



NATIONAL TRUST of Australia (Victoria)

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National Trust of Australia (Victoria) Policy Statement: GRAFFITI

There are two sides to the issue of graffiti and heritage :

1. Graffiti on the main facades of historic buildings detracts from their appearance, and cleaning it from masonry surfaces can result in damage. Graffiti in such places is strongly discouraged.
2. Some graffiti has historic significance, and some graffiti art can have recognised value. Such examples should be recorded, and protected only to the extent of stabilising to slow down decay.

BACKGROUND

Messages scratched on walls have been part of urban life for centuries, probably well before those found on the walls of Pompeii, which date from the 1st century AD. The late 20th century however has seen an explosion in the amount found on walls and objects in public places. These range from political slogans, messages of love or hate, names or signatures known as tags, to a particularly ornate style of writing known as graffiti art, painted scenes, community art, and professional artists using the style and the medium to express ideas.

In Melbourne, by the late 1990s, Melbourne began to look like New York in the late 1970s, with graffiti in all its forms on virtually any flat surface that was not well guarded. Factory walls along railway lines (and the carriages themselves) were particularly favoured. Tagging in particular began to dominate in some areas, and spread to the facades of buildings in public streets, especially in the inner city.

In 1999, an example of historic graffiti was nominated to the Trust. The phrase 'Keon Traitor to the ALP' on a factory wall in Richmond related to a major figure in the great Labour Party schism which was played out in the streets of that working class suburb in the mid 1950s, and resulted in the formation of the DLP. The then 20th century buildings committee felt that it was undoubtedly of interest, and when the story was taken up by the media, the Trust was criticised for condoning vandalism, in the form of graffiti.

Formal classification was delayed pending the preparation of a policy for classifying graffiti, and to options for its retention in the event of classification. Before that could occur, the 'Keon' slogan was itself graffiti'd, and the whole issue was put aside.

THE ISSUES

It is clear that the overwhelming majority of graffiti is of little historic or artistic interest. Graffiti on historic buildings would detract from them and its removal may damage them, and it should be strongly discouraged. This certainly applies to particularly notable buildings, and those with unpainted masonry surfaces.

On the other hand, graffiti on the painted side walls of late 19th or early 20th century terraced houses or shops may not detract from the building, and repainting will not damage them. In some cases the owners do not mind their building being a canvas for expression, and in recent years shop and bar owners have encouraged, or even commissioned graffiti art for their side walls. The City of Melbourne even supports an art project in a lane off Centre Place that has resulted in graffiti covering very large areas of the laneway walls.

In 1997 the Trust classified a large mural by New York artist Keith Haring. His art was inspired by graffiti, but this is much more a work of art than graffiti proper. It was commissioned, required scaffolding to create, and is on a wall that is visible to the public, but not in a public space.

There will also be examples that can be shown to be of historic interest, either for their great age, or as a reminder of an important historic event, issue or person. When these are in a public place, which raises the question especially those on political themes that, may have special significance.

Once an example has been found to be of significance, the question of whether or not to preserve it, and if so how, needs to be determined.

Classification of graffiti by the Trust immediately suggests that we believe it to be worthy of preservation. The issues around graffiti are however quite different to those around buildings and objects. Arguments against classification and preservation action are that:

- graffiti is not intended to last
- graffiti in general can be considered vandalism, and can be offensive, meaningless, visually unattractive, and detract from, or even damage, significant buildings
- the paint will inevitably fade
- it would be impossible to prevent future graffiti obscuring the significant examples
- it is probably attached to a building or object that is not significant, that may be proposed to be replaced
- the owner, or a future owner of the building or object may not wish the graffiti to remain.

The arguments for include:

- if it has survived long enough to attain significance, it is worthy of preservation
- political, social or witty graffiti is, especially in the inner city, is widely considered a legitimate form of expression, and accepted as part of the public landscape. Some examples are even widely admired, or at least considered favourites. Graffiti on blank factory walls or concrete walls especially in industrial areas can even be considered to enliven such areas.
- graffiti that is offensive, meaningless, or detracts from, or damages significant buildings or objects would not be considered suitable for classification or preservation. Contemporary 'graffiti art' would not be considered worthy, unless the Public Art committee found it had particular artistic merit.