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explore the cultural value of preserving historic graffiti

# Etched in the memory

In modern society, graffiti normally carries negative connotations, but there can be historically, artistically and culturally important factors for retention. Debate is focused on graffiti removal from buildings and the wider built environment.

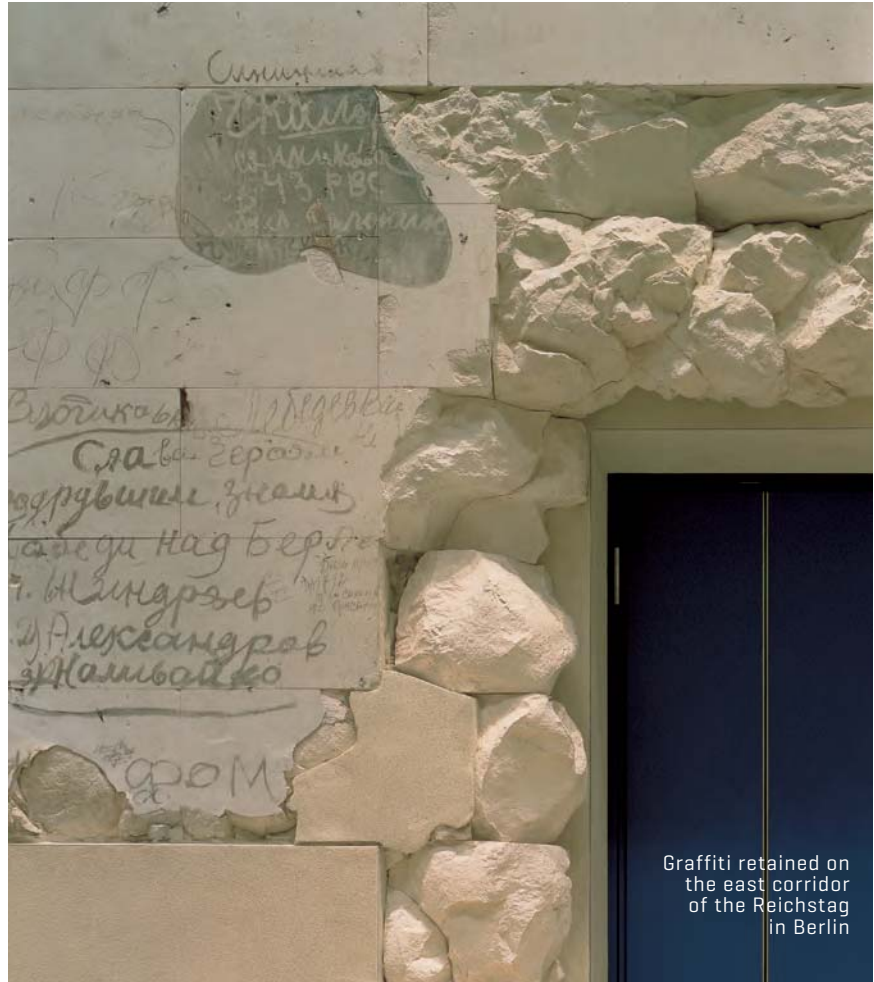
However, clearly there are decision-making protocols for practitioners to highlight the circumstances governing whether an item should be removed or retained.

The classical definition of the term graffiti is 'little scratching' derived from the Italian *graffiare*. This has been redefined as "inscribed or surface applied media, forming writing or illustration, produced without expressed or implied permission" to better reflect the array of media and substrate types.

Cultural significance is a widely adopted concept in global conservation protocols to determine the value of places, buildings and associated artefacts. However, the cultural significance of historic graffiti has yet to be understood, leaving examples prone to mistreatment or removal. In Scotland the Scottish Historic Environmental Policy (SHEP) it is characterised by reference to one or more of three groups:

- **intrinsic:** inherent in the monument
- **contextual:** relating to the monument's place in the landscape or in the body of existing knowledge
- **associative:** assessments of the associations of the monument, including current or past aesthetic preferences.

While these parameters are undoubtedly helpful, some aspects are inherently subjective. Traditional judgments on value were associated with "age and/or rarity and the idea of celebrating high art and culture as well as the icons of power and influence". Today, this bias towards high art is altering, and it could be argued that traditional notions of heritage are shifting towards a higher appreciation for graffiti, new and old alike.



