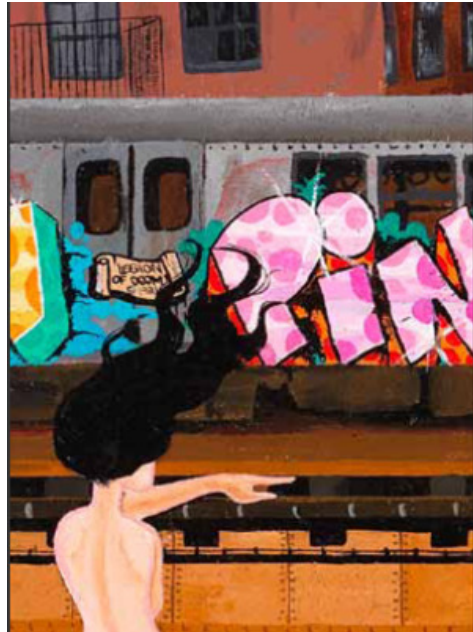


And if art  
is a crime,  
Let GOD  
forgive all



# CITY AS

GRAFFITI ART FROM THE MARTIN WONG COLLECTION

# CANVAS

## EDUCATOR RESOURCE GUIDE

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

MUSEUM  
OF THE  
CITY  
OF NEW YORK

Frederick A.O.  
Schwarz  
Children's  
Center



The Keith Haring Foundation Inc.

## Introduction

This guide is intended to be used as a resource for teachers either preparing to visit the Museum of the City of New York's *City as Canvas: Graffiti Art from the Martin Wong Collection* or to use in the classroom following a class visit.

During the gallery tour of the *City As Canvas* exhibition, students will view highlights from the Museum's rich collection of 1970s and '80s graffiti art in New York. By analyzing the drawings, paintings, photographs and blackbooks collected by Martin Wong, students will learn about New York City artists known as "writers", like Keith Haring, Lady Pink, Lee Quiñones, and Daze, and the historical context in which their work was created. Students will be able to elaborate on the multiple perspectives surrounding street art, discuss the various styles represented, and will respond creatively to the pieces by drafting their own sketches.

The information and activities in this guide correlate to the guided tour, but may also be taught as stand-alone lessons utilizing the text, images, and suggested activities. Teachers are encouraged to adapt the information to the grade level and ability of their students. For further information or to schedule a visit to the Museum of the City of New York, please email the Frederick A.O. Schwarz Children's Center at [schoolprograms@mcny.org](mailto:schoolprograms@mcny.org).

### Included in this guide:

- **Curriculum Connections**
- **Key Terms**
- **Background Information on the Exhibition**
- Artist Spotlights: Keith Haring, Wicked Gary, Daze, Futura and Lady Pink
- Suggested Activity:
  - Gallery Review
  - In the Voice of the Artists
  - Debate it! Finding Space for Street Art
  - Write Your Own Exhibition Text
- **Bibliography**

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## Curriculum Connections

Educational activities in the *City as Canvas: Graffiti Art from the Martin Wong Collection* exhibitions connect to your school curriculum and the Common Core Standards in the following ways:

### Visual Literacy and the Arts

- Learn to perceive and interpret visual elements in artworks
- Consider the various reactions for and against street art
- Analyze the different styles created by the writers, and understand some of their motivations behind their creations
- Analyze the artworks to learn about individual artists, such as Lady Pink, LEE, Daze, LAll, and Keith Haring
- Consider the international impact of graffiti
- Learn how graffiti emerged as a form of self-expression and how it evolved as an art movement over time.

### Social Studies

- Students use artwork to understand New York City history
- Consider what New York City was like in the 1970s and '80s

### English Language Literacy

- Develop skills in reading and writing to respond to artworks verbally, in writing, and in conversation with peers.
- Elaborate on the multiple perspectives surrounding street art and “writing”
- Discuss the different stylistic elements seen and various media used in pieces created by different artists
- Engage in conversation, pose and respond to questions based on the photographs and imagery they see in the exhibition
- Voice and defend positions on street art

### Common Core Standards:

- SL.4.3: Have the opportunity to explain events or concepts in a historical text based on information in the text
- SL.5.1: Engage in collaborative discussions with the educator and with each other
- SL.5.1c: Participate in discussions by asking and answering specific content related questions
- SL.5.2 Summarize information presented visually

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## I. Key Terms

Students may benefit from an explanation of the following terms that relate to the *City as Canvas: New York Graffiti from the Martin Wong Collection* exhibition.

|            |             |
|------------|-------------|
| Abstract   | Mood        |
| Aerosol    | Movement    |
| Cityscapes | Pattern     |
| Collection | Perspective |
| Culture    | Portrait    |
| Exhibition | Scale       |
| Gallery    | Style       |
| Graffiti   | Tag         |
|            | Urban       |

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# CITY AS CANVAS: NEW YORK GRAFFITI FROM THE MARTIN WONG COLLECTION



Mel Rosenthal (1940-) *Fourth of July*, hanging out on the stoop of their apartment house. 1976-1982. 2013.12.22

