A Comparative Study of Graffiti Art of Iran and England (Emphasizing Four Recent Decades)

Fatemeh PANAHII, Abolfazl DAVOUDI2*, Fatemeh SHAHROUDI3

1,2Department of Art Research, Yazd Branch, Islamic Azad University, Yazd, Iran
3Department of Art Research, Central Tehran Branch, Tehran, Iran

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Abstract. The Graffiti art is one of the most important ways to expression the individual and group approaches of today urban areas that is the main base of the paper. This research is aimed of comparative study of Iran and England graffiti art at the time of four recent decades to survey two artists belong both countries in the names of “Tanha” and “Banksy” as case samples. The thesis results were obtained in comparative and cross-sectional method shows that an Iranian artist express more his criticism of events in Iran and other matters around the worlds have secondary importance, but Banksy rely is on his works of world events in the past and now. Moreover, it seems an Iranian artist has more conservative to created works of political and social content, but a Western artist has more venture and explicit to express his art, and sometimes directly represent and criticize the true character of his society. Iranian works shows his Iranian identifies, but a Western artist works are not shows the belonging to a country.

Keywords: Graffiti, British Contemporary Art, iranian Contemporary Art, Banksy, Tanha

1. INTRODUCTION

The term graffiti is referred to any stenographical writing and unauthorized visual expression against regulations on the wall and surface of public places (Oxford, 2006). Nowadays the intention of graffiti is its very new function. What is called modern graffiti now, in fact, is the deformation of flat surfaces using lasting color sprays or markers or other similar materials (Kavsari, 2010). Graffiti has great differences with each other in Iran and England in respect to society’s cultural and structural differences, but is similar to each other in the way of implementing. In this paper, the introduction of “Tanha”, the Iranian artist and “Banksy”, the British artist is dealt with, then their works are identified and the comparative analysis of their works with the same theme is conducted. In addition, the content and formal analysis of their works is carried out.

Graffiti in the Western that mostly indicated a political act in the 1960s was formed among groups, which used it for specifying their realm, then, along with changes from city streets to the walls of subways and stations, gradually it found its way into the different cultures and countries with different applications so that in many countries, municipalities have established free walls for artists and many people attempt to present their thoughts and societies by their works, but graffiti art has not a long history in Iran. Maybe a limited number of “murals” after the Revolution can be classified as graffiti. In 1999, a person named “Escnce” was recorded as the first Iranian graffiti artist, but the serious beginning of this art in Iran dates back to 2003 that some examples were reflected in the website of Kollahstudio. Several years later, a weblog was launched named “graffiti BlogSpot” that displayed a number of examples of graffiti works. In recent years, some people like Tanha are active in this field. Tanha created his first works on the faculty’s wall in 2002 and from the year 2003 onward, he began his works on the city walls of Tehran.

* Corresponding author. E-mail: Davodi@iauyazd.ac.ir

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2. DIFFERENT GRAFFITI STYLES

This art was changes and developed in different forms over the years, recorded various experiences in its path and accepted different forms and styles that some examples are mentioned. Signature style is the simplest work on the walls. Signature is the most fundamental graffiti style in which an artist’s name is written in the form of painting by spray or marker. The artists create a combination of handwriting and picture in a particular form by painting their name (Kavsari, 2011). Throw Ups style is conducted quickly using two or three colors. It is mentioned that in this style beautifulness is sacrificed for quickness. Throw Ups can be done in the form of unicolor (Kavsari, 2011). Piyes is a more accurate style than reflecting artist’s name in which different non-integrable letters are integrated so that are unreadable. In this style, three colors are mostly used. It can be mentioned that styles are created based on the attitude, culture and nature of each country. Society’s different classes, layers and groups also have their particular culture, which are called subculture in addition to the general culture dominant over each society. Subculture is defined as a system of values, customs, behavior patterns and lifestyle of a social group that is distinct from the dominant culture of the assumed society, but is related to it (Sazgara, 1998).