Grffiti retained on the east corridor of the Reichstag in Berlin

## Historic context

Several examples of historic graffiti are representative of various visual and socio-political statements and are, therefore, potentially of great cultural significance. They reflect common media and substrate types, including, chalk, charcoal, and inscribed and carved surfaces. The nature of the receiving surface is important. For example, a very hard igneous stone would not lend itself to inscribed graffiti, while a soft chalk would.

The 9th century graffiti at Maeshowe, Orkney, is considered to be of great cultural significance. Described as a 'dragon and serpent knot', it was inscribed in fine grained sandstone.

The intrinsic value can be evaluated on several levels, with age being an important factor. When applying the SHEP system, retention and conservation would be relatively easy to substantiate. Strong, associative characteristics are formed between the influx of Vikings into Orkney. This piece documents their presence and thus establishes a contextual relationship between Maeshowe and its history. The runic inscriptions are rare; such examples are not widely seen outside of Nordic countries. They clearly show a skilfully executed, decorative illustration of aesthetic merit. Conversely, the piece's 'meaning' is more uncertain in its

geographical context. It is not until it is set in framework of the Nordic tradition of 'symbolism' that its consequence becomes more apparent.

Black death plague inscriptions are incised on the walls and columns of Ashwell Church, Hertfordshire. According to historian David Sherlock, these may be classified into two principal categories, references to the plague and popular sayings depicting the pre-Great Fire of London Old St Paul's Cathedral. The date of these inscriptions has been based on understanding of the plague from external sources, and information contained in the text. It is also established on the premise that the illustration of Old St Paul's does not include later alteration. This is important because few examples of architectural plans exist from this period.

The text-based graffiti inscriptions are also at eye level and are, primarily, done from the aisles, from a position where clergy officiating in the chancel could not have seen them being done. This is an important factor when defining graffiti. The absence of permission must be a key feature to its classification. The writing form is of a style that was not used around the time of the Reformation, thereby enabling indirect secondary dating to be achieved.

The inscriptions, capture many sayings such as: "*Drunkness breaks whatever wisdom touches*" and alarmingly, "*The lands about lie waste for lack of labourers through the pestilence*". The intrinsic value and more specifically, the research potential, is significant. The contextual and associative value of the graffiti are important due to the rarity of the inscription, which provides a first-hand account of the plague.

## Social record

The Reichstag graffiti was left by Russian troops entering Berlin in the final days of the Second World War. Mainly text based, written in pencil and chalk, only 202 pieces of graffiti remain, a very small proportion of the original number.

On the east corridor, the wording of one Cyrillic contribution translates as:

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The greater the evidence for tripartite intrinsic, contextual and associative characteristics, the higher the likelihood of retention

*"Glory to the heroes who hoisted the banner of victory over Berlin!"*  
Shindryaev  
U. Alexandrov  
S.K. Nalivaik

The retention of the Reichstag graffiti was politically contentious but has great associative value given that it represents an important event in Western history. The intrinsic value lies in its individual uniqueness, given that the graffiti are the only record left by the individuals involved, making their mark in the way that is as old as mankind itself. It is this connection with ordinary people that appears to be one of the most compelling aspects.

Various examples of graffiti have been recorded and archived by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland. Decisions to record and/or retain are made relatively easily when the examples are ancient or have been produced by famous people. However, they are rather more difficult with relatively modern contentious examples, i.e. the anti-Thatcher graffiti at the former Ravenscraig steelworks that, while without any artistic merit, would be of interest to social historians.

What is more difficult to ascertain is the long-term value of these items for those undertaking research or for wider society. Additionally, while some examples of graffiti are not historic in nature they would still be destined for conservation

from the day they were created, due to their associative characteristics.

For an item of graffiti to be readily considered as culturally significant it would ideally require satisfaction of more than simply the aesthetic components of the associative characteristics. In short, the greater the evidence for tripartite intrinsic, contextual and associative characteristics, the higher the likelihood of retention.

However, the determination of artistic merit creates problems and may benefit from additional sub-evaluation criteria using accepted definitions of 'significant form', 'self-expression' and 'meaning'.

All graffiti could be claimed to be self-professed 'art', but whether it is 'good' art is a different question. The move away from sole expert evaluation toward greater community or individual appraisal could potentially create great democratisation, but may also generate tensions. The rights of an individual claiming that their marks are a reflection of their self-expression could lead to arguments being put forward for the retention of worthless graffiti or simply vandalism. This situation needs to be sensibly evaluated, by obtaining the views of the wider community. ●

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