

# FROM STREETS TO SUITES

## GRAFFITI ART LEAPS INTO A NEW ZIP CODE

Antonio “Shades” Agee used to get arrested for his art. Now, he gets paid – handsomely.

“I still remember my first indoor paid job,” he says. Agee charged the owner of a “huge mansion” \$2,500 to paint his sons’ rooms and bathroom. “That’s funny,” he says, “because today, I get \$2,500 for a canvas.”

Now, Agee is perhaps Detroit’s most in-demand artist in a fast-growing art form: graffiti interiors.

The bright colors and bold strokes of graffiti adorn interior walls from coast to coast. Even internationally, from Tokyo gyms to Bombay nightclubs, graffiti interiors vibrate with energy and create instant cutting-edge cool.

With the exploding popularity of loft living, many loft owners are looking to grace their walls with urban authenticity. And many corporations want to indicate a bond between urban and suburban as well. Enter artists like Agee.

Jolie and David Altman, of Birmingham, say they chose Agee’s graffiti to adorn the wall of their living room “because it’s very gritty and urban in a suburban setting. It’s not the way our neighborhood is, so I think the contrast is very striking.” Jolie adds, “We don’t buy things so they’ll match our sofa. It’s on buildings, and it’s illegal, and we appreciate that.”

Graffiti, from the Italian word for “a scratch,” has roots that stretch as far back as art itself. Forms of graffiti have been discovered on ancient Roman and Mayan architecture, and Renaissance artists like Raphael and Michelangelo carved or painted their names into the surfaces of ruins. Swoon and Barry McGee are legendary today for their graffiti work. Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat are two more of a flock of critically acclaimed artists who started their career by spray-painting subway trains and downtown buildings.

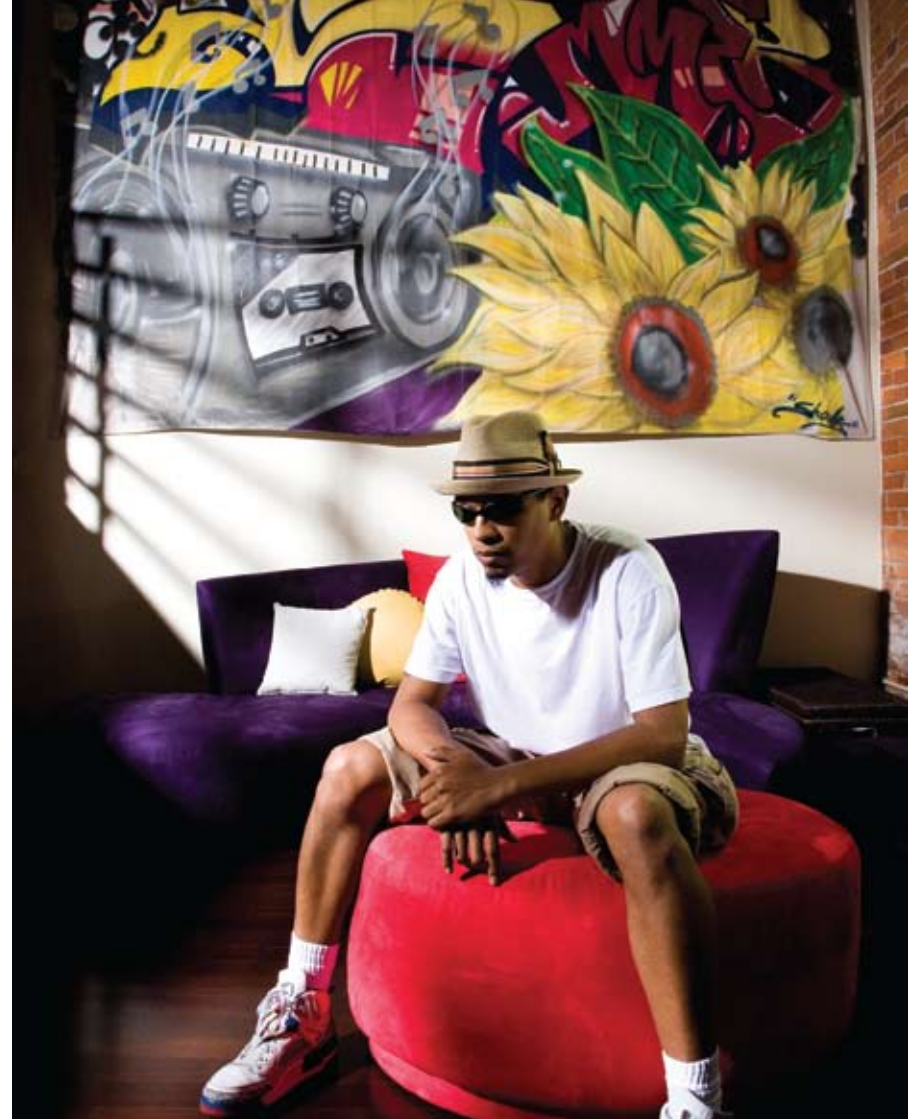
But spray cans are expensive, and graffiti artists can’t “rack” – steal their paints – forever. So a migration inside and a graduation to paid work seemed a natural and lawful progression. True graffiti artists’ art, however, isn’t affected by the move inside. What changes – other than the elements – are simply the surfaces on which they work.

“My clients do not conform me,” Agee says. “They go, ‘There’s a wall. Do something.’ They don’t tell me what they want.”

Some owners opt for canvas. Dan Hoops, another owner of Agee’s pieces, explains why: “I want to be able to take it with me. I live in a townhouse. I’m not going to live here my entire life. If this were a building or a loft, I’d have him tag my entire wall.”

Agee prefers it when clients do give him their walls to play with. “I love stretching canvas,” he says, “but it’s not the same as doing a wall, because a wall...when I do murals, it’s freedom, man.”

Because graffiti artists are always trying to evade police, they learn to work fast. If one is decorating an interior, this speed can easily be



seen as an advantage because the interior is only uninhabitable for a short time. It all goes back to the street, the ultimate proving ground not just for speed but content. “You could go to sleep, and you wake up, and you got the Mona Lisa there, and you’re like, ‘What put that there?’” Agee says with awe. “We’re like the magicians in the night.”

Agee and others like him preserve their freedom of expression and their methods, but despite this, graffiti artists who move indoors are still subject to criticism that they have sold out.

In response, Agee says, “I don’t even have business cards. It’s all word of mouth. Every job that I’ve gotten, including DaimlerChrysler, is word of mouth.”

And to the criticisms that he has abandoned his original art form, Agee smiles slyly. “You know, it’s always in your blood,” he says. “You can’t help it. I might run around with a can every once in a while. I might run around with a couple of markers. If you see a clean building, you gonna hit it.”

He points out the window of his downtown Detroit loft. “This building has been calling me since I’ve been here. The only reason it’s not tagged is because I know him. That’s the only reason. I want to hit that so hardcore and give him something that’s, like, nice. It’s all about putting a flower on something, putting a little heart on this desolate urban blight, the concrete jungle with all the gray. What’s the matter with adding just a little color? It doesn’t hurt.”

And indeed, graffiti adds color to an interior wall. It also adds uniqueness, authenticity, character and verve – which don’t hurt, either.

 – Marshall Zweig

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