

Banksy is a pseudonymous England-based graffiti artist, political activist, film director, and painter. His satirical street art and subversive epigrams combine dark humour with graffiti done in a distinctive stencilling technique. Such artistic works of political and social commentary have been featured on streets, walls, and bridges of cities throughout the world. Banksy's identity remains unknown, despite intense speculation. The two names most often suggested are Robert Banks and Robin Gunningham. Pictures that surfaced of a man who was supposedly Banksy pointed toward Gunningham, an artist who was born in Bristol in 1973. Gunningham moved to London around 2000, a timeline that correlates with the progression of Banksy's artwork.

Banksy began as a freehand graffiti artist in 1990–1994 as one of Bristol's DryBreadZ Crew (DBZ), with Kato and Tes. He was inspired by local artists and his work was part of the larger Bristol underground scene with Nick Walker, Inkie and 3D. From the start he used stencils as elements of his freehand pieces, too. By 2000 he had turned to the art of stenciling after realising how much less time it took to complete a piece. He claims he changed to stenciling while he was hiding from the police under a rubbish lorry, when he noticed the stencilled serial number and by employing this technique, he soon became more widely noticed for his art around Bristol and London. He played football with the Easton Cowboys and Cowgirls in the 1990s and toured with the club to Mexico in 2001.

In July 2011 one of Banksy's early works, *Gorilla in a Pink Mask*, which had been a prominent landmark on the exterior wall of a former social club in Eastville for over ten years, was unknowingly painted over after the premises became a Muslim cultural centre. Banksy's stencils feature striking and humorous images occasionally combined with slogans. The

message is usually anti-war, anti-capitalist or anti-establishment. Subjects often include rats, apes, policemen, soldiers, children, and the elderly.

Banksy's work was made up of the Bristol underground scene which involved collaborations between artists and musicians. According to author and graphic designer Tristan Manco and the book *Home Sweet Home*, Banksy "was born in 1974 and raised in Bristol, England. The son of a photocopier technician, he trained as a butcher but became involved in graffiti during the great Bristol aerosol boom of the late 1980s." Observers have noted that his style is similar to Blek le Rat who began to work with stencils in 1981 in Paris and Jef Aerosol who sprayed his first street stencil in 1982 in Tours (France), and members of the anarcho-punk band Crass, which maintained a graffiti stencil campaign on the London Tube System in the late 1970s and early 1980s. However Banksy claims that he based his work on that of 3D from Massive Attack, stating, "No, I copied 3D from Massive Attack. He can actually draw."

The Frenchman - known as Blek le Rat - accusing Banky of stealing his 'guerilla art' style has made him one of the most famous artists in the world, earning him a fortune and scores of celebrity admirers. But now Banksy has been accused by a Parisian graffiti artist of stealing his style.

Xavier Prou, 59, who works under the name Blek le Rat, invented the life-sized stencil technique that Banksy would later use to make his name. Banksy, now believed to be 38, was still at primary school when Prou's works began appearing in the backstreets of the French capital. Twenty years later, when Banksy's images started springing up across London, the similarities were unmistakable. He even had the temerity to use the French artist's trademark rat stencil in some of his works, as well as the same life-sized images of men and soldiers.

Blek le Rat has always refused to comment on the likeness to his own work. But in a Channel 4 documentary, *Graffiti Wars*, he finally admits being angered by what he sees as Banksy's plagiarism. He said: 'I used to make a lot of soldiers, then I see Banksy making a lot of soldiers.'

'When I see Banksy making a man with a child or Banksy making rats, of course I see immediately where he takes the idea. I do feel angry. 'When you're an artist you use your own techniques. It's difficult to find a technique and style in art so when you have a style and you see someone else is taking it and reproducing it, you don't like that. 'I'm not sure about his integrity. Maybe he has to show his face now and show what kind of guy he is. 'It's true that some people say Banksy is a prick and a lot of young people consider Banksy like a God.' Banksy's success was built partly on his anonymity and the myths that built up around him. It was always thought that he was a talented tearaway from an underprivileged background on an inner-city estate. But three years ago, *The Mail on Sunday* unmasked him as Robin Gunningham, a former public schoolboy who grew up in a middle-class suburb of Bristol.

Blek le Rat was similarly privileged, growing up in an 'haute bourgeois' district of Paris. His father was an architect and his mother the daughter of a French consul in Thailand. He attended one of the best private schools in France. Banksy does not give interviews but in his unofficial biography he says of Blek le Rat: 'Every time I think I've painted something original I find out that Blek le Rat has done it as well, only 20 years earlier.' He refused to comment on Blek le Rat's comments in the documentary.

Jane Preston, producer and director of *Graffiti Wars*, said: 'Banksy's an interesting character and after having met Blek le Rat and seen the similarity between their work, I really

wanted to ask him about it, but unfortunately he declined.' Blek le Rat is successful but has not enjoyed Banksy's mainstream popularity.

