



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2001 Volume IV: Race and Ethnicity in Contemporary Art and Literature

Racism, Gender, Ethnicity, and Aesthetics in the Art of Graffiti

Curriculum Unit 01.04.01
by Val-Jean Belton

The information provided in our art curriculums and various art textbooks does not represent the African American and Latino art culture as a whole. This sparse information that is provided in textbooks, only gives a brief explanation about the art of Africa and Puerto Rico along with various resources and daily life uses of this art. In some of these books it also only gives a brief explanation of artists of color and art during the Harlem Renaissance era and the muralist era in California. There are no major or particular art textbooks in our curriculum that explores African American art and its aesthetics from its roots in Africa through contemporary African American artists today. Therefore, the intent of this unit is to expose students to a distinct art form of Graffiti, and its significance on African American and Hispanic art and culture today. Through my exposure to literature and visual art materials in the seminar, "Race and Ethnicity in Contemporary Art and Literature", it will offer a way to introduce and build upon the knowledge and aesthetics of students in visual art classes. It has also fostered the teaching of Art and Literature as one component in the art room. As these artists are studied and the literature is read, the idea of racism, gender and ethnicity in graffiti art will be fully revealed.

This unit is designed for students who are enrolled in advanced drawing and advanced painting classes. The majority of these students that I teach at James Hillhouse High School are of the African American culture. Their knowledge about African American and Hispanic artists varies, but they show a desire to find out more information about artists of color.

In this unit, the goals will allow students the opportunity to focus on developing their own style of Graffiti art. This unit will also use as a resource for information the art and style of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. In this examination students will compare and contrast these specific works of Basquiat in graffiti, and how graffiti played a major role in his art style.

Another goal of this unit will be to introduce students to the visual art of Hispanic graffiti artists who have made their art part of subway art. Through this introduction, students will focus on the visual racism, ethnicity and gender questions like the art of Basquiat that are the focal point in many of these subway pieces. This unit will also examine the history and the techniques of graffiti.

In this unit there will be various strategies and objectives developed in order to teach this unit. The strategies and objectives are:

1. Students will be taking trips to the Yale Art Gallery and the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford,

in order to gain knowledge about various artists and style in art works.

2. The Internet will also be used as a research tool.

3. Students will be assigned various literature pieces of reading to understand or gain knowledge about racism, gender and ethnicity in art.

4. Students will also learn and develop their own aesthetics in art through exposure.

Student Objectives:

Knowledge Objectives:

1. Students will describe how graffiti is a part of everyday culture.

2. Student will develop basic vocabulary terms for thinking and writing about graffiti.

3. Students will become familiar with the Internet and other library resources.

4. Students will research graffiti art using the Internet and library.

Skills Objectives:

1. Students will be able to work with various media.

2. Students will be able to make and justify judgments about aesthetics qualities in graffiti art.

3. Students will develop their expository writing skills.

4. Students will develop their own style of graffiti letters.

5. Students will be encouraged to use the Yale Art Gallery as a resource for their study.

6. Students will participate in creative hands-on art activities.

Attitude Objectives:

1. Students will enjoy exploring their creative abilities.
2. Students will develop confidence in their ability to express creative ideas, and imagination through visual arts.

Process Objectives:

1. Students will view, discuss, and write about works of graffiti art.
2. Students will create artworks in a variety of media.
3. Students will creatively express themselves in a work of art that they complete using graffiti lettering.

Experience Objectives:

1. Students will encounter historical work of art in the Yale Art Gallery.
2. Students will discover information about graffiti art.

This unit will also address the following Visual Arts Content Standards that are the focal point in teaching of art in the New Haven Public Schools. Content Standard 3.0 Evaluate, Critique, and Integrate Art Concepts.
Performance Standards

Students should:

- 3.1 Choose, evaluate and critique a range of subject matter, symbols and ideas to communicate meaning.
- 3.2 Integrate visual, spatial and temporal concepts in content.
- 3.3 Apply evaluation, critiquing and integrating skills in daily life.

Content Standard 4.0 Historical and Cultural Relationships and Influences in Artwork.

Performance Standards

Students should:

- 4.1 Understand the visual arts in relation to history and cultures and be able to identify specific works.
- 4.2 Describe the functions of art in relation to history and cultures.
- 4.3 Expand verbally and in writing how history and culture influenced art works.
- 4.4 Express the contribution historical and cultural influenced art works.

Content Standard 5.0 Critique and Assessment of Artwork

Performance Standards

Students should:

- 5.1 Reflect upon and assess the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others.
- 5.2 Through analysis, gain insight of the meaning, purpose, content and process of art works.

