Are taggers of today the Old Masters of tomorrow?

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If you hate graffiti, here's a theory that will drive you up the wall.

In a book titled "The Nature of Paleolithic Art," scholar R. Dale Guthrie argues that primitive cave drawings are not early attempts at artistic expression, as we always have thought, but rather prankish acts of vandalism.

The cave painters most likely were adolescent boys who "tagged" walls much like the perpetrators of graffiti are doing today.

The only difference, Guthrie says, is that early taggers used primitive dyes and pigments instead of spray paint in a can.

This is a shocking theory that, if accepted, forces us to reappraise our thinking about cave art.

And graffiti.

Guthrie, professor emeritus of the Institute of Arctic Biology at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks, says cave drawings of hunters, weapons, beasts and bloodshed, not to mention lots of curvy females, are similar to the highly charged images of violence and lust favored by youthful taggers of today.

It's testosterone talking, then and now, he says.

"The main images are large mammals. No butterflies, no babies, no small animals, no women with clothes on," he says.

Handprints that often accompany cave paintings, Guthrie says, are too small to have been made by adult male hands. In fact, a study of the hand lengths, palm widths and finger sizes suggests the prints were made by boys who would have been 9 to 17 years old in the Pleistocene Epoch, between 10,000 and 40,000 years ago.

Where does this leave us?

After all, we revere ancient cave paintings. We work hard to protect and preserve them. We consider them a vital part of our human record. These drawings, we believe, are the worthwhile expressions of people struggling to define their identity, struggling to shape their vision, struggling to tell their story and leave some record of their efforts to evolve and survive and succeed on this planet.

So, must we view modern graffiti in the same way, since it's pretty much the same thing?

I say, we have two choices.

One, we start respecting the taggers of today. We value their art. Instead of scraping it off, hosing it down or splashing whitewash over it, we learn to love it.

After all, if wall and bridge paintings of today are the same as cave paintings of old - the result of teen taggers - how can we say that one is any less valuable than the other?

Our other choice is quite different. We challenge the taggers of today.

We ask them: So, why haven't you evolved in 40,000 years?

Why are you still tagging walls the same way it was done in prehistoric times?
We tell them: Maybe some of you have the talent and ability to be great artists. How will we ever know, and how will you ever know, if you keep working in the dark, in the middle of the night, using furtive and hurried techniques, looking behind you as you paint, ready to flee at any moment if you are spotted?

Come out into the light.

Come out of the Stone Age.

Try creating artwork on traditional surfaces, such as paper or canvas, using real paint and pens and brushes. Practice, practice, practice. Work up a portfolio of samples and shop it around to dealers and galleries and local museums.

Be a real artist.

Who knows? You might have what it takes to leave your mark and be remembered by name, unlike the cave painters of ancient times.

You may be good enough to have your stuff displayed on the inside of walls, with people lining up to see and buy it, instead of giving it away for free on the outside of walls. Give it some thought.

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