He was first involved in graffiti during the great Bristol aerosol boom on the late 1980s. The style of his artwork is mostly satirical piece on topics such as culture, ethnic, and politics. Technique wise, the way he combines both stencil and graffiti is very similar to a French artist Blek Le Rat. When it started, Blek Le Rat took inspiration from New York's graffiti scenes. It is from this scene that he created his own style by continuously painting stenciled rats around the streets in Paris before going nationwide to Lyon, Marseille and Toulouse. Banksy has also recognized Blek Le Rat influences in his artwork while also being a big fan of Blek's work. In one of his quote, Banksy said "Every time I think I've painted something slightly original, I find out that Blek Le Rat has done it as well, only twenty years earlier."

On the other hand, Prou admitted that he sees Banksy as a son of his movement in addition to crediting Banksy for raising his profile while providing him with increased publication that resulted in increased commercial success. In his interview with Sunday Times, Prou said "I consider him like my descendant. He took some ideas. But he changed them. And he took the movement to a huge level all over the world." What others do not really know is that there is another person whom inspired Banksy to first take out his stencils and spray paints in the dead of night. Known as the Godfather of Street Art, Richard Hambleton made his first mark in the 1970s painting chalk outlines with red blood across North America cities. His most famous piece, the Shadowman and Marlboro Man collections are among some of his pieces that have the clearest links to Banksy.

He was born in Vancouver, Canada in June 1954. He earned his bachelor in 1975 from Emily Carr School of Art. Recognized as the Founder and Co-Director of "Pumps" Center for Alternative Art in Vancouver. He is now working and living in New York City. Richard

Hambleton is the surviving member of group who, together among Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, had a great success coming out of New York City art scene during the 1980s. A lot of his work is similar to graffiti art, however, Hambleton considered his work as public art.

He is the person who influenced Xavier Prou (Blek Le Rat). When ask, Prou said that he really like Richard Hambleton. Richard was the first artist from NYC to export his work all over the world in the 80s. His work has been so widespread in Europe it could be found in London, Paris, Berlin, Rome, and many other cities.

We already know what a cultural phenomenon Banksy has become. He's gone from a teenage tagger to a well-known artist making multi-million dollar art. His style and message have, ironically, been wholeheartedly embraced by the very type of people he mocks. Celebrities and members of the art world have praised his unconventional pieces. Government officials in some cities have ordered workers to leave Banksy's graffiti alone despite their normal policy of removing all graffiti. As the buzz around his name grows, so does the number of places where Banksy street art is spotted. Banksy got his start in Bristol and there are, predictably, still some traces of his antics around the streets. The Bristol City Council, once frustrated with his graffiti, now has a standing order to leave all Banksy pieces where they are rather than removing or painting over them. There's no telling how many of his early works in Bristol were removed before that order took effect.

London is one of the best places to go if you're hoping to spot an original Banksy. New pictures crop up from time to time and are soon surrounded by people with cameras and camera phones, all preserving the work which may not be there tomorrow. Numerous Banksy-centric London maps are available online for those who wish to do some art-hunting on their own. For Banksy fans who prefer to travel in packs, free walking tours are often arranged by members of Banksy forums. Or you could always buy the book and set up your own walking tour.

Of course, Banksy doesn't spend all of his time painting up the English urbanscape. His work has been spotted all around the world. Above are a rare Greek Banksy (top) in Corfu Town, and two pieces painted in Sydney, Australia sometime in 2005. Banksy has been known to hop over to mainland Europe to have a bit of fun. Like when he slipped his own art into the Louvre with the help of a fake beard, a trench coat and an accomplice or two. He's also visited Paris to stencil his now-infamous "This is Not a Photo Opportunity" in an area where tourists flock to take pictures of the Eiffel tower. One of his most controversial stunts in America was the Guantanamo Bay prisoner inserted into the landscape of a ride in Disneyland. The effigy remained in place for an hour and a half before Disneyland staff removed it. Other works have been spotted on the streets of California in recent years.

Banksy's most recent journey to America included a trip to New Orleans to decorate some of the buildings affected by Hurricane Katrina. On his website, Banksy talks about his first impressions of Nola: "I looked out the window of the taxi on the drive into New Orleans and remarked 'There's still so much devastation – I can't believe they haven't cleaned this mess up.' To which the driver stared at me and said 'This part of wasn't affected by the hurricane – it's always looked like this.'"

Some of Banksy's most high-profile and memorable graffiti was done in Palestine. The 425-mile-long barrier separating Israelis and Palestinians looked like social injustice and a huge blank canvas to the guerrilla artist. He created nine new paintings there in 2005, most of which were ill-received by the local population. When he was working on one of the pieces, an old man approached him and said that his paintings had made the wall look beautiful. Banksy thanked the man, but he responded: "We don't want it to be beautiful, we hate this wall. Go home."