## INTRODUCTION

New York's age of graffiti – both notorious and celebrated – began in the early 1970s. With indelible markers and aerosol spray paints, teenagers across the city were engaging in a new form of graffiti writing: one that emphasized the aesthetics and visibility of their creations in addition to the literal messages they contained. They began by writing “tags”—stylized signatures that usually combined an alias with the number of the street where they lived—on public and private buildings in their neighborhoods. Soon they were painting in subway stations, on buses, and on the interior and exterior of subway cars. Graffiti quickly proliferated across the city. A new, consciously artistic movement was born; one that would come of age over the next 20 years. By the mid-1980s, alongside the emerging hip-hop culture, graffiti writing was being hailed internationally as an important new art form. This validation took place in spite of ongoing efforts to eradicate graffiti from New York City's streets and subways.

The graffiti movement evolved rapidly. Competition among writers flourished and the style of writing quickly evolved from “tags” (stylized signatures), to more complex “pieces.” As artists honed their individual styles, their work progressed from two-dimensional, two-color designs, to intricate bubble letters painted with light and shadow, and more elaborate color combinations. These eventually encompassed the entire sides of trains—from top to bottom, end to end. In the words of Norman Mailer, the subway system was eventually covered with, “giant separate living letters, large as animals, lithe as snakes, mysterious as Arabic and Chinese curls of alphabet.”

While many writers transitioned in the 1980s to painting on canvas for the art market, others continued to relish the thrill of illicit writing. Under the urging of Mayor Edward I. Koch, in 1981 the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) increased efforts to prevent graffiti, with intensified policing of train layups and the installation of razor-wire fences and guard dogs in several train yards. At special graffiti removal stations, the MTA used corrosive petroleum hydroxide to remove paint from the train cars, and they declared the subway officially graffiti-free in the spring of 1989.

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peter bellamy © 2012

Peter Bellamy, *Martin Wong*, 1985

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## MARTIN WONG

Among those who found this new writing compelling was Martin Wong (1946–1999). When he arrived in New York in 1978, commercial art galleries were beginning to exhibit the work of several notable graffiti writers. A significant artist in his own right, Wong admired the writers' efforts to push the written word to the point of abstraction, as well as their inclusion of comic book characters and pop culture figures in their pieces. He befriended these young artists and began collecting their work, and he continued to support them even as interest from galleries and dealers waned.

Wong's affection for his adopted city was reflected in his finely detailed paintings of the buildings and people in his predominantly Latino neighborhood. In 1982, he collaborated on a series of paintings with Miguel Piñero, a Nuyorican poet and actor, in which he combined Piñero's verse with his own meticulous cityscapes. Beginning in the early 1980s, Wong exhibited his work in East Village galleries and participated in group exhibitions, including the 1984 *Aspects of the City* show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Despite the recognition he was achieving, making ends meet as an artist was always a challenge, and Wong supplemented his income from art sales with a job at Pearl Paint, an art supply store on Canal Street. There he met many writers from the graffiti movement, sometimes giving away canvas and other supplies to aid emerging artists.

Wong became a stalwart advocate for these young artists' careers, and a voracious collector of their work. He usually acquired pieces from the artists directly, either buying them or trading his own paintings for graffiti works. In 1989, Wong founded a gallery on Bond Street, the Museum of American Graffiti, which was dedicated exclusively to the art form. Though short-lived, the initiative bore testament to his belief in the movement.

Facing a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS and hoping to keep his collection intact, Martin Wong approached the Museum of the City of New York in 1994. For the City Museum, in East Harlem, graffiti writing was a local phenomenon, with many artists coming from the neighborhood, and the Museum recognized the value of this powerful—albeit illicit—form of urban self-expression. Comprised of 55 sketchbooks and more than 300 works on canvas and other media created between 1971 and 1992, the Martin Wong Collection provides a window into the evolution of the graffiti writing movement—a long, contentious, and complicated journey with New York City at its epicenter. Martin Wong died in 1999, at age 53.

