



**Aerosol Culture Goes Global
As Old Masters Find New
Uses for Their Skills**

► Zephyr, one of many internationally known graffiti artists, leaves his mark on a Berry St. wall.

Graffiti is not dead; it's just gone legit.

■ Stay tuned for our graffiti image gallery, coming soon.

The Metropolitan Transit Authority has nearly eradicated graffiti underground, but the wild, spray-paint characters that once decorated this city's subway trains have begun to surface in movies, murals, mainstream advertising and on the Internet. The artists who were once considered outlaws are now entrepreneurs.

On North 10th Street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Bob Schneider commissioned one of them to do a full-scale mural for the bus depot he manages. The fresco, which was painted during the summer of 1995, crams two walls with a vivid neo-Aztec-Polynesian-Celtic-Egyptian riff on identity and history. Sarcophagi, dragons, Shivas, villagers, frogs and pyramids are intertwined with burning signatures on the two-story garage. The Pharaoh Wall, as it has become known in the neighborhood, is a local landmark for graffiti writers and the school groups that come to study it.

"The kids understand it better than any of us," Schneider said. "The kids look at it and stare at it and get some ideas," Schneider said.

"Basically, most writers today will bomb anything that can't pick up and run."—Jugz

"You look at graffiti writers as being punk kids," he said, "but they're really not. They're artists."

The word "graffito" entered the lexicon in 1851, according to Oxford English Dictionary. Archeologists used the term to describe informal

writings on ancient monuments, such as in Rome or Pompeii.

In New York City the graffiti renaissance was ushered in by gangs, subways and indelible markers. In the summer of 1971, a small article in The New York Times took note of Taki 183, an enterprising young man who achieved a kind of fame by scrawling his signature or "tag" on dozens of subway cars with a felt-tip pen. Tagging was also used as a way to mark gang territory, according to Subway Art, Chalfant and Cooper's (<http://photoarts.com/cooper/index1.html>) seminal book on the subject.

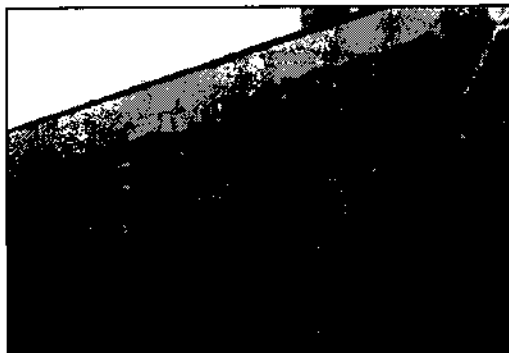
Spray paint became the medium of choice by 1975 when the first top-to-bottom, multicolored names appeared on subway cars. Aerosol culture (<http://home.dti.net/futura/index.htm>) accelerated in the early eighties when it fused

with hip hop's urban aesthetic to create wild style, the big, bright and kinetically cryptic lettering that came to signify the New York look.

Lady Pink helped define that look. "Not only do you have to be an artist, you have to be a bit of a criminal," explained Pink (because she still does a few extralegal pieces, Pink will be identified here only by her tag). When she started out tagging trains in the late 1970s, Pink, now 34, was one of the few serious female graffiti writers in the city.

"I was more of a budding feminist," Pink recalled. "That was the perfect outlet for me. I just could not put up with boys telling me what can and cannot be done. I was out there to prove myself."

And she did. During the winter of 1980-81, Pink and some of the city's best wall painters were invited to show their work at the New Museum and P.S.1 in Queens. A flurry of exhibitions and press followed. The art demimonde had discovered graffiti.



"Basically, gallery art happened to us," Pink noted.

Although the attention brought Pink money and a chance to travel, she was uncomfortable with the way it changed her work. "You're just a commodity," she said, "like the stock market. We were only painting for money, and that didn't sit well with me. We were excluding our peers."

