

Art as Rebellion: The Berlin Wall

By Kim Weiss



Motivation:

Students will learn about the history of the Berlin Wall and explore some of the artwork from the current East Side Gallery. They will learn the difference between street art and graffiti, and how street art can be a vibrant form of public expression and commentary on current society, politics or economics. Students will create a minimalist art piece inspired by Berlin Wall artist Thierry Noir using acrylic paint and paint markers and will include a personal statement as part of the finished piece.

A Brief History of the Berlin Wall:

- In order to understand the origins of the Berlin Wall, we need to go back to the end of World War II. When Germany lost the war in 1945, the communist Soviet Union took over the Eastern half of the country (the German Democratic Republic), while France, Great Britain and the USA occupied the Western half, which was eventually combined to form West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany). The capital city of Berlin was fully inside of East Germany, but it was also split into East Berlin and West Berlin.
- At first, people were allowed to move freely between East and West Germany, but as conditions and quality of life worsened in communist East Germany, the country experienced “brain drain,” where many of its highly skilled and educated citizens left for a better life elsewhere. Between 1949 and 1961, about 2.5 million East Germans defected to West Germany.
- In order to stop this “brain drain,” the East German government, in just one night on August 12, 1961, ordered the border between East and West Germany closed and erected a barrier of barbed wire and concrete between the two halves of the city. In a single day, the wall separated many families from their relatives and cut many people off from their jobs in the other half of the city.
- The East German government eventually built a more permanent wall, which became known as the Berlin Wall. It was 28 miles long across the middle of Berlin and an additional 75 miles long around all of West Berlin. It was up to 15 feet high in places, with 116 watchtowers, guard dogs, mines and trenches to prevent people and vehicles from crossing. There was even a second wall built on the East German side, and the space between was cleared out to make anyone who attempted to cross more visible to the wall’s armed guards. Almost 200 people were killed for trying to go over the wall.
- In the 1980s, Germans on both sides began openly protesting the wall. In 1987, US president Ronald Reagan, in a visit to West Berlin, appealed to leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, to “tear down this wall!” Many musicians even held concerts in the late 1980s on the West German side of the wall, close enough so that listeners on the East Side could enjoy the music.
- On November 9, 1989, a massive crowd of over 2 million people gathered at the wall in East Berlin, some carrying hammers and chisels, and they began to destroy the wall by hand. They chanted, “We are the people!” and “Open the gate!” and the overwhelmed guards eventually let them pour through to West Berlin and freedom.
- The reunification of East and West Germany was made official on October 3, 1990, almost one year after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Art and the Berlin Wall:

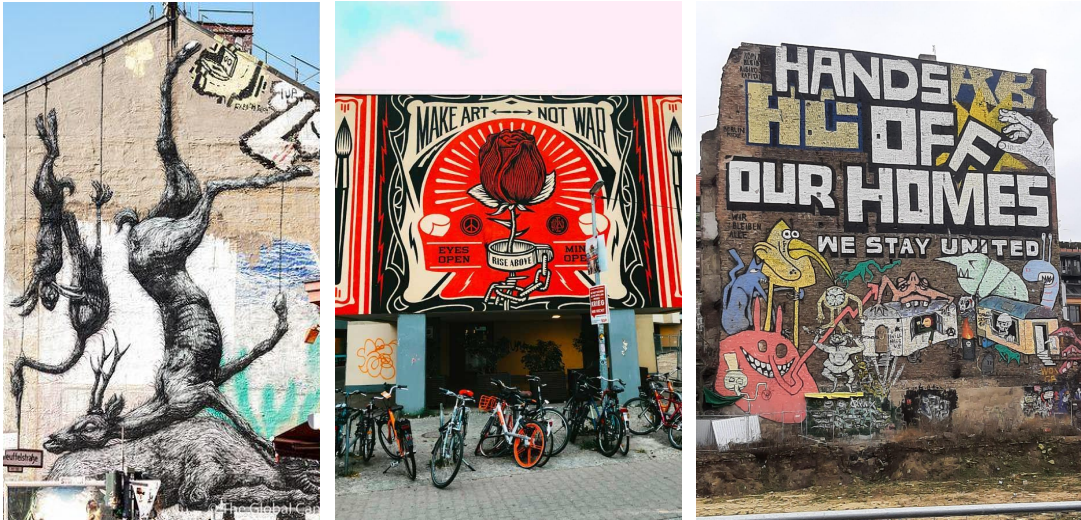
- The East Berlin side of the wall was heavily guarded until its fall in 1989, so it remained gray concrete.
- In the 1970s, West German artists and citizens began to cover the West side with graffiti, political slogans, jokes and artwork, often in protest against the wall and what it stood for.

