

# ***Graffiti art: styles, iconography, and message***

**Secondary: (ages 11 – 14)**

**Visual arts**

Students will learn about the styles and the visual elements used in graffiti art and also about the role this art form can play in society. They will first explore the evolution of graffiti iconography, from a form of typography in its origins towards very detailed visuals and artwork more recently. They will also discover the different graffiti styles and will experiment with them to create their own graffiti nickname. To conclude, they will learn how the visual language of graffiti transcends the individual artist when it conveys a political message.

*This activity can be implemented separately or as part of a longer project comprising also the activities “Graffiti art: perceptions and historical connections” and “The Duke of Lancaster: a graffiti case study”.*

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**Time allocation** 4 to 5 lesson periods

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**Subject content** Art theory (theory of representation) and history of art  
Interpreting and using visual arts elements and techniques

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**Creativity and critical thinking** This unit has a **creativity** and **critical thinking** focus:

- Challenge assumptions and play with unusual, radical ideas
- Generate ideas and make connections
- Produce, perform or envision something personal
- Appreciate novelty and/or possible consequences of art

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**Other skills** Collaboration, Communication

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**Key words** Tag; Shepherd Fairey; politics; campaigns; art history; representation

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## **Products and processes to assess**

Students study, compare, and appraise examples of graffiti art, and product a poster and speech campaigning on an issue of interest to them. At the highest levels of achievement, products are imaginative and show a high level of personal features and appropriate risk-taking in formulation and techniques. The work process considers several perspectives on graffiti and shows a clear understanding of the strengths and limitations of positions, as well as willingness to explore a variety of ideas and both give and receive critical feedback.

## Teaching and Learning plan

This plan suggests potential steps for implementing the activity. Teachers can introduce as many modifications as they see fit to adapt the activity to their teaching context.

Step	Duration	Teacher and student roles	Subject content	Creativity and critical thinking
1	Lesson period 1	<p>The teacher presents the history of graffiti art and explains that it started as a kind of typography. The teacher then introduces the notion of <i>tags</i>, a signature or nickname that is the simplest and most widespread form of graffiti. Whereas early graffiti tags were simple (the writer's name followed by their house number), more advanced forms of graffiti such as <i>pieces</i> (short for masterpieces) appeared on subway trains, and <i>throwups</i> (large, stylised letters) were also prevalent. The teacher makes students aware of the prevalent visual arts elements in the different styles and invites them to think about what they think each style conveys.</p> <p>The teacher then explains how graffiti iconography has evolved and grown from its origins as text to include striking, often very detailed visuals and artwork and how this has made graffiti more acceptable as an art form in its own right. The teacher will show examples of graffiti artists (see Resources) and will invite students to compare them taking into account the materials used, the styles (throwup, sticker, stencil, wildstyle, piece blockbuster, heaven), the colours and the subject.</p> <p>Students are split into groups to compare the different examples of graffiti art and they are asked to prepare a presentation summing up their conclusions. After their presentation the group receives feedback from peers.</p> <p>At the end the class discusses the differences and the similarities between the observations made by each group.</p>	<p>Building aesthetic awareness</p> <p>Knowledge of artistic movements and their historical context</p> <p>Presenting on and comparing different examples of graffiti art</p>	<p>Understanding the context of graffiti art</p> <p>Comparing, contrasting, and analysing visual arts pieces</p> <p>Reviewing alternative perspectives on graffiti styles and iconography</p> <p>Considering several perspectives on content, technique, or expression</p>
2	Lesson period 2	<p>Students are then invited to create their own graffiti nickname based on their name and where they live (e.g. the number of their house). They are asked to think about the different styles of graffiti they have seen to create their own tag. They use the online tool Graffiti creator to experiment with different styles and create their tag.</p> <p>All the tags made by the class are displayed and students explain their stylistic choices and what they wanted to convey.</p>	<p>Using various graffiti techniques</p> <p>Presenting on stylistic choices and message</p>	<p>Generating ideas for their own tag</p> <p>Reflecting on chosen expressive choices relative to possible alternatives</p>
3	Lesson period 3	<p>The teacher explains that graffiti art developed in the late 1960s at a time when many cuts were being made to school extra-curricular activities for young people. The youth of New York City and Philadelphia developed the practice of graffiti writing. For some, it was a way to claim gang territory. Others simply wanted to mark out a symbolic space in a city</p>	<p>Developing awareness of the socio-political value of art</p>	<p>Explaining strengths and limitations of a piece of visual arts</p> <p>Making connections between arts</p>

