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Off the wall

By Victoria Maw

Graffiti has made the transition from vandalism to fashionable art, but how did the street become domesticated?



© Gunther Sachs

The work of Toast (Ata Bozaci) and Dare (Sigi von Koeding) at Gunter Sachs' Lake Wörth castle

Graffiti on the streets is nothing new. Declarations of love, territorial stamps and political statements have marked city walls for aeons, from the ancient streets of Pompeii to the modern streets of Philadelphia.

Graffiti's move indoors, however, is a more recent phenomenon. Spurred on by the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat and others during the 1980s, the style gradually became gentrified, moving from the exterior walls of derelict buildings and subway carriages to the interior walls of auction houses. Graffiti artists such as Banksy, Ben Eine and Shepard Fairey are now big names in the contemporary art world, their work hung in the homes of celebrities and collectors. And graffiti's place indoors is

not just confined to canvas: today's graffiti artists do not restrict themselves to a single medium.

Urban art's rise in status has been well documented, most notably through transactions in the top auction houses. Alan Montgomery, a senior specialist in contemporary art and design at Bonhams, the first auction house to hold an urban art auction, in 2008, says that it started to take off in a big way in 2007 thanks to the notoriety of Banksy. "There are not that many contemporary artists where people instantly recognise their work," he says. "The fact that people were seeing these works in the street meant that it was a bit more accessible." At Bonhams' most recent urban art auction, Banksy's "Everytime I Make Love To You I Think Of Someone Else" raised £42,000 and a work by Shepard Fairey (perhaps most famous for his Barack Obama "Hope" election poster), sold for £27,600.

Paul Smith is one of several artists who have taken street art indoors. He founded his London-based business Graffiti Interiors in 2007, painting bespoke designs directly on to interior walls. "It seemed like a lot of graffiti artists were painting canvases and there was huge interest in that." However, Smith felt that canvas was not a natural home for graffiti: "If you paint graffiti, you paint it on a wall. To paint it on a canvas and then have someone buy it for a house is a sort of strange disconnection from where a graffiti artist would normally paint. The idea [for Graffiti Interiors] was to get graffiti on a wall in someone's house so they had the real thing."

GRAFFITI FURNITURE

If the idea of inviting a graffiti artist to attack the living room walls feels a little too much, armchairs are a good alternative.

Jimmie Martin Ltd, a luxury furniture brand based in London, sells one-off pieces of furniture – chairs, wardrobes, lamps – many of which are decorated with graffiti. Old brown furniture is given a new lease of life with anything from marker pens to spray paint and gold leaf. The latest additions to the collection are 6ft 5in (1.8m) mannequin lamps (male and female models available), spray-painted with bespoke graffiti.

Co-owner Jimmie Karlsson

Smith's interior graffiti is accessible – huge cherry blossom trees or flocks of birds sweeping from one end of the room to another – and quite different from the New York street style, which grew up from "tagging" or signing the artist's name on subway carriages. Instead, Smith uses stencils – the same technique used by Banksy. A hand-cut cherry blossom stencil has about 500 cuts or holes in it, with the smallest holes just 2mm wide. This method was developed to enable street artists to complete intricate designs very quickly.

If cherry blossom doesn't seem quite "street" enough there are plenty of graffiti artists painting interiors in other styles. Miami-based artist Erni Vales, who claims to have developed the 3D style of graffiti in the 1990s and has been painting graffiti for 33 years, has worked on an array of commercial and residential mural commissions including a five-storey indoor mural for

says that the company “can do pretty pieces, not just crazy pieces” and has customers of all ages as well as rock stars and royalty. Jimmie Martin also works directly on to walls and existing pieces of furniture – in 2009 Karlsson flew to New York to spray paint a cabinet and some bar stools for the Surrey hotel on the Upper East Side.

Karlsson, whose premises are on west London’s Kensington Church Street, home to numerous antique shops, admits that the company’s furniture is not to everyone’s taste: “I’m sure some of the owners of the antiques shops walk past the window and want to throw up. They probably think we’re damaging all the furniture but we’re buying things that people don’t want anymore. We’re trying to use the history and create something new.”

www.evlworld.com

www.graffitiinteriors.com

www.jimmiemartin.com

www.bonhams.com

Google’s office in New York (painting different animals to mark each floor). His style is bolder than Smith’s – he describes it as a fusion between graffiti and pop art – and he has collaborated with photographer David LaChapelle.

When creating art for homes, Vales says he tries to work with the colours of the environment, the setting and the lighting. However, clients should not expect the work to blend into the background. “Graffiti is meant to stand out,” he says. “When I did graffiti on subway cars, my goal was to stand out from my peers. So I still carry that energy and that concept. My paintings are inside homes with Picassos and Matisse and that’s heavy competition.”

Vales says one of the best examples of interior graffiti that he has seen is the home of Gunter Sachs, the German playboy and former husband of Brigitte Bardot. Sachs, who died in May, was a champion of graffiti and commissioned Swiss graffiti artists Toast (Ata Bozaci) and Dare (the late Sigi von Koeding) to decorate his castle at Lake Wörth in Austria.

Vales says that the artists had “great consideration for the environment of the castle” and the result is an almost continuous flow of graffiti – monochrome figures interspersed with splashes of reds, greys and blues, and bold 3D lettering – that seems to float seamlessly around windows, through doorways and

into other rooms. “It is one of the best residential installations I have ever seen and the art works organically with the space,” says Vales.

In spite of the fact that graffiti now graces luxury homes and galleries, its controversial roots remain. Illegal street graffiti is regularly labelled as vandalism or a blot on the cityscape and local authorities spend millions cleaning it off public buildings. Just 10 years ago, in a survey, 77 per cent of Londoners listed graffiti as a quality of life concern. Does the stigma attached to graffiti make it difficult for people to welcome it inside their homes? “It takes a certain person to have the confidence to say, ‘Come and paint something in my house’ because people do have this hang-up that it is graffiti and they worry,” says Smith. “That is the main stumbling block for a lot of people. They hear the word graffiti and they think, ‘I’m

not sure about that.”

Vales believes that graffiti's edgy reputation makes it more attractive to his customers: “There is that illegal aspect that makes people feel cool. It is a conversation piece and that's what you want when you purchase art. The people that buy my art like to be the first of their friends to discover something and if it has an element of danger, then it's even better.”

Smith is more sceptical: “I think some people associate graffiti with something cool or something street or something fashionable but I'd prefer to think that people who buy my stuff aren't necessarily buying into that. It is painted with graffiti paint and it's using the style that some graffiti artists use but they are getting it because it is going to look stunning in their house.”

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