It can be pointed out that subculture, in fact, depends on the general culture or society’s cultural system owing to its relation to the traditional institutions of the middle class and acceptance of its various norms, but since each subculture has its particular norms, is distinguished from the larger culture. Individuals dependent on subcultures, in all probability, are often encountered with the rejection of those whose values make the dominant general culture (Koen, 2006). The presence of subcultures is the sign of social groups’ struggle in the form of cultural and artistic activities including graffiti to gain legitimation against the presented background by the society’s dominant and general culture that can be useful in many cases. In addition, subcultures play an important role in identifying the culture of a country because they manifest the awareness of the history of a race and the occurred events to it (Salehi Amiri, 2010).

3. EFFECTIVE FACTORS ON THE DURABILITY OF GRAFFITI WORK

The combination of the quantity and quality of a muralist’s works is usually considered a kind of success. With rappers’ death like Notorius BIG or Tupac Shakur, various murals were painted on the walls and doors of supermarkets. Muralists constantly attempt to gain progress in their work, while categories work only in their districts and are not in pursuit of more addressees and are not considered principally artistic (Ibid). Since the main addressee of graffiti is people themselves, these works can reflect people’s social life. The use of the portrait of famous political, social or popular characters who are interrelated with common people’s life on the particular occasions with particular message is one of the factors of the durability of graffiti to people.

![Picture 1. Notorius’ memorial, the U.S. Source: www.culturecliamx.com.](image)

Designs are created mostly affected by and according to the artist’s facilities and abilities for performance with the shortest time, because as the work is done sooner, the possibility of arriving the police or other people is decreased. Another factor in protecting graffiti is malicious people’s
inaccessibility to graffiti. A number of graffiti works directly refer to part of poetry and literature culture and are closely associated with the cultural identity of a country including Tanha who has performed Hafez’s poems as piyes on German walls. Another group of graffiti works, which are durable are the ones with political and social content. These works refer to part of important political events of a society and sometimes have had popular reactions. The other part of durable works are the ones that have had artistic aspect and their own particular addressees. This group of works are kept in artistic collections and museums such as a number of Banksy’s trusted works.

4. GRAFFITI IN IRAN

In Iran, the common forms of Graffiti have a long history at least a history as much as the new form of urbanism. Some examples include the writings concerning romantic relationships on walls and the ones engraved on trees. The writings in public toilets are among the extremely common examples. These writings include everything from sexual matters to political issues and their examples are found abundantly everywhere. Finally, the graffiti on the school and university chairs with various themes can be mentioned. Graffiti with revolutionary issues was formed during the Revolution and after it, which is the simplest form of graffiti at that time. This work, in Iran, was done using stencils made from radiography isinglass papers that the intended picture was cut in it. The use of these stencils was simply possible using colorful brush or spray (Kavsari, 2010). The other type was modern graffiti who Escence performed it in Iran in 1994.

The new application of graffiti in Iran, contrary to the past, mostly conforms to its critical and subcultural application. As we glance through the Internet websites relevant to their producers or fans, we see that Iranian graffitists relate their work to a kind of the concept of underground art. Therefore, modern graffitists are the youth who do not act in the direction of formal culture, but sometimes derive pleasure from their opposition to the formal culture so that see identity-finding in it. Tanha is one of the graffitists in Tehran who in his interview introduces himself as “I’m Tanha (alone) my work and interest is painting and marking the urban surfaces. Maybe someone think of me as a saboteur. No problem, I’m very happy that I’m a known as a saboteur” (www.kollahstudio.com).


Picture 3. An example of the first graffiti after the Revolution in Iran in stencil form, Source: (Momayez, 1982).
5. INTRODUCING BANKSY AND HIS WORKS

Banksy is the alias of the British graffiti artist, political activist, director and painter that his identity is not so clear. His street satirical art and bitter ironies include a combination of black irony with a kind of graffiti performed uniquely with stencil. His works have become outstanding through his political and social criticism in streets, on the walls, bridges and all around the world (Kavsari, 2011). Banksy’s works show that he has focused his bite on the capitalism system and generally the British political system in different ways. He bares the ugly face of all ornamented things forthrightly and fearlessly. In this way, his works are awakening politically. He has dealt with poverty, prostitution, slums, workers’ misery life, the police and other different issues cleverly.