		<p>that they felt systematically marginalised them. The motivating factor for youth was to 'get up', or have as many pieces on the streets as possible.</p> <p>The teacher then explains that graffiti art can be used to make political statements and shows examples (see Resources). Students are shown pieces of art produced by Shepherd Fairey, they are asked to select two that grab their attention and they are given 15 minutes to think about what they like and dislike about them and what they think the message is behind them. They share their answers with the rest of the class and debate if they have different views.</p> <p>In groups, they are given 15 minutes to take a look at Shepherd Fairey's Barack Obama "Hope" poster and to think about what the message behind the image is and why it is so powerful. At the end the groups share their main conclusions with the class.</p>	Analysing specific pieces of art	<p>and politics</p> <p>Reflect on chosen expressive choices of a piece of visual arts</p> <p>Play with unusual or radical ideas and identify and question assumptions about the relationship between art and politics</p>
4	Lesson period 3 and 4	In groups, students are asked to imagine they are a team campaigning to get a new school rule or a student right introduced. Students should identify an important issue to their group by reflecting about the following questions: "What matters to you?", "what would you like to change?", "how will you do this?". Students design a poster to represent the group's message. Students can be challenged to try to find unusual, interesting, and powerful ways to communicate their message.	Designing posters to communicate a message	<p>Reflecting on their own desires and agency</p> <p>Making connections between political messages and artistic expression</p> <p>Creating engaging visual arts pieces</p>
5		Students write a short speech to deliver to the rest of the class about why their new rule or idea is important and should be implemented and how they have communicated this with a poster. After each group has delivered their speech they receive feedback from classmates and think whether they would modify something in their speech or poster to make the message more effective.	Presenting their artistic work and message	Giving and receiving feedback, appraising strengths and limitations, and considering different perspectives
6	Possible extension	Building on the feedback received, students will record their speeches and create a documentary showing their campaigns.	Creating a documentary	Reflecting on and integrating feedback to create and refine an engaging visual arts piece

## Resources and examples for inspiration

### Web and print

- **Graffiti creator tool:** <http://www.graffiticreator.net/>
- **Different graffiti styles:**
  - Blek le Rat (pioneering French Stencil Graffiti artist): <http://bleklerat.free.fr>
  - Pure Evil (graffiti artist): <http://pureevilgallery.virb.com/>
  - Ben Eine (graffiti artist): <http://www.blackbookgallery.com/artists/ben-eine/>
  - Diffgraff (Website showcasing graffiti and street art in Cardiff but also includes a searchable A-Z listing of graffiti artists -click on the artists tab): <https://diffgraff.wordpress.com/about/>
  - Peaceful Progress: <http://www.peacefulprogress.org/>
  - Boiler House (Cardiff Graffiti and Street Art gallery): <http://boilerhousegraffiti.com/>
- **Graffiti that makes a statement:**
  - Shepherd Fairey's art: <https://obeygiant.com/images/2015/12/EARTH-DAY-PRESENTATION-FINAL-.pdf>
  - Banksy (British artist): <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/dec/21/banksy-copenhagen-regents-canal>
  - Pejac (Spanish artist): <http://www.pejac.es/outdoor/>
- Mr. Thoms (Italian artist): <http://www.thoms.it/>

### Other

- Computer and internet access
- Digital camera / iPad / mobile phone to take photos and record videos

### Opportunities to adapt, extend, and enrich

- This activity can be linked to the activities from the same OECD CERI project, Graffiti perceptions and historical connections and Graffiti: the Duke of Lancaster

**Creativity and critical thinking rubric for visual arts**

• Mapping of the different steps of the lesson plan against the OECD rubric to identify the creative and/or critical thinking skills the different parts of the lesson aim to develop

	<b>CREATIVITY</b> Coming up with new ideas and solutions	<b>Steps</b>	<b>CRITICAL THINKING</b> Questioning and evaluating ideas and solutions	<b>Steps</b>
<b>INQUIRING</b>	Make connections to other visual arts concepts and media or to conceptual ideas in other disciplines	3,4	Identify and question assumptions and conventional rules in a piece of visual art (content, style, technique, colour, composition, etc.)	1,3
<b>IMAGINING</b>	Play with unusual and radical visual arts ideas when preparing or creating a piece of visual art	1-3	Consider several perspectives on the content, technique or expression of a piece of visual arts	1,3,5
<b>DOING</b>	Create visual art that shows expressive qualities or personally novel ways to engage a subject matter	2,6	Explain both strengths and limitations of a piece of visual arts justified by aesthetic, logical and possibly other criteria	1,3,5
<b>REFLECTING</b>	Reflect on steps taken in creating a piece of visual art and on its novelty compared to conventions	6	Reflect on the chosen expressive choices of a visual arts piece relative to possible alternatives	1,2,3