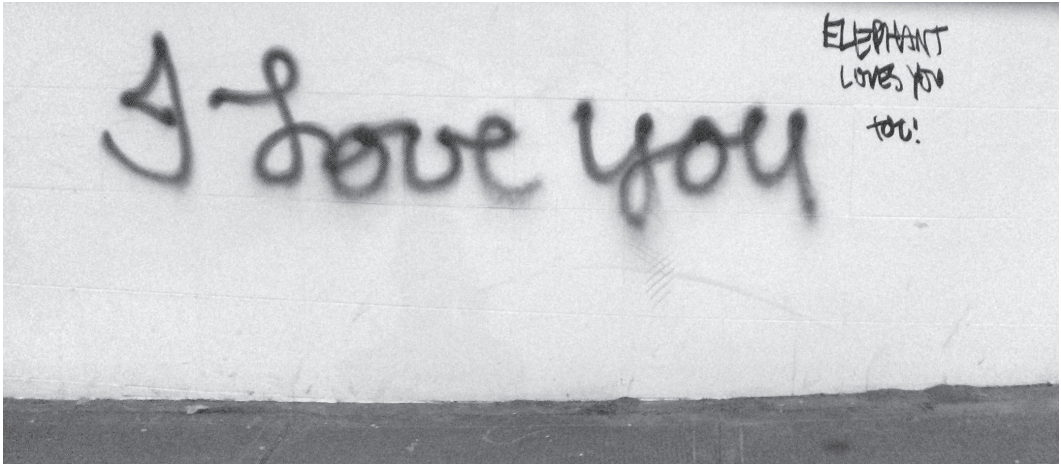


Twisted Characters

Graffiti isn't high art but the letterforms of the writers speak volumes, as PETER MITHAM discovers.



Graffiti may catch the eye but the BC Libraries Association and other groups are partnering to rein in writers. / Peter Mitham photo

RIDING THE COMMUTER TRAINS into Montreal as a kid, I was struck by the graffiti on rail cars. The disorder of the words was a counterpoint to the order of my comfortable suburban life, messages scrawled on steel palimpsests that rolled across the continent to be written over, revised and bear testimony to the continent's subculture. Closer to home, there were numbers on washroom walls and tags on transit infrastructure. But the industrial-strength tags littering the rail yards and ornamenting boxcars and rotund grain cars were something else.

After I moved to Halifax for university, my eye saw the primitive etchings in the upper levels of St. George's (Round) Church. Here was something new, engravings a century or two old by the forebears of the generation that taught me to cover my books and respect private property.

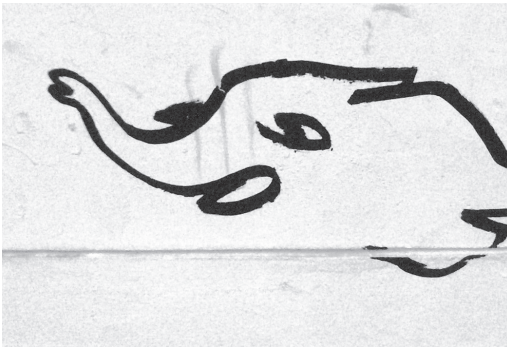
Graffiti, it seems, has been around for generations.

MODERN GRAFFITI BORN IN NEW YORK

But don't call the distorted letterforms many graffiti writers use art, says Val Spicer, who has been involved in graffiti management programs at the Vancouver Police Department. She completed a master's thesis on the topic and traces the origins of the tags that are the bane of property owners the world over to New York street culture of the 1970s.

"The original stuff is all out of New York," she said, citing Henri Chalfant's study of the New York writers of the 1970s, *Subway Art*. Chalfant credits New York with the rise of a graffiti subculture in every city in North America. "Everyone in Vancouver is inadvertently derived from that.... But nowadays, for Vancouver's subculture, they're just biting stuff off the Internet and copying people."

Spicer says most of the graffiti that appears in British Columbia's Lower Mainland is a signature or tag written in hip-hop style with letters that



Graffiti writers seldom make literary references, but these are often the writings that capture the popular imagination. / Peter Mitham photo

have a three-dimensional form like something out of a cartoon (see sidebar on graffiti styles). Graffiti occurrences have skyrocketed in Vancouver since the city terminated its graffiti management program at the end of 2009, although private property owners remain on the hook for cleaning up graffiti within 10 days of its appearance under a 2003 bylaw that also levies a minimum \$500 fine on those convicted of graffiti writing.

But legislation and fines haven't stopped writers from making their mark on property.

The egotistical element, combined with the wilful damage to property, makes it difficult for Spicer to see graffiti as anything other than a crime.

FORM OF ART OR CRIME AGAINST PROPERTY?