Content Standard 7.0 Expanding Artistic Knowledge and Resources Performance Standards

Students should:

- 7.1 Use museums, galleries, the art community, libraries, etc. to expand knowledge beyond the classroom.
 - a. Experience the art community and resources for life-long learning and career options.

The vocabulary for this unit is as follows:

1. Bite- to copy another style that already exists.
2. Buff- to remove.
3. Burn- to beat your competitor.
4. Def- something that is really good.
5. Fade- to blend colors.
6. Tag- a writers signature.
7. Throw-up- a signature written with on layer of paint.
8. Wak- not good work.
9. Wildstyle- letters that appear complicated; interlocking letters.
10. Writer- a practitioner of the art of graffiti.

Graffiti

Graffiti artists have the ability to transfer what they are feeling whether it is racism issues about gender, ethnicity or aesthetics into something that is beautiful. The history of Graffiti has lost its luster over time and its history goes much deeper than many realize. The word "graffito" is an Italian word that means rocky engravings, to engrave and design on stable surfaces. If we focused on the true history of Graffiti we would have to divide our research into five distinct but related art categories prehistoric, pre-Columbian, Egyptian, Indian and 20th Century.

The first category related to the history of graffiti takes us back to Prehistoric Art. Prehistoric Art relates to graffiti through the primitive man and his art. The primitive man used many symbols that represented the nature and world that he lived to mark things.

This was how the idea of rock art was developed. Many of these primitive artists used many resources available to them such as coal, clay and the juice from grass to develop wall paintings. In the rocky graffiti developed during this time, there were many personalized portraits, landscapes, and still-lives. Most of these painting were in caves, and burial areas.

Rock art was developed through a need from obscure magic. Many of the men during this time thought in order to gain luck through hunting and etc., they had to represent their fighting with the animal in a mural drawing. They also used mural drawings to proclaim the possession of territory. The visual language of rocky art and paintings represents a form of communication but most of all the first beginnings of graffiti art.

The second category that helped in the development of graffiti, was pre-Columbian Art. In 1496 some murals were discovered in a region south of Mexico. They were considered to be the most important of the old America. They covered the entire walls of the memorial monument that was built by a Mayan soldier.

The next category is Egyptian Art. Between 2900 and 2800 BC art was characterized by its aesthetics and its artistic culture. Egyptian art was developed primarily in relation to

its architecture and murals and was influenced through faith and spiritual powers. Graffiti was usually painted on the stucco in monochrome colors.

Indian art represents that period's continuous research to shape the art of graffiti. Most murals were dry-painted on the walls of tunnels, and dug out in stone. They mostly represented religious themes and illustrated Buddhist tales with full scenes of characters.

Graffiti art today in the 20th century is a form of art that was inspired by urban graffiti or subway art. Mostly activists who are interested in making aesthetic, racial, gender and political statements and street gangs who marked territory use graffiti. It wasn't until the 1960's that Graffiti started to take a place in the art forum. The history of Subway Art, and Graffiti began in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania during the late 1960's. But, F.S. Krauss did the first document ever recognized as graffiti, in 1910 for the purpose of political aim.

Leading graffiti artists were Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring. Interest in graffiti emerged in New York during the early 1970's. During this time is when artists and various art critics began to look at graffiti art as a direct aesthetic and expression of art in the urban culture.

Jean-Michel Basquiat was an African American painter who first was an urban graffiti artist on the streets and

subways in New York. The story of Jean-Michel Basquiat is not so much about the art that he produced, or the study of life that he painted, but Jean-Michel story is more about the study of a life style at a particular time in the twentieth century.

Jean-Michel was the son of a Haitian accountant. He began to draw at an early age. He never received any formal training in art and most of his paintings incorporated images of angular shaped people, along with symbols with words and phrases.

During his brief graffiti period, he worked with another artist friend named Al Diaz. Their work together was clearly recognized by their trademark signature, SAMO, followed by a recognizable copyright symbol.

Many critics praised his work for its composition, color, and balance between spontaneity and control. While Basquiat was in his early twenties he began showing his work in leading art galleries in and around New York, and Paris, Tokyo and Dusseldorf.

These galleries were SoHo galleries, including the Annina Nosei, and the Mary Boone Gallery. Many of his paintings sold for \$25,000 to \$50,000. Basquiat's swift rise to art world stardom came in the 1980's. A Colab selected him, an artist's cooperative, for their Times Square Show.