Banksy’s first graffiti in great dimensions is called “Mild Mild West”. This artwork was drawn in 1997 for the advertising of the office of an old attorney in Bristol showing a teddy bear, which throws a Molotov cocktail to three riot police.

On 27 April, 2007, a new record was obtained for selling Banksy’s work namely “Space Girl and Bird” with the sum of £288000 approximately 20 times as much as the estimation in Ben Homes Auction in London. He won the prize of the biggest British artist on 21 May 2007.

In July 2011, one of Banksy’s early works called “Gorilla with Pink Mask” was regarded as an exclusive sign of embossed on the external wall of a social club and thereafter it was painted and the building became a cultural center of Muslims (Wels, 2011).
6. TANHA, THE IRANIAN GRAFFITI ARTIST

Tanha’s works with their social and sometimes political issues are mostly seen in Tehran around Atabakan and Apadana towns. He became known for his paintings who drew with his friends on the walls of Tehran-Karaj Highway and gradually became famous in the artistic society of Iran. Tanha’s works, unlike Banksy’s, are not based on mere visual expression. Part of his works are calligraphy known as Arabic calligraphy. Picture 7 has portrayed a fortune-teller girl below the stuck advertisings on the wall. In this work, Tanha has referred to the bitter reality of working and fortune-telling children, which is seen along with the advertisings of different companies. Picture 8 is another Tanha’s stencil work called “justice with RPG 7”. In this graffiti, he protests against parts of Iran’s events using the symbol of justice and freedom.


7. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BANKSY’S AND TANHA’S WORKS

In most of Banksy’s works, subjects include mouse, monkey, the police, soldier, child and elderly people. He criticizes political authorities, fascists and extremist religious people. Banksy who expresses his political views under the mask of satire says “sometimes the world’s status quo makes me feel so bad that I can’t eat my apple pie” (Banksy, 2010). Tanha’s works include three parts of calligraphy with cultural concepts, portray (often children) and painting using personal characters with social themes. His first work with social content was performed in Germany. This picture shows a mother who criticizes her child (Picture 9). Banksy drew the picture of a girl with an umbrella (Picture 10) on the wall in the corner of the North fence close to the French district in the New Orleans of the U.S., which is one of the shocking illegal works.

These two works are in harmony of form and content and have could to convey their message in two different forms. Other types of harmony are conceivable for the artwork in addition to harmony in form such as harmony between form and content, harmony between artwork and addressees (their needs, dreams, wishes and real life) and at the highest level, the harmony between artwork and the whole graffiti society is beautiful, because it makes a relation not only in form, but between artist and society, his language and life as well as addressees.

![Picture 9](https://tanha.com) Untitled, Tanha, Germany. Source: Tanha’s Facebook.

![Picture 10](https://flickr.com) A girl with umbrella, Banksy, the U.S. Source: www.flickr.com.

In Banksy’s painting (Picture 11) titled “Her Majesty as Ziggy Stardust” it is believed that Banksy has performed a picture of the queen like Ziggy Stardust in stencil method in honor of Diamond Jubilee. In Picture 12, Tanha has drawn “men on the moon”, which is the picture of Ahmadinejad and Chavez from two different countries. The red color of Chavez’s jacket is the symbol of martyrdom and blood and Ahmadinejad and Chavez are beside the moon like two star alongside other stars in the sky.
In Banksy’s and Tanha’s paintings, both have drawn the picture of their heads of state on the wall using stencil method. It seems that the best technique for performing political messages concerning world’s important characters is stencil, because in its initial form, we are encountered with two main colors namely black and white and politics is either black or white from the public view. The other dimension, which is seen in the work of both artist is using red color along with the black and white colors. Red refers to a kind of riot and revolt against the existing conditions and protest expression is hidden within it. The other case is the satirical aspect of and finally mocking society’s leaders that was manifested in both objectively, with the difference that Banksy has achieved a kind of visual brevity in his expression that is admirable. In addition, Tanha has used the wittiness of other elements to convey the main concept of his painting.