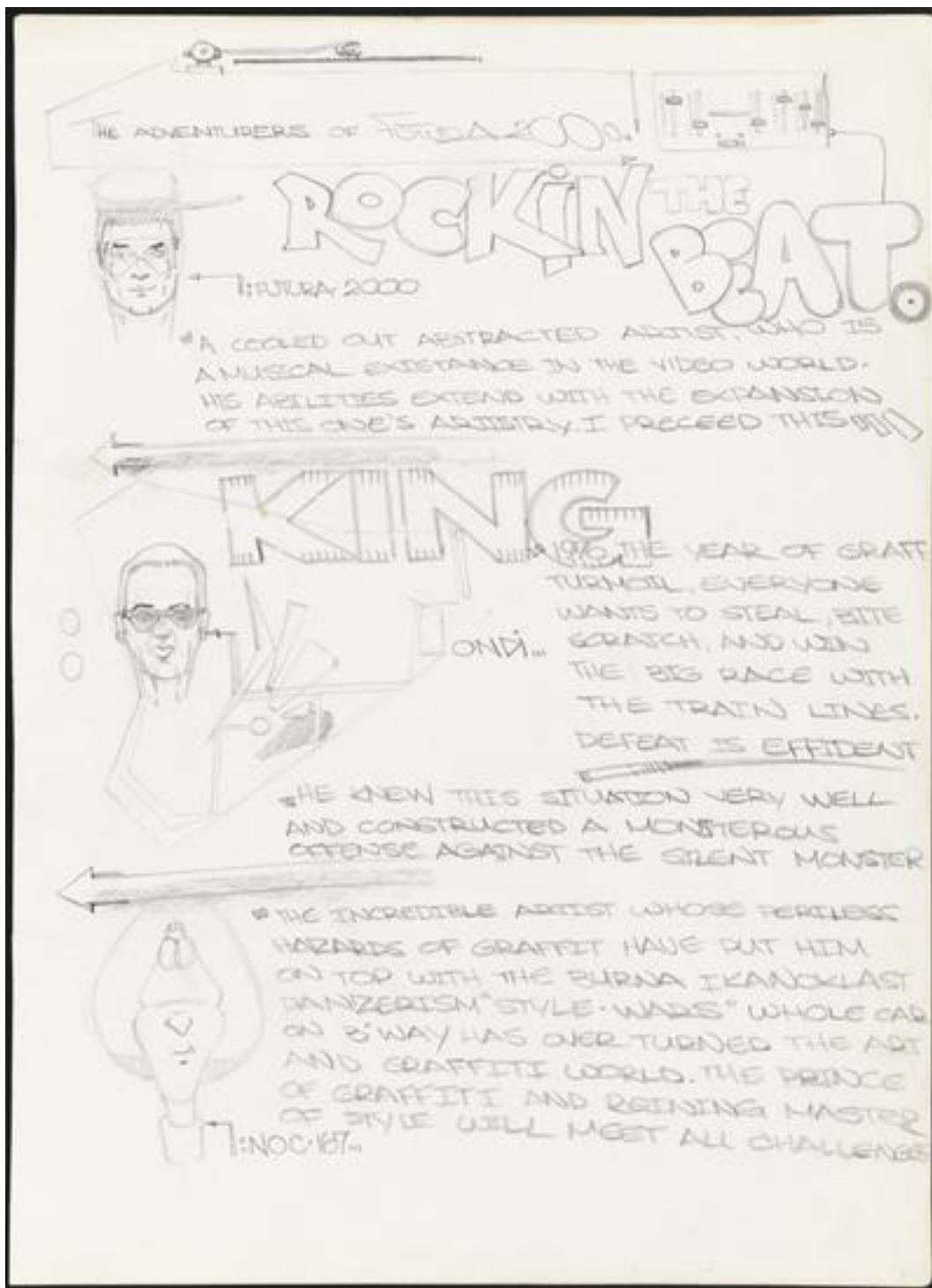
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94.114.312.2 Melvin (NOC 167) Samuels [Style Wars.] Date: ca. 1982.

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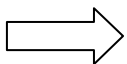


## GRAFFITI AND HIP-HOP: THE ENDURING LEGACY

The graffiti writing movement that Martin Wong embraced was the first of many art forms to emerge from the youth culture of New York City in the 1970s and 1980s. DJ Afrika Bambaattaa, who is credited with helping to mobilize hip-hop as a creative force to draw city kids away from the influence of gangs, quickly identified graffiti as one of the pillars of hip-hop culture – along with rapping (or MCing), music (DJing/breakbeating), and b-boying/b-girling (breakdancing). Films like *Style Wars*, *Wild Style*, and *Beat Street* linked the practice of graffiti with the sound of rap music in the popular imagination.

Some of the artists themselves enthusiastically embraced and even participated in the world of rap music, but even more importantly, graffiti had become the look of hip-hop culture. Even after graffiti largely disappeared from trains and fell out of favor in the art world by the late 1980s, it remained linked to hip-hop music, dance, and fashion, and it spread around the globe with them. Today, the art form that New York teenagers pioneered and that Martin Wong collected is an internationally recognized symbol of America's most influential cultural export – as well as an enduring and evolving expression of a movement that began in the streets.

In 1994, the Museum of the City of New York was given a remarkable resource – the graffiti art collection assembled by the painter Martin Wong throughout the 1980s. This pioneering collection, acquired at a time when graffiti was not highly regarded in the art world, includes more than 300 objects – including some 50 artists' black books along with more than 100 canvases and over 150 works on paper. Among them are the earliest surviving examples of work by artists who went on to have important careers in the arts, fashion, and music industries, including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Christopher "Daze" Ellis, FUTURA 2000, Keith Haring, LA II, LADY PINK, and Lee Quiñones.



### Artist Spotlights

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