smoky candle, lantern, or lighter.

Etched. Using an acidic chemical to permanently burn glass.

Placed. Using adhesive or wheat paste for the placement of paper or stickers.

- D. That have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history."

No one is advocating preserving all graffiti, and much of it can be dismissed outright as vandalism. But some graffiti resonates with a community, especially when it was created by someone from, or voices a concern relevant to, that community. Great street art takes into account the space in which it is created when the artist is composing their "piece" or "mural." When this is done, it can fall into the category of simply "art."

Although many factors are considered in the decision to remove or preserve graffiti, some of the most important are its age, the artist, and its context. For graffiti, an easy and quick method can be considering the "five Ws"—who, what, where, when, and why.

Who created the graffiti? Was it a world-renowned artist like Banksy or a local kid? But what happens if that kid grows up to be the next Jean-Michel Basquiat? If that graffiti is removed as part of regular maintenance, will we even know that their earlier work was destroyed? Can we expect the local public works department to recognize the work of an important graffiti artist versus the tag of a gang marking its turf? Or was it created by people going

Fig. 4.
Lower East Side Tenement Museum, 97 Orchard Street, New York, New York. Penciled inventory inside an apartment, 2022.

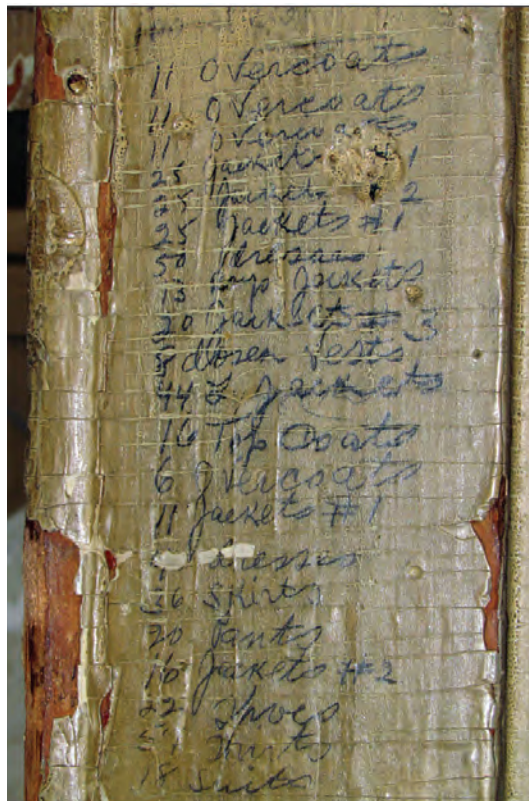
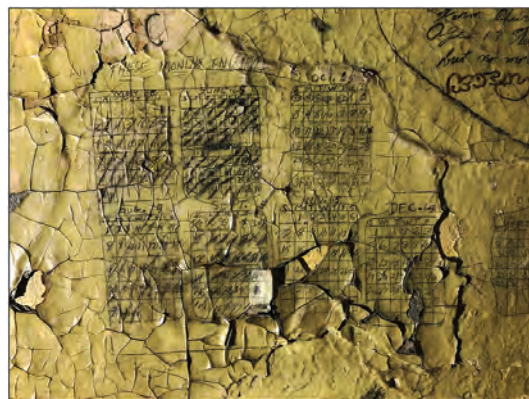


Fig. 5.
*Burlington County Prison
Museum, 128 High Street,
Mount Holly, New Jersey.
Prisoner graffiti in need of
stabilization, 2021.*



about their normal lives, and does it help provide insight into who they were, or tell their story?

Graffiti need not be created by a well-known artist to be culturally relevant. The Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City illustrates this vernacular perspective. Located at 97 Orchard Street, the Tenement Museum was home to over 7,000 people from 20 different countries between 1863, when the building was opened, and 1935, when the upper floors were closed after the owner refused to make additional upgrades to meet new building codes. This situation left the apartments on the upper floors

empty, while the basement and first-floor storefronts remained open for business use until the building was purchased by the museum in 1988. In the parlor of one of the apartments, a young girl, Ruth Katz, used a pencil to sign her name in cursive on the wallpaper before she moved out. Elsewhere in the room, someone, possibly an adult based upon the handwriting, wrote the date of their departure, "July 21, 1932." A door frame in a different apartment displays pricing and inventory markings in pencil from one of the first-floor merchants who used the second floor apartment as storage (Fig. 4). As these examples of graffiti help to tell the story of the former inhabitants and provide insights into how the spaces were used, care has been taken to preserve these pencil marks by merely leaving them alone during cleaning and conservation work in the apartments.

What is the graffiti? This question includes graffiti that is rare and unique, as well as its intrinsic physical characteristics and condition. These factors determine the appropriate preservation treatment—or if it can even be preserved.

