

Graffiti moves from the streets to the walls of Mark Twain Bank

BY TERRI F. REILLY

TWENTY-ONE YEARS AGO, AN exhibition of a new art form—pop art—launched a new bank and a commitment to the arts in St. Louis. In 1965, Mark Twain South County Bank opened its doors with an impressive showing of pop art mounted by the Leo Castelli Gallery of New York. It was then considered to be a controversial art form that would never catch on. It did, and to celebrate the bank's 21st anniversary, Mark Twain Inc. brings to St. Louis another much-talked-about form of art—graffiti.

The celebration kicks off Monday, Nov. 26, with an exhibit curated by the Sidney Janis Gallery of New York. All of the works that will be displayed are new, with the exception of one collaborative painting. Most of the graffiti writers come from the streets of New York and started practicing their art on the walls and subways of the city.

On loan from the Janis Gallery, 15 pieces by seven artists known as Toxic, Crash, Daze, A One, Noe, Bear and Futura 2000 will hang for eight weeks.

Although graffiti has been around for years, not much attention has been paid to it except to remove it. The oddly spray-painted writings that covered the walls and subways of New York

City were considered by many to be a sign of the decay of society.

Though these graffiti artists come from all over New York, many grew up in ghetto situations where destruction of property was a form of release. (Keith Haring, a well-known New York graffiti artist, comes from a predominantly white, middle-class town in Pennsylvania.) Most of the artists were in their teens when they began, and have never had the benefit of formal art training, but were nonetheless talented.

Spray cans take the place of brush strokes for the graffiti writer, who must depend on "hit and run" tactics to avoid prosecution. Several of the current artists have been arrested. The risk factor involved in the illegal art form urged many of them on. But with stiffer penalties coming from Mayor Koch's city hall, defacing public property is more dangerous. For graffiti writers 18 or older, jail terms are not out of the question.

With the recent flight of some New York artists from the commercialized streets of SoHo, a refuge was found in the East Village, alive again after years of dilapidation. Through the help of various new galleries and individuals in the neighborhood, including underground actress P=J Astor's Fun Gallery, graffiti beg-



Two examples of New York graffiti art.

to be taken seriously as an art form in the early 1980s. Graffiti writers began to change their tactics.

Spray guns and cans are still the tools of the profession, but stationary canvas replaced the moving subway cars and the brick walls. Graffiti artists have traded the fear of prosecution for \$8,000-\$10,000 price tags on their works and exhibitions abroad. Their styles vary: some use bright colors, filigreed detail, bold objects and primal figures incorporating stick figures.

"Graffiti is moving from the subways and walls to the museums," says John-Paul Wolf, art curator for Mark Twain Banks. "And these artists are very sophisticated in using spray cans. They are still using the same techniques they used in the subways, now it's on canvas. But, they still work very fast and get a quick charge from it."

Wolf says the graffiti exhibition at the South County Bank parallels the pop art show of 21 years ago.

"We are celebrating with graffiti," he says. "At first, pop art was

hated—now we see its influences. Many view graffiti in the same way today. Graffiti is something to think about."

Not only has Mark Twain Bank been in business for 21 years, the commitment of Adam Aronson, chairman of the board of the bank, to the arts in St. Louis has also endured. A collector and supporter of the arts before he entered banking, Aronson, sometimes called the "Missouri Medici," provided space in the banks for local artists.

"We usually do two to three art shows between the 15 St. Louis banks," says Wolf. "We like to help new artists to become established in the community. We feel they deserve recognition. The gallery space at the banks are a springboard for them."

The galleries in each bank are not set off in one area, rather works hang in various locations throughout each facility. Mark Twain Bank offers the space free of charge.

"Art is an educational tool for everyone," says Wolf. "We feel it's worth supporting—it's our duty."