Pink still sells an occasional painting on canvas, but her main work is now commissioned by businesses. "Mostly we do interiors," Pink said, "-- airbrush, photo realistic, abstract impressionist -- all styles." For example, Pink organized the collective that painted the Pharaoh Wall in Brooklyn. This year Pink got a grant from the city to paint a mural in Astoria and she and her husband Smith, also a graffiti writer, recently returned from a trip to Belfast, Ireland, where they taught painting to local kids.

Despite the commercial attention, Pink and Smith still do some of their best work for free. "We donate public walls," Pink explained.

If the old school was raised on the instant feedback of New York's subway system, the new generation has had to find other ways and places to get their work up.

After the MTA instituted its "zero tolerance" policy in 1985, aspiring graf writers had to find a new canvas, explained Jake Dobkin, a former graffiti writer and webmaster of the I Can Fly (ICF) site on the Internet. The ICF site on the Web (<http://graffiti.org/icf>) serves as a digital gallery and forum on the evolving aesthetics of graffiti. "I like to maintain a presence for ICF worldwide," Dobkin said.

What was once a New York phenomenon has gone national and international. For instance, the most prolific graffiti artists showcased on Art Crimes (<http://www.graffiti.org/>) are Europeans -- kids from Germany, Czechoslovakia and Italy. New generation writers also print stickers in runs of 10,000 or more to get their tags up. For larger "throw-ups" -- quickly filled-in signatures -- or more elaborate pieces, new school painters work on freight trains and highway overpasses. "Basically, most writers today will bomb anything that can't pick up and run," explained Dobkin.



"It's all about getting recognized and wanting to define yourself," said Reggie Martineau. Martineau ran the mural painting program for El Puente, an alternative school on Williamsburg's Southside. "There's a philosophy in graffiti where the more you put your name up the better. Kids still tag up, but the skill level isn't there," he added.

Part of the changeover was caused by popularity, part by simple economics. "When the whole hip hop thing blew up in the '80s people dropped (graffiti), because it became corny and they didn't want anything to do with it," Martineau said. "And, you can't be 20 years old doing stuff for free anymore."

As it spreads, graffiti also mutates. "There's a certain aesthetic that comes from New York, from the city," Martineau said. "The further it goes out, the more influence it brings into the culture. But does it still play the same role in the community where it came from?"

When Gilbert Aviles and Erni Vales teamed up at New York's High School of Art and Design in 1981, graffiti was their obsession. "We were out there doing pieces every weekend," Aviles said. "We were doing IRTs, 4, 5, 6 trains and Js and Ms. It was addictive."

It soon became a business. Aviles and Vales started out painting denim jackets and were later commissioned to paint the interiors of nightclubs and movie sets. The partners formed Erni-Gil Inc., a collaboration that ran from 1986 to 1993. Aviles and Vales are still the best of friends, but their work was going in different directions.

In 1994 Aviles started Gilco and began designing point-of-purchase displays for companies like Converse, Victorinox, Footlocker and Burton snowboards. "They came to me for outrageous designs," Aviles said, "and it just took off." Aviles recently incorporated with a few other artists in a venture called CREW ? Creative Retail Environments Worldwide. The next job: Pepsi.

Meanwhile, Vales has continued painting restaurants and nightclubs and has built a reputation as a set painter. Vales has done sets for Seven, Vampire in Brooklyn and he burned through 230 cans of Krylon painting a 200-foot-long section of tunnel for the movie Money Train. Vales has also done some clothing design and painted backdrops for the TV show New York Undercover and the photographer David LaChapelle. Recently he invested in a Connecticut restaurant and is considering another restaurant startup. "That all really did branch off from graffiti," Vales noted.

Although Vales contributed to the Pharoah Wall, he doesn't do illegal work anymore. "I can pretty much work whenever I want," Vales said, "so the prospect of working for free and maybe going to jail doesn't really appeal to me."

For Aviles graffiti was a beginning, not an end in itself. "My whole point of view as an artist stems from that," he said. "It was a great growing period, but it's not my whole life."

"Erni and I were both kind of hustlers," Aviles said. "I never had to go to a job interview -- I've always worked for myself, and I've done pretty well."

Story & Photos by Robert Cummings
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