Pencil graffiti over interior paint, for instance, should be stable, but when twenty layers of paint have been applied over multiple layers of whitewash and water-soluble distempers, water infiltration and high levels of humidity can lead to the loss of historic fabric. Such is the case at the Burlington County Prison Museum in Mount Holly, New Jersey. The prison, originally constructed in 1811, was closed in 1965; at that time, it was the oldest continuously used jail in the United States. The graffiti—in pencil, crayon, and ink—was created by convicts between 1950 and 1965 (Fig. 5). The walls that confined them are covered in graffiti, which includes Bible verses, portraits, landscapes, political statements, calendars, taunts, dates, and signatures. Years of water infiltration have left the paint poorly adhered to deteriorated plaster and powdering whitewash. As this graffiti furthers the mission of the museum and helps to tell the stories of the men who were imprisoned there, preserving it is imperative. The museum is working with New Jersey's State Historic Preservation Office to obtain grants to help fund much-needed conservation treatments.

Where is the graffiti located? Is it desecrating the side of a church or enhancing the inside of an abandoned building? What happens when that building is no longer abandoned? It might make sense to treat juvenile graffiti in an alleyway differently from a section of the Berlin Wall, but how does its location help us make distinctions

about its social value? Does its location speak to the community or help to preserve its character?

This type of preservation can be found inside a secret closet at the NBC Studios in New York City (Fig. 6). In 1964 Jim Henson and his crew became bored while waiting to appear on the Jack Paar Show. With several hours of downtime on their hands, they “Muppetized” the exposed plumbing by painting faces and adding fur collars, mustaches, and hair. Once they were finished, they closed the door and simply walked away. It was not discovered until years later and is now a highlight of the NBC Studios tour.

When was it created? Graffiti by its very nature is ephemeral: therefore, the older the graffiti, the rarer it is. But should doodles dating from the Civil War-era, uncovered during a restoration, be treated differently from something that just showed up last week? Keep in mind that even historic graffiti was also once only a week old.

Michigan Central Station in Detroit, Michigan, sat vacant for years before it was purchased by the Ford Motor Company. During this time, the building became a haven for urban explorers and graffiti artists alike; as the sole occupants, they had been the life of the building for the last 30 years (Fig. 7). Ford recognized that the graffiti was an important part of the history of the station. In addition to retaining several areas of graffiti in the interior, the company also worked with students from Detroit’s Center for Creative Studies to document other examples before removal. The documentation included paintings, photographs, and oral-history interviews with the artists and members of the community to ensure that this chapter of the building’s history is preserved.

There may also be local laws protecting the “moral rights” of graffiti creators, even when the creation is illegal. After whitewashing graffiti murals at the 5Pointz apartment building in Long Island City, New York, the building owner was required to compensate the artists with a \$6.7 million payment for running afoul of the 1990 Visual Artists Rights Act (VARA).¹³

Why was the graffiti created? Is it evidence of a territorial dispute between rival gangs, or is it artistic expression? Is it a message that really needs to be heard? And, if so, who decides? The world is, for example, at an important point of history right now. Social-justice marches and protests for Black Lives Matter have been happening all over the globe. Many of these protests were



Fig. 6. NBC Studios, 30 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, New York. Detail of the Muppet closet. In addition to “where,” this graffiti also falls into the “who,” “what,” “when,” and “why” categories. Courtesy of the Jim Henson Company, photograph by John E. Barrett.



Fig. 7. Michigan Central Station, 2023. Spray-painted graffiti on the interior, which will be conserved as part of the building’s restoration. Photograph by Angela Wyrembelski.

Graffiti Creators

Graffiti writer. Work is illegally placed and consists primarily of painted letters and symbols. Creations can range from a small signature to a large, multi-colored word that fills the side of a building.

Street artist. Work is illegally placed and tends to include more illustrations and graphics.

Muralist. Often creates legal paintings that are commissioned by the property owner or community.

Crew. A group of writers or graffiti artists.

Graffiti Terminology

Bombing. Tagging or spray-painting multiple surfaces within a location, often using quick tags.

Tag. A quick, stylized signature composed of letters and/or numbers.

Throw-up. More elaborate, larger works that require more time to create than a tag but are still quickly executed to avoid detection. Generally, there is a one-color outline and single-layer fill color; “bubble-style” letters are frequently used.

Piece or burner. A large, detailed work that has bright colors and artistic value, which displays the best work a graffiti writer or artist can do. A “burner” is a really good “piece.” This type of work is widely respected and often remains in place for a long time. If it was created in a difficult location and is well executed, it will earn the writer greater recognition.

Mural. The highest form of graffiti.