While many of the original New York writers were interested in the art world, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Dondi, Spicer claims that a fraction of graffiti writers active in Vancouver—maybe five percent—are artistically inclined. The throw-up line sketches and socio-political graffiti that cast graffiti writers in a romantic light are the minority; more often, the tags are acronyms for crew names, some of them as unpleasant as the writers themselves.

"I've seen them grow up to be sex offenders, domestic violence abusers, aggravated assaults, near murders," she said. "They're not nice people, for the most part. It's about destruction, it's about vandalism, it's about getting your name up."

And if it is an artistic endeavour—and Spicer, who studied fine arts at Concordia University in Montreal for her bachelor's degree, knows something of the area—it's not progressive. "If you're 17, 18 years old and you're making those scribbles—that's not really what you do in art school. I'd probably tear them apart if they were in art school," she said, adding: "What art movement has caused knowledgeable victimization?"

Dada may be the closest, she says, but the distorted stylings of the letterforms graffiti artists typically use speak to something deeper and more disturbing. "It's a cognitive distortion that's occurring," she said. "A lot of them have talked to me informally about how they like the letters to be convoluted because it does, actually, capture their attention." Many writers hone the letterforms into an individual chop of sorts that identifies them as the creator (or, if you will, perpetrator).

"It's all about how can I be unique," she said. "Most of what you read on the walls has everything to do with someone wanting just to become known. But not known to you—known in the subculture. Because then they all get together and they go for beers."

LETTERFORMS KEY TO STYLE AND IDENTITY

The legibility of the characters is less a concern to writers than how the letters' forms make a tag stand out. This has allowed long-time students of graffiti such as Sergeant Wendy Hawthorne of the South Coast British Columbia

Transportation Authority Police Service (colloquially known as the Transit Police) to identify the writers of specific tags. Hawthorne has been studying graffiti, a key property crime for transit services, for 25 years. Since 2002, she has been engaged in analyzing graffiti in the same way that other enforcement officials examine handwriting to determine the creator. The individual style graffiti writers cultivate ultimately works as a sort of visual fingerprint that allows enforcers to identify perpetrators.

Hawthorne examines the movement, line flow, stops and starts in lines, and so on to identify the work of individual writers. “You will see the evolution of them as they get better,” Hawthorne says. “As a calligrapher starts out, their letters aren’t going to be as good, and then they start to focus on getting that movement, that flow, depending on what tools. A graffiti writer is very much the same.”

Graffiti isn’t like other forms of writing because of the variations in tools writers use and the rules and standards of graffiti writing, but the letterforms are key—perhaps more so because content is secondary to establishing a presence among other active writers. “For a graffiti writer it’s all about the letters,” Hawthorne says. “It’s all about that letter and the style and looking for the perfect style. So they really take pride in it even though it may not look like much.”

The long-term hope is that style analysis will allow writers to be held accountable for their work. Hawthorne is a regular speaker at conferences, and municipalities across the country are keen to use her principles of style comparison to identify writers in their communities to pursue civil actions in a bid to recoup losses. The city of Langford on Vancouver Island was among the first municipalities to successfully prosecute a case using Hawthorne’s style comparison.

“There’s a huge calling for the style comparison,” she says. “We’re looking at individuals who’ve done hundreds of them, and we’re going to say ‘OK, now, we’re going to hold you accountable for all of them.’ ”

.....
~ Peter Mitham is editor of *Amphora*.

MAKING THEIR MARKS

Sergeant Wendy Hawthorne of the South Coast British Columbia Transportation Authority Police Service identifies a number of types of graffiti. These include:

SIGNATURE: The assumed name of a graffiti writer, or “tagger.” Tags display a style unique to the writer. Taggers may also do a “throw-up,” a tag written in hip-hop or bubble-style letters that incorporate one or two colours. Throw-ups are a more elaborate way to tag and can be done quickly by developed and practised taggers.

SKATEBOARD: Skateboarders usually use signatures but may utilize skateboard lingo, groups and names that set them apart from other crews.

SOCIO-POLITICAL: Adult-oriented graffiti commenting on social and political issues. Tags often employ pre-designed stencils that are put on objects and spray-painted over to create the stencil image on the product.

GANG: Gang graffiti is used to establish recognition, create intimidation and mark off turf or area.

RACIST: Tags that target specific racial groups or proclaim the superiority of a particular race.

BUBBLE GUM: Tags proclaiming love, such as “Jim love Laurie.”

EULOGY: Tags commemorating dead friends, associates and heroes.

RELIGIOUS: Tags with a religious message, such as “John 3:16.”

SATANIC: Tags such as 666 and “NATAS” (“Satan” spelled backwards).

NON-DESCRIPT: Tags proclaiming the name of a rock band or sports team but otherwise bearing no particular meaning.

Source: www.vandalismsolutions.org