

## CHAPTER I

# GRAFFITI WRITING: ROOTS AND STYLES

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In any self-respecting critical essay, providing reliable sources is crucial. But how to do so when literature on the subject is almost non-existent? The only plausible source for us was dialogue, made possible by interviewing the artists and transcribing their direct point of view<sup>1</sup>. This dialogue has shaped a horizontal treatise on a topical subject that has only recently received the attention it deserves, and is still unfortunately not fully understood. While studying this varied and enigmatic subject, we have considered many questions to which we hope to give the right answers. Therefore, before crossing any geographical barrier and exploring the universe of graffiti in China, it is essential to provide an adequate terminological and etymological explanation of this topic, with the intention of trying to understand what graffiti is, who the artists are and, above all, what they mean to convey.

Firstly, care must be taken not to confuse Street Art – a mishmash of artistic expressions (sticker art, stencil art, poster art and video art) performed in the streets often illegally – with graffiti writing: graffiti is a different kind of art (also performed in the streets). Some find it hard to place it in this “street art mishmash”, but the truth is it lays at its foundation. Although, nowadays, any pictorial work in a public place is referred to as graffiti, it is important to clarify that the artistic phenomenon we are going to analyse is “graffiti writing”.

The etymology of the word *graffito* derives from the Latin term *grāphium* (or “engraving style”), which stems from the Greek word *gràphein* (γράφειν, to scratch, to hollow, to draw), while the English term “writing” refers to the artistic practice that deals with the execution of letters and thus implies the study of lettering, or “the style of letters”.

“It’s a simple game with simple rules: get yourself a tag and write it in an original style, as often as you can, everywhere and anywhere.” (Mininno 2021, p. 29). With this premise, Alessandro Mininno, the guiding spirit of these first pages and an outstanding expert on the subject, unveils his scrupulous analysis of graffiti writing which, in general terms, can be defined as a social, cultural and artistic movement spread across the globe. This phenomenon is a spontaneous expression of a heterogeneous group of people belonging to a subculture which operates with no declared intent: the Hip-hop culture.

Hip-hop is a cultural movement that arose among the Afro-American and Latino communities of the New York suburbs in the late 1970s. The four main aspects of hip-hop culture are: speech (rap or *MCing*), music (*Djing*), movement (breakdancing or *B-boying*) and sign (writing). As a complex and structured form of visual expression in constant evolution, graffiti writing represents an act of interpreting and developing letters – so as to give birth to a proper tag, or signature – using spray paint or markers in public spaces.

“Signatures, or tags, thus are the backbone of the writing phenomenon. All pieces [the term by which we will henceforth refer to graffiti], even the largest, the most colourful and the most elaborate, are basically no more than tags: any illustrations and figurative characters – often found also on trains in the 1970s and 1980s – are almost always secondary, there only to enhance a composition which always revolves around lettering. It’s on the letters that a writer’s style is based,” continues Mininno.

## Writing is the writers<sup>2</sup>

A melting pot of low-class Afro-Americans and middle-class white kids who end up expressing themselves with clearly common means (spray paint as their medium, lettering as their subject matter and the public space as their canvas) yet often with very individual and diverse intentions. (...) Some paint for the sake of vandalism and for a ten-minute thrill in a subway tunnel, while others, closer to the artistic sentiment, prefer to spend days pouring over their letters within a legal arena (*ivi*, pp. 31-33), called “hall of fame”.

However, it is not just a matter of illegality: some artists’ primary objective is quantity, that is, to cover (or bomb) entire cities’ walls with their signatures and attain the fame of “king” (the best and most skilful writer, respected by all); conversely, others prefer to put the emphasis on quality, always seeking an original style. And, often, this dual nature coexists in the same person. Writers do not work alone, they normally gather in crews, small groups of friends carrying on a common name: an acronym (usually two or three letters) serving as a brand for the whole group (Mininno 2008, p. 168).

Before getting to the heart of the Chinese phenomenon, it is essential to tell the story of writing from its birth in the United States until its spread to Europe, outlining the stylistic foundations of the Old School.

## American graffiti and the evolution of tags

The birth of graffiti writing dates back to the late 1960s in Philadelphia, USA, and can be traced to the activities of Cornbread and his friends. However, the Big Apple undoubtedly gave this phenomenon a decisive boost in the early 1970s, when artists like Taki 183, Julio 204 and Cat 161 painted their names on walls and in Manhattan’s underground stations (Mininno 2008, pp. 16-17). In the years following 1972, considered the crucial moment of birth and development of American graffiti, writers felt the need to

transform their simple tags into forms of style experimentation. Firstly, the letters began to grow in size, and then to change, being refined and swelling into new, different styles, depending on the artist who created them. They were enriched with backgrounds, bubbles, 3D effects and arrows, as well as fill-ins and outlines.