Landmark. A piece of graffiti made in a difficult-to-access location so that removal is almost impossible or simply not feasible; the work will remain in place and eventually become a “landmark.”²¹

supplemented with graffiti as a means for communities who felt they were ignored. These expressions have ranged from simple initials of “BLM” to some artistically sophisticated murals. Such examples are more about civil-disobedience protests by marginalized communities than mere acts of senseless vandalism and are reflective of a historically significant period.

The social-justice protests in the spring and summer of 2020, following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, led to discussions on what to do with powerful graffiti statements on historic buildings. The slave quarters at Decatur House in Washington, D.C., for instance, were spray painted with the question “Why do we have to keep telling you Black Lives Matter?” A joint statement from the presidents of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States and the White House Historical Association showed that they understood the “poignant and powerful” message and how it related to that site. To discourage additional graffiti, however, they chose to remove it, but it was well documented by both groups beforehand, in addition to being photographed by many members of the general public and the media. Furthermore, the site plans to

incorporate this new episode in the building’s history, including the graffiti from the recent demonstrations, into its public interpretation of the site.¹⁴

Similarly, the City of Seattle’s Office of Arts and Culture collected much of the graffiti from the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest (CHOP) in 2020, with the goal of documentation and preservation. Some pieces are being offered back to the people who created them. The office is also working with museums to find places to store, display, and preserve other powerful pieces, such as the example of an image of George Floyd created by the question “How many weren’t filmed?”¹⁵ Several Seattle museums, including the Museum of History and Industry, the Museum of Pop Culture, and the Washington Historical Society, are acquiring some of the plywood murals that were painted after stores boarded up their windows during the early days of the Covid pandemic.¹⁶ The challenge of this work is to understand the significance of the current times and how the graffiti could be important in the future.

Graffiti can fall into more than one category of the “Ws,” and the more categories and criteria it meets, the stronger the case for preservation. The “five Ws” are just the beginning. One of the most important aspects of determining significance is involving the community, particularly when the graffiti “has become iconic, highly appreciated, or respected by the neighborhood.”¹⁷ The significance of a piece may not be readily apparent to conservators coming in from outside that neighborhood, whereas residents are often guided and influenced by a different set of lived experiences and priorities. Community involvement, such as what is being done in Seattle and at Michigan Central Station, is required to gain a greater understanding of what these messages mean to a neighborhood, a city, or perhaps even on a broader societal level. This is not a decision that can be made by an outsider alone.

Furthermore, as is the case with many forms of contemporary art, including graffiti artists and writers in these conversations will ensure that their voices are heard and that their ideas are incorporated into discussions about the preservation and longevity of their art. Some see their creations as inherently ephemeral and may not even want to see them “preserved”—they may not have been meant to last (Fig. 8). Some feel that when people interfere with an organic process, the graffiti becomes stagnant; “what makes graffiti thrilling and interesting to the public and

to other graffiti artists is the fact that it is a never-ending, changing, kind of living art form.”¹⁸

Conclusion

Preservation of graffiti can take multiple forms, including photographic documentation (Fig. 9), National Register listings, application and installation of protective coatings such as Plexiglass (Fig. 10), or performing conservation treatments.¹⁹ With the proliferation of smartphones and social-media platforms, such as Instagram, many graffiti artists record and share their work.

The decision to remove graffiti often must be made quickly. Supplying graffiti-removal teams with digital cameras and access to a database would allow for the swift removal of graffiti while still recording the information and making it available for future study and reference. This work is being done by groups such as The Historic Graffiti Society and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which have taken up the task of documenting historic graffiti. But their work generally ends at digital archiving and does not include preservation and conservation work, leaving the artwork vulnerable to destruction by the elements and vandals.

Obviously, there is a large degree of subjectivity and room for personal, cultural, and even racial biases. While one's instinct may be to immediately remove graffiti that is hateful or inappropriate for public viewing, it is still important to be mindful of its historic context.²⁰ All this becomes more acute when applied to graffiti created less than 50 years ago. Additionally, balancing the prioritization of the rights of the graffiti's creator with those of the owner of the defaced property interjects murky, localized legal considerations. What is presented in this Practice Point cannot be the last word on the subject. Hopefully, though, it represents a good place to start pushing the professional preservation community toward establishing a more formal “best practices” approach. There is a new definition of “graffiti,” and there are new methodologies for its removal and conservation. Work is needed on what happens in between.

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Fig. 8.
Spray-painted graffiti on a snowbank in Cazenovia, New York, 2022.



Fig. 9.
Historic Graffiti Society recording graffiti by railroad telegraphers, undisclosed location, 2022. Photograph courtesy of Historic Graffiti Society.



Fig. 10.
Banksy graffiti, West 79th Street, New York, New York, protected by plexiglass, 2019.

Notes

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