Other known artist also influenced Basquait art career. One artist that influenced his work and that he developed a close relationship was Andy Warhol. During this friendship the two artists collaborated on a series that was exhibited in 1985 that featured corporate logos and cartoon characters. He also collaborated with an Italian artist named Francesco Clemente on several other paintings.

Like Basquiat, Keith Haring was also a very well known graffiti artist in the 1980's who also had the influence of pop artist Andy Warhol. It was during this period that Haring began drawing graffiti on the streets in New York. Many of his drawings were very simple. The drawings usually consisted of pyramids, the human figure, T.V sets, animals, and various forms of babies.

Graffiti to Haring was thought to be the most beautiful art form. He then began developing his own style of graffiti such as a little person crawling on all fours. He later called this developed image the Baby.

Because at this time during the beginning of Haring's career he had little money, he drew his developed images all over the subways' in New York. Most of his work was drawn on black panels that were on the subway platforms. This was the beginning of Subway Art, or Subway Graffiti.

The birth and death of Subway Art in New York had a brief existence. The birth of Subway art began when the youth of New York started writing their names on neighborhood walls in nicknames. This writing created a public identity for the streets. The use of names in this writing style held a territorial function. But, writing started moving from the street writing to the subway where it became very competitive.

In subway writing or graffiti, there was an established method in the artists writing. The first method was concerned with the "Tag Style". The tag style was the way a name was uniquely designed and written in script or calligraphic style. Many writers designed their tags with various designs. For example, the design of a crown if used by a writer, was that particular writer proclaiming himself king or of a certain gender. The most recognized tag style in this culture's history was "STAY HIGH 149". This writer used a smoking joint as the crossbar for all letter H's. He was also known for the use of the television symbol for The Saint in his work.

The second established method was the "Tag Scale". The tag scale involved the rendering of letters. Letters

were now being rendered at a larger scale to accommodate train sizes and varied according to the size of the spray can nozzle. Letters were also containing simple designs in their interiors. These designs were stars, crosshatches, dots, or checkerboards.

In addition to developing their style, writers began experimenting with size and color. Many of these graffiti artist of this period, discovered that they could paint their developed styles on large areas in a quick fashion.

As large space on wall s and trains began to fill, writers found it necessary to develop styles of writing that would make their own individual name and designs stand out from the other writers. As time pasted, letters became larger and a vast number of styles emerged. The scale writing and painting grew until the majority of the trains and subways in New York were painted from top to bottom.

During mid to late 1980's graffiti and subway art deteriorated mainly due to various factors. First, some of the deterioration was directly related to the graffiti culture as a whole. While other factors were related to the greater society. Laws that restricted the sale of paint to minors also contributed to the fall of graffiti art, along with the drug epidemic that existed. But, the major change occurred when the New York transit staged a war against the tagging of trains. Graffiti removal off trains made the life span of paintings very short and this frustrated many writers to quit the Graffiti art.

Graffiti writing has been built on generations of contributions of many cultures and has already acquire a very known tradition. This developed art is very much a part of the urban subculture. Its history, unique style, techniques and established history are a very innovative way to record racism, gender, aesthetics, and culture.

This innovative origin and history is part of this world's unique cultural existence that sparks the social significance in everyday life. Graffiti is an art that has surfaced underground but has moved to the forefront to appear in major art galleries and museums.

Lesson One:

Graffiti Research:

Objective:

Students will use the Internet and library resources to research the history of Graffiti.

Materials:

Computers

Library Resources

Motivation: Teacher will engage students in a brief discussion about graffiti and its history.

Procedure:

1. Teacher will provide students with various web-sites in order to complete research about Graffiti art.

2. Students will develop and write a concise research paper about Graffiti art.

Lesson Two:

Graffiti/ Bubble Lettering

Objective:

Students will explore line shape and color as they work individually and as an artistic unit. Students will develop their own style of graffiti bubble or soft lettering.

Material:

White Drawing Paper (9x12, and 24x30)

Thick Black Maker

Paints

Pencils

Erasers

Motivation: Teacher will have show examples of graffiti lettering from the book "*Subway Art*" by Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant.

* See Appendix for lettering handout.

Procedure:

1. Students will use white drawing paper, teacher handout and experiment on drawing various styles of lettering.
2. Students will choose a specific style of lettering from various styles that they have developed.
3. Students will transfer their letter drawings to a larger white piece of drawing paper.
4. Students will use pencil to indicate various values of shade and shadow.

Evaluation:

1. Note the information gathered by each student and their drawings to assess their understanding and levels concerning graffiti art.