- Artists usually had to paint quickly to avoid being caught by the East German guards. For this reason, their style was typically **stylized** or **minimalist**, with a limited color palette and little detail.
- The art on the West side of the Berlin Wall became a symbol of rebellion against the repression and division the wall created and stood for. By the late 1980s, the stark contrast between the gray and empty East side and the vibrant West side was evidence of the divide between these two opposing systems of government and culture.
- After the wall came down in 1989, the German Democratic Republic invited several artists to paint **murals** on a section of the wall, which would remain intact as a public art exhibit. By the end of 1990, over 100 artists from around the world had created artwork on the East Wall, which is known today as the East Side Gallery and a world heritage site.
- Today, Berlin is famous for its **street art**, visible everywhere you look, including huge murals and urban art projects. There is even a museum in Berlin dedicated to street art from around the world (Urban Nation).



Street Art vs. Graffiti:

- Many artist and critics use the terms “street art” and “graffiti” interchangeably, however there are key distinctions between the two.
- Graffiti has been around for centuries, but today is considered vandalism and usually consists of inscriptions or text-based artwork that, while created in public spaces, is illegible to the larger public as it represents a specific community or group of artists. Graffiti artists do not aim to improve communities or share thought-provoking messages.
- Street art is defined as image-based artwork that is intended for the general public to view, understand and discuss, and it seeks to comment on society, social or political issues and other aspects of public life.



Thierry Noir – Stronger than the Wall:

- Thierry Noir was born in 1958 in Lyon, France, and came to Berlin in January 1982. Thierry was the first artist to start painting the Berlin Wall in 1984. Thierry's goal was to transform the wall, to make it ridiculous, and to help destroy it. Over the next five years the wall was covered with layers of artwork from other artists who were inspired by Thierry's act of rebellion.
- Because painting on the wall was forbidden, Thierry had to paint as quickly as possible, using a minimalist recipe: "two ideas, three colors." His highly stylized work is characterized by a strong emphasis on line and simplification of forms to their most basic elements.
- Thierry painted several miles worth of artwork on the wall before its fall in 1989. He claimed that painting the wall made him "feel stronger than it."
- Other Berlin Wall artists, including American painter Mary Mackey, were inspired by his "heads."



Thierry Noir at work



Mary Mackey's "Tolerance" in The East Side Gallery

Vocabulary:

- **The Berlin Wall** – A guarded concrete barrier that encircled West Berlin from 1961 to 1989, separating it from East Berlin and the communist German Democratic Republic.
- **East Side Gallery** – A permanent open-air gallery on the longest surviving section of the Berlin Wall and a World Heritage Site.
- **Mural** – A painting applied to the surface of a wall or ceiling.
- **Street Art** – Visual art created in public locations for public visibility, often with the intent to provoke thought or discussion about current social, political or economic issues.
- **Stylized Art** – A form of art that alters natural shapes, colors and lines to create an image that is more expressive or symbolic than realistic.
- **Minimalist Art** – A form of art that emphasizes simplicity by focusing on basic elements such as geometric shapes and limited color palettes.