Two other works belonging to Tanha and Banksy are works with cultural content that both have drawn a picture of Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa with the difference that Tanha has created it with ewer in stencil on painting canvass (Picture 13) that Mona Lisa is drawn with her innocent face, pale laugh and an orange ewer. This work mostly has cultural load. This work may means that Tanha has kept the symbol of Europe painting art waiting in the back of Iranian public toilet. Banksy’s mural (Picture 14) titled “Mona Lisa Rocket-launcher” the main character of the painting while smiling has a weapon in hand and is ready to shoot it at enemy. Banksy’s works have specific political and social tendencies. The theme of his most of works has anti-war concepts.

Comparing the two mentioned works, it can be pointed out that Mona Lisa has been a considerable pretext to express political, social and cultural concepts for artists. Tanha has reached a satirical expression by integrating eastern-religious culture with Mona Lisa painting that has made it higher than an ordinary artwork and has regarded sociocultural concepts, while Banksy has suggested important concepts in the world such as war and capitalism using Mona Lisa painting that has recently been controversial in the formal media.
CONCLUSION

The performed stencil method of the most of graffiti in Iran is affected by Banksy’s works or other graffiti artists who are experienced in this technique, but their works have been completely independent of the western graffiti artists’ influence in terms of form and content. Tanha’s major works as an Iranian artist are regarded as the indicator of Iranian art in Europe. The major part of his works, he has created noticeable works on the walls of European countries using Persian letters and words and combining them with Iranian graphics. In another part of his works, he has reach a kind of characterization that is not seen in the world’s artists and is peculiar to him.

Children are one of the common issues between Tanha’s and Banksy’s works. In most of Tanha’s works, the picture of Iranian girls and boys is observed with each other with the Iranian visual elements including broken Nasta Liq handwriting or Iranian characterization considerable in both content and performance skill. This part has displayed Iranian children’s innocence with traditional and regional context. Displaying Iranian identity is among the distinctive features of Tanha’s works. In Banksy’s works, children’s concern in today’s contemporary and advanced is suggested. In a number of his works, children’s poverty, loneliness and lack of facilities are taken into account. He has not deprived the children of the West Bank from his works with freedom themes using picture. Banksy has used children’s innocence to express man’s initial needs such as freedom, security and peace. In addition, working children are among other issues considered by him. While, Tanha has displayed primarily Iranian identity and children’s innocence.

The other part of Tanha’s works is called “Persian graffiti”. The current characters of his works are consisted of geometric shapes with the repetitive texture of smooth, curve and broken lines. In contrast, the quality of Banksy’s graffiti works has a definitive route. He conveys his political message and sometimes cultural one to the public using virtual characters such as monkeys, the
police, mice, children and young woman and man. Both works have portrayed society’s weak class in two different languages. Tanha attempts to deal with the current issues of Iranian society in his work using Iranian identity and even personal characters, but Banksy investigates concerns ahead of the world in his works therefore he is internationally renowned.

Concerning the difference of Iranian and English artists’ motivation in creating graffiti works, it can be mentioned that graffiti artist Iran creates works with social content and sometimes political one conservatively that finally have spiritual dimension and remains at the level of discharging energy protest expression, but in England in respect to the democratic atmosphere dominant over the society, the artist can gain reputation and sell his work in several times as much as its real price by portraying a political or social message that its initial addressees are people. Regarding the difference of the graffiti art features in terms of form and content in the two countries, it can be mentioned that according to the atmosphere dominant over the two Eastern and Western countries with different cultural background. Certainly, visual elements used in graffiti of Iran and England are different. The Iranian artist prefers to express his message indirectly using unreal and virtual characters. Ironically speaking is part of the literary culture of Iranian people, which its effect is manifested in the visual art, unlike England that frankness and outspokenness are seen in their artworks that is part of the cultural society’s people.

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