

Street Art

Graffiti and street art are often concerned with drawing people's attention to things that are happening right now – especially things that the artists think are wrong or bad about our society. By painting in public places with spray cans, they can respond really quickly; and even if their art gets cleaned off within a few hours, still a lot of people will have seen it – especially if it is big. You have probably seen the 'Black Lives Matter' protests on the news, and wall pieces have appeared in all sorts of cities around the world. Here are a couple:

George Floyd mural painted by artists in the Ballero neighbourhood of Palermo, Sicily (June 2020)



George Floyd mural near Chicago and Lake Street in South Minneapolis (June 2020)



- How are these images different from one another?
- Which one do you think took longer to paint?
- Which one do you think is more effective?
- In the Minneapolis mural, George Floyd in the centre is cradling something in his arms. Can you work out what it is? Can you see it as several things at once? **People with their arms raised in protest/the tall buildings of the city. An image of the whole city in solidarity.**
- The other people in the mural are cradling George Floyd in a giant pair of arms. What sort of people are they? Why are they wearing masks? **Maybe the general public, wearing masks because of the COVID-19 pandemic; or healthcare workers...**
- There are some other people who regularly wear masks to go about their work: here is a photograph of a street artist in Manchester. Why do street artists wear masks? **To protect themselves from breathing in the aerosol paint sprays.**



- Some street artists see themselves as part of the fight – by making art to keep on reminding us, even if it is something we don't want to think about. How long do you think these murals will stay in place? Who should decide?
- At the same time, statues made to remind us of other people in history are being pulled down. Who should decide about those? **This is all incredibly complicated and there are no easy answers – but have a discussion about who should a) make the decision about who should be remembered as statues in the first place and b) who should decide which statues should now be removed. Some people think it is ok to keep statues of people whose ideas are now seen as wrong as long as there is something written to explain this. Other people think they are part of history and it does not matter if their opinions are thought of as wrong now. And there are others who do not want to see people who had unpalatable views celebrated. What do you think? Maybe all statues are problematic as it is impossible to choose someone who is liked by everyone. If we do not have statues, what kind of art should we have instead?**
- Do you know the names of any street artists? **Maybe some of you will have said 'Banksy'!** Banksy is probably the most famous street artist working in this country. But no one is completely sure who he is - what his real name is or what he looks like - because he has tried hard to keep his identity a secret.

That is partly because often when he makes his art he is breaking the law. If you do not have the permission of whoever it is who owns a wall, then it is illegal to paint on it.

- Some people think that street art is just vandalism. What do YOU think? Why do you think artists would even want to paint on walls rather than making pictures on paper or canvas?

And now have a look at this wall piece by Banksy, where he is telling you what *his* opinion is. What argument is he making?

Cave Painting – Banksy (2008; The Cans Festival, Leake Street, London)



- This is a photograph showing a piece that Banksy painted on a wall in London. Have a good look: in the photograph, which things are real and which did Banksy paint? **The pavement at the bottom, the drainpipe on the left and the cables hanging overhead are all real; everything in the space between those things was painted by Banksy.**
- Do you know how Banksy makes his wall pieces? What kind of paint and equipment does he use? **Banksy generally uses aerosol paint and stencils that he has prepared in advance.**
- What kind of person is the man in the hi-vis jacket meant to be? Is he an artist, do you think? Who do you think he works for? What is he doing? **He is a workman – maybe employed by the council – and he is jet-washing some painting off the wall. You can see the paint running down where he is washing it off.**
- At first perhaps it looks like a random collection of graffiti that the workman is cleaning off. But look again: what can you spot? Look at the colours and the style... what does Banksy want it to look like? **Wild animals and stickmen with spears... it looks like a Stone Age cave painting.** Why has he done

this? **He is reminding us that the very earliest humans had a natural urge to make art, and they did it by *painting on walls*, just like the street artists of today.**

Do you see the hand on the left-hand side of Banksy's painting? Now take a look at this:

'Cave of the Hands' (Stone Age, c.7,300 BCE; Mineral pigments on stone Wall, Cueva de las manos, Rio Pinturas Canyon, Santa Cruz, Argentina)



- These hand paintings were made thousands of years ago in a cave in South America. How do you think these hand paintings were made? – how could you do it? **You could dip your hand in some paint and press it against the wall to make a print. Or you could place one hand against the wall and paint round it with a brush or with the fingers of your other hand.**
- Or... there is another way: look carefully at the texture of the paint and you will see that it is not smooth but spattered. So what do you think they did? **They spray-painted! These cave artists made little pipes out of hollowed-out animal bones; they would put a pipe in their mouth, suck up some paint, place one hand against the wall, and then blow the paint through the pipe. Banksy's use of stencils and aerosol paints really is like the modern version of cave painting!**
- Have a go at it yourself. Pretend you have got a little bone pipe. Put it in your mouth and bend over to suck up some paint into the pipe. Hold it, hold it...be careful not to swallow any! Put one hand out in front of you, and now blow the paint through the pipe, moving your head to spray the paint around each of your fingers.



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Now go back to Banksy's *Cave Painting*:

- Banksy is placing Street Art in a great long tradition of art-making. But in his picture, the workman is not even looking at the art on the wall, he is just washing it off. Why? **As far as the council is concerned, it does not matter how good or important the street art might be; if it is against the law, then it has to be removed.**
- So what's Banksy's joke? **If the Stone Age caves were owned by the council, they would have cleaned off the cave art long ago!**
- Banksy has said that things go up in our streets all the time – like huge adverts and ugly buildings – that we have no choice about. Whereas street artists are making places more interesting and beautiful. What do you think?

Not all street art is illegal. Sometimes street artists are invited to make pieces to decorate cities during special events like the Olympics or the World Cup; or simply to cheer up the streets. The Banksy piece we looked at was made for a Street Art festival held in a disused tunnel near Waterloo Station in London. It meant he could really take his time making it (whereas normally he works quickly and makes his getaway before anyone can catch him).

It was probably the tunnel that gave Banksy the idea about cave painting. One of the most creative aspects of Street Art is the way artists make their designs to fit a particular space or get their ideas from existing things in the streets.

Follow-on ideas

- Have a go at cutting a simple stencil in a piece of card and blowing paint across it through a drinking straw to make a Street Art-style image on paper.
- Take a camera with you into the school playground, or on a walk through your local streets, and take photographs of bits of pavement or drainpipes or manhole covers or brickwork or anything with an interesting shape or texture. Then see if you can use them to inspire your own design for a piece of street art. What can you fit into a space or around an object? Or can you turn it into something completely different?

Topic Links

- Art and Design: Spray painting
- Public Art
- Stone Age/Cave Art
- PHSE/Current Affairs