Supplies:

Item	Cost per student
White cardboard (9"x12")	\$0.44
Acrylic paint (red, yellow, blue, green, purple, white)	\$0.46
Double-sided black acrylic markers (each good for approx. 6 uses)	\$0.14
Scratch paper (cut to half sheets)	\$0.01
1/2" flat brush (size 6-8)	Provided by school
3/8" flat brush (size 2-4)	Provided by school
Reusable palettes or dinner-size paper plates	Provided by school
Pencil and eraser	Provided by school
Ruler	Provided by school
Water cups	Provided by school

Total cost per student: \$1.05

Lesson Step-by-Step:

1. Give the students a brief background on the origin of the Berlin Wall, what led to its fall in 1989, and how artists on the West Side of the wall used it as a canvas for graffiti and street art as a form of protest. Talk about the difference between graffiti and street art, and introduce the students to artist Thierry Noir, the first artist to start painting on the Berlin Wall.
2. Have the students view Thierry's work and comment on what they notice about his style of painting (key words: "stylized" heads, "minimalist" shapes and color palette). They can also begin thinking about the message they would like to include in their artwork.
3. Begin by drawing a line with pencil about 1 inch from the bottom of the paper, across the paper in landscape format. This will be where the students will sign their artwork.

4. Sketch the two heads. Allow students to add their own characteristics, while being mindful to keep their drawings simple and stylized (avoid detailed hair, clothing, etc.). Be sure to leave space around or between the heads for their “message” to be added in after the piece is painted.
5. Have the students choose from a simple palette of colors (recommend not using pure black) for their heads. Encourage them to choose different colors from their neighbors so each piece is unique! Begin coloring in the shapes that make up the heads.
6. Have the students select one color for the background. Older students may add white to create a gradient effect. Students should paint the entire background.
7. Have the students choose one color for the bottom strip and paint that area in completely.
8. Let the artwork dry. Approx. 5 minutes is enough as long as there are no big globs of paint. Check out kid-friendly videos about the Berlin Wall and Thierry Noir (see References below)!
9. Once the artwork is dry to the touch, have the students use the brush side of the black paint pen to outline all of the shapes in their heads and add in any simple line details.
10. Students will then write their message with the fine tip of the black paint pen between the two heads (or wherever there is ample space) and write their name, city and year across the strip at the bottom. Provide sample messages and fonts for reference.

Time needed for lesson: 45 min – 1 hour

References:

Berlin Wall history:

- <https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/Berlin-Wall/598930>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTckHBXgo4>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9fQPzZ1-hg>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3Xe4AdJaFQ> (contains some graphic images – recommended for decent background only)

Art and the Berlin Wall:

- <https://www.thecollector.com/art-on-the-berlin-wall/>
- <https://www.visitberlin.de/en/east-side-gallery>

Thierry Noir:

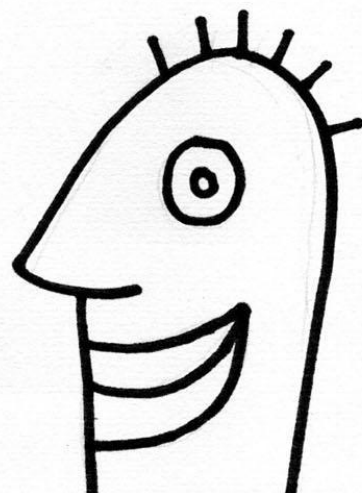
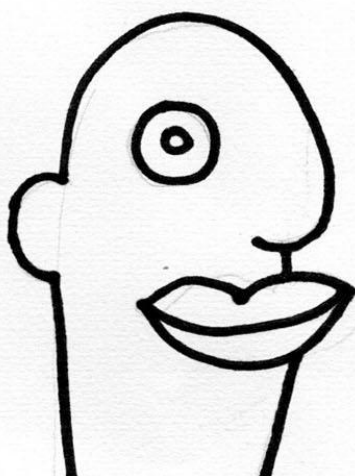
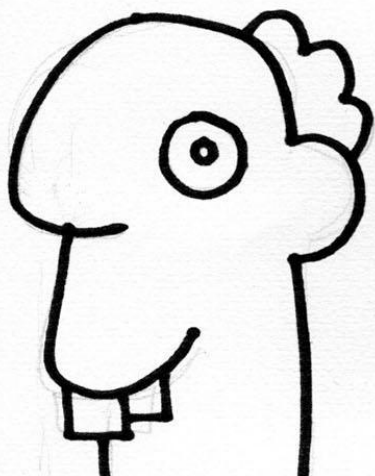