2. Observe the level of participation of each student for this activity.

Lesson Three:

Name Design

Objective: Students will develop a name design.

Resources: Gerald Brommer, "Art in Your World." (1985)

Materials:

Pencil

Tempera Paint

White Paper

Brushes

Water Cups

Towel Paper

Procedure:

1. Students will draw their own name with pencil. (Guidelines should be used to draw name in a confined space on the paper.)
2. Students will use tempera paint to paint in their names design.

Evaluation:

Students will display their work.

Lesson Four:

Graffiti Design Painting

Objective:

1. Students will develop and paint a 24x36 graffiti design that includes lettering.

Resources: Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, "Subway Art". (1991)

Materials:

White Drawing Paper

Pencils

24x36 Canvas Board

Brushes

Water Cups

Acrylic Paint

Rulers

Paper Towel

Motivation:

Teacher will engage students in a discussion that includes information about graffiti artists. Students will also view various slides made by the teacher about graffiti artists and their art.

Procedure:

1. Students will use white drawing paper and draw a design that includes graffiti lettering.
2. Students will transfer their drawings on to white canvas board.
3. Once students have a design drawn and transferred to the canvas board, they will paint their design using acrylic paints.
4. Completed design will be displayed.

Lesson Five:

Mural Graffiti Painting:

Objective: Students will design and paint a graffiti wall mural in the art classroom.

Materials:

Drawing paper to develop a design.

Pencils

Acrylic Paints

Wall space in the classroom

Procedure:

1. Students will work together and collaborate on a design to paint as a graffiti mural in the classroom.
2. Students will transfer their developed design on the wall.
3. Student's will choose what colors will be used.
4. Students will paint the mural on the wall.

Bibliography:

MacDonald, Nancy. *"The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity and Identity in London and New York"*. Palgrave, 1990. (Book that explores the contribution and understanding of the graffiti subcultures of today.)

Frankel, Ken. *"Off the Wall: The Best Graffiti of the Walls of America."* Long Street Press, 1986. (The book is about the funniest places that graffiti can be discovered.)

Castelman, Craig. *"Getting Up; Subway Graffiti in New York."* (An deep examination into the art of graffiti. Mostly explains subway graffiti in NYC in the seventies.)

Walsh, Michael. *"Graffito"* ., 1996. (A highly illustrated book that probes the issues of graffiti in American cities. This book has 108 photo illustrations.)

Edelson, Bob. *"New American Street Art."* Mass Market Paperback. 1999. (Full color pages of the most diverse street art produced in the last 10 years of 20th century.)

Lambright, Lynn. *"Graffiti."* Bright Lamb Publications. 1997. (Book tells a story an artist who roams the streets and creates graffiti. Good children's book.)

Abel, Ernest. *"The Handwriting on the Wall."* Greenwood Publishing Group. 1997. (Book reviews the racism that appears in Graffiti Art.)

Brommer, Gerald and George F. Horn. *"Art in Your World"* , 1985. 2nd Edition. Davis Publications, Inc. Worcester, Massachusetts. (Excellent classroom text that gives good references about lettering.)

Hunter, Sam (ed.) *Art Since 1945* . New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., 1958. (Good resource that gives a brief history of graffiti art.)

Belli, Gabriella, and Jerry Saltz. *"American Art of the 80's"* . (Exhibition Catalogue.) Trento, Italy, 1991. (Excellent visual resource.)

Muller, George, and Keith Haring. *"Warhol-Basquiat: Collaborations"* (exhibition catalogue) Paris: Didier Imbert Fine Art, 1989. (Reference that focuses on the graffiti of Basquiat and his collaboration with Andy Warhol.)

Web-sites:

- The Painted Rocks: History, Art or Graffiti? www.nysm.nysed.gov
- Graffiti History: www.graffiti.org (The encapsulated history of graffiti. A good research tool.)
- History of Graffiti: www.endoxa.it (Web-site explores how graffiti has lost its luster over the years.)
- The Graffiti Source: www.fortunecity.de (The history of graffiti since the days of the caveman.)
- Graffiti Net: www.graffiti.org. (Developmental history of graffiti.)

Appendix:

Handout for Lesson One: Lettering Design/ with Guidelines Graffiti lettering can be taught using these simple steps:

- Step 1. Draw guidelines for the area where letters will be drawn.
- Step 2. Write letters in between the guidelines as if you were writing ordinary words.
- Step 3. Block in written letters with thick lines. (See example)
- Step 4. Decide which direction your light is coming from and draw the appropriate shadows.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>