The second stage in the evolution of the tag is the “throw-up” or “flop”, a stylised drawing of one’s signature or its abbreviation (e.g., the first two letters), executed quickly but on a larger scale, using a few colours often roughly sprayed, even without fill-ins. Throw-up is an art in itself: the style is immediate, often very simple and rubbery but not banal, and very few colours are used (one or two) (Mininno 2021, p. 93). It is perfect for bombing.

The third stage is the “piece” that, if particularly successful, will stand out among the others and earn the title of “masterpiece”. After 1972, the first pieces began to appear on entire train cars. The high visibility of the tags, the vast potential audience, and their role in creating a connection and communication between city neighbourhoods and writers, led to the much-loved practice of train bombing, that is, bombing as many trains as possible in a race to see who can create the most captivating piece. In the second half of the 1970s, more elaborate and complex styles began to emerge. 1975 saw the appearance of the term “wildstyle”: softie letters started to stretch, to twist, to become separate from one another and be adorned with arrows, regardless of the overall legibility of the piece (*ivi*, p. 49). Wildstyle is often considered the most difficult form of writing to execute and the least readable for “non-writers”. It took less than a year for writers to realise that they could infuse the movement with a significant aesthetic evolution simply by eliminating smudges and adopting more uniform colouring and precise outlines. In the same period, after 1974, writers started to add figurative elements to their pieces, such as cartoon characters, known as puppets (Mininno 2008, pp. 20-21).

## Arrival in Europe

With Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, graffiti art officially entered the international art scene. Around 1983, with the hip-hop culture cult film *Wild Style* and the documentary about New York underground graffiti *Style Wars*, the graffiti phenomenon also found fertile ground in Europe, especially in Amsterdam and in the Parisian suburbs. Major capitals, such as London, Berlin and Paris, had already witnessed their first tags and pieces in the early 1980s. By 1987 (when the volume *Spraycan Art* documented writing also outside the United States), the movement had reached almost all major European cities, and writers had started to paint trains in Vienna, Düsseldorf, Munich, Copenhagen, Paris and London, although most Europeans preferred to work on walls.

Writing, which had taken more than ten years to fully develop in the Big Apple, arrived with disarming speed in Europe, its forms and methods already established. While Americans were stuck with the intricate forms of Wild Style, with all its arrows and bars, tangles and swirls that often made the final result illegible or deliberately obscure, Europe reacted (with substantial differences from nation to nation) through the evolution of more linear and often more comprehensible letters. (Mininno 2021, p. 63)

As in other European countries, writing arrived in Italy in the early 1980s, also thanks to the appearance of pieces by foreign graffiti writers, especially in Bologna and Rome. Inspiration for young writers in Italy came from cult films, foreign writers on tour, and fanzines (unofficial independent amateur magazines dealing with cultural and subcultural phenomena). From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, mainly thanks to hip-hop, writing spread like wildfire and went through a sequence of radical changes in styles: from the unreadable and knotted New York style to a more open and comprehensible one, which makes it possible to focus mainly on the quantity of pieces (Mininno 2008, pp. 30-39).

## **New frontiers: the birth of post-graffiti**

After an initial phase in which the dominant element was represented by letters, contemporary graffiti culture moved towards wider horizons: the post-graffiti movement. The personal style of each artist was free to evolve without constraints and to employ a wider range of expressive means: from stickers, posters and stencils to airbrushes, oil chinks, paints and even sculpture (Ganz 2005). Post-graffiti is based on stylistic trends that have their roots in the culture of graffiti writing and street art, flourishing in multiple disciplines such as painting, sculpture, graphics, design, illustration, fashion, photography, architecture, video art and calligraphy. The frontiers of this creative universe are in fact far more porous today than they used to be, and this process facilitates the rise of new styles and ways of perceiving graffiti. While graffiti writing was born and developed in the US to impose its model on a planetary scale, the post-graffiti movement has risen and spread in a global world, insofar as it lives through the Internet. The Internet is the place where people look for new models to be inspired by and publish pictures of their work.

The late advent of the graffiti movement in China – already contaminated by new experiments related to post-graffiti – led to the blossoming of a hybrid form of graffiti art. This kind of art not only echoes the fundamentals of American graffiti, but also blends with street art in a broader sense.