

Reading Comprehension

The history of graffiti

1. The first drawings on walls appeared in caves thousands of years ago. Later the Ancient Romans and Greeks wrote their names and protest poems on buildings. Modern graffiti seems to have appeared in Philadelphia in the early 1960s, and by the late sixties it had reached New York. The new art form really took off in the 1970s, when people began writing their names, or ‘tags’, on buildings all over the city. In the mid-seventies it was sometimes hard to see out of a subway car window, because the trains were completely covered in spray paintings known as ‘masterpieces’.
2. In the early days, the ‘taggers’ were part of street gangs who were concerned with marking their territory. They worked in groups called ‘crews’, and called what they did ‘writing’ – the term ‘graffiti’ was first used by The New York Times and the novelist Norman Mailer. Art galleries in New York began buying graffiti in the early seventies. But at the same time that it began to be regarded as an art form, John Lindsay, the then mayor of New York, declared the first war on graffiti. By the 1980s it became much harder to write on subway trains without being caught, and instead many of the more established graffiti artists began using roofs of buildings or canvases.
3. The debate over whether graffiti is art or vandalism is still going on. Peter Vallone, a New York city councillor, thinks that graffiti done with permission can be art, but if it is on someone else’s property it becomes a crime. ‘I have a message for the graffiti vandals out there,’ he said recently. ‘Your freedom of expression ends where my property begins.’ On the other hand, Felix, a member of the Berlin-based group Reclaim Your City, says that artists are reclaiming cities for the public from advertisers, and that graffiti represents freedom and makes cities more vibrant.
4. For decades graffiti has been a springboard to international fame for a few. Jean-Michel Basquiat began spraying on the street in the 1970s before becoming a respected artist in the ’80s. The Frenchman Blek le Rat and the British artist Banksy have achieved international fame by producing complex works with stencils, often making political or humorous points. Works by Banksy have been sold for over £100,000. Graffiti is now sometimes big business.

I. Match the paragraphs with the best paragraph headings. One heading is not needed.

- A. Not just a modern phenomenon
- B. The future of graffiti
- C. Increasing exposure and attention
- D. Art or vandalism
- E. Famous graffiti artists

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____

II. Read the questions and choose the correct answer.

1. Why was the seventies an important decade in the history of graffiti?

- a. That was when modern graffiti first appeared.
- b. That was when modern graffiti first became really popular.
- c. That was when graffiti first reached New York.

2. What is a 'masterpiece' in graffiti?

- a. A really high-quality piece of graffiti.
- b. A work of graffiti showing the artist's name.
- c. A full piece of graffiti, like those seen on subway trains.

3. What was the main motivation for the first taggers?

- a. Showing which streets belonged to which gangs.
- b. Creating a strong visual identity for their 'crew'.
- c. Sending coded messages to other gangs.

4. Who coined the phrase 'graffiti'?

- a. New York gangs who had a lot of Italian immigrant members.
- b. A newspaper and an author.
- c. The man who was the mayor of New York in the late seventies.

5. How did things change after the first war on graffiti?

- a. It was considered a more serious crime.
- b. Graffiti artists had to stop painting.
- c. New York looked a lot cleaner.

6. What does New York city councillor Peter Vallone say about graffiti?

- a. Graffiti can be good for cities as long as it is tasteful and conveys positive messages.
- b. Graffiti can be beautiful if it is done by a skilled artist.
- c. Graffiti is a crime if the artist does not have permission.

7. What do the Berlin-based group Reclaim Your City say about graffiti?

- a. Involving young people in graffiti stops them getting involved with serious crime.
- b. Graffiti helps the public to own the streets and take control away from advertisers.

- c. Graffiti actually increases the value of property by making the area more attractive.

8. What is the author's final point?

- a. Graffiti has now become mainstream and can make artists a lot of money.
- b. Graffiti is not a good way to become a respected artist.
- c. Some of the most popular graffiti artists end up being exploited by the art world.

III. Answer the questions.

1. Where can you see graffiti nowadays?

2. In your opinion, is graffiti an art or a vandalism?

3. What is your attitude to graffiti?