Banksy's influence can be seen and felt all around the world. Street artists who have never even seen a Banksy piece in person have been inspired by his message and the way he gets it across to people. It seems pretty likely that we'll see Banksy art popping up in even more places around the world in the future.

Two things seem to be clear: First. That change is inevitable. And second. That change polarizes people.

They say that things take five years to fully come into their own. And with the street art movement, we see that exactly to be the case. In truth, it wasn't until last week's trip to London that we fully understood how significant the changes have been in the street art scene. It wasn't until last week that it fully hit us how much the movement has finally come into its own on so many different levels. And one thing is clear - this has polarized a lot of people. Coming back from London, we started explaining it to our friends as: "The Banksy Effect" While we've always been unabashed (and unapologetic) fans of Banksy, we now see Banksy as the single greatest thing that has happened not only to the street/urban art movement, but to contemporary art in general.

We know that that's a sweepingly broad statement that is likely to get us in trouble, but let us explain. Most people need entry points to become comfortable with things that are new. And for millions of people, Banksy is the entry point they need in not only seeing art in a new way, but in accepting art as a part of their daily lives. Like Andy Warhol before him, Banksy has almost single handedly redefined what art is to a lot of people who probably never felt they appreciated art before. By being an iconoclast, and in the process becoming a mythic hero for a lot of people, Banksy has become an incredible icon in our society. One that we think, when things are said and done, will be at the level of Warhol.

The fact that Banksy's book "Wall and Piece" is in every bookstore imaginable, including Urban Outfitters, is a statement unto itself. The fact that Banksy's work is now selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars at Sotheby's is a statement unto itself. And we know that both of these things polarize a lot of people. But for us, we think that this is the best thing that could have ever happened to the street art movement. Why? Because what Banksy (and Steve Lazarides) have done is to create a market for an entire category of art that until now has not been recognized at the level that it is now being recognized at. And for this we should all be grateful.

If you're one of those people who are calling Banksy a sellout for selling his work for exorbitant prices, but are interested in making money yourself from your own art, then you should perhaps rethink your views a bit. Here's what we see happening. There are now a lot of people that have money and want to spend it on art. Their entry point into buying "urban art" is now Banksy. They read about Banksy selling his work at Sothebys and they want to be in on the action.

But not many can now afford to buy a Banksy piece any more. This is actually a good thing for artists who are talented and want to make money from their art because those people who can't afford "a Banksy" are now learning more and searching out and buying work from other talented artists who are part of the movement. One of the best things that we did last week was to go to the opening of a fantastic exhibition at the Elms Lesters Painting Studios. The show featured great work by Phil Frost, Adam Neate, WK, and Anthony Lister. All four of them are incredibly talented and have been working their asses off for years. All four of them deserve everything they receive, including selling their work at prices most of us can't afford. (We think that they deserve to make as much money as they want.) Would the work have sold without Banksy? Sure.

Would the show have commanded the prices it did without “the Banksy Effect”? Would the show have sold out without the “Banksy Effect”? Some will say yes, but we don’t think so. Of course there was a market for this movement before Banksy started selling at Sothebys. Gallerists like Jonathan Levine, Merry Karnowsky, and others have been selling art from these artists for years. But never at the level it is selling at now. Another sign of the Banksy effect: Prints from places like Pictures On Walls, Faile.net, and others have never sold out faster. This is allowing more artists to make a living from their art. For us...

Shepard Fairey created the movement. Banksy created the market.

And even if you don’t agree with anything we’ve just written, we do think that both of these two guys deserve the full recognition and respect for what they have done. We think that 10 years from now, the “Banksy Effect” will be recognized as one of the most significant moments in the contemporary art market. UPDATE: Turns out we’re not the only ones who are calling it “the Banksy Effect” Just found this CNN clip from Santa’s Ghetto here.

Known for his contempt for the government in labelling graffiti as vandalism, Banksy displays his art on public surfaces such as walls, even going as far as to build physical prop pieces. Banksy does not sell photos of street graffiti directly himself; however, art auctioneers have been known to attempt to sell his street art on location and leave the problem of its removal in the hands of the winning bidder.

His art that appear in cities around the world was first born out of Bristol underground scene involving musicians and artists. His prints are popular with celebrity and singer Christina Aguilera and actor Brad Pitt. In 2007, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt spent £1 million on his stencils, and his works on buildings are now protected by councils despite being sprayed illegally.

Banksy's first film, *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, billed as "the world's first street art disaster movie," made its debut at the 2010 Sundance Film Festival. The film was released in the UK on 5 March 2010. In January 2011, he was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Documentary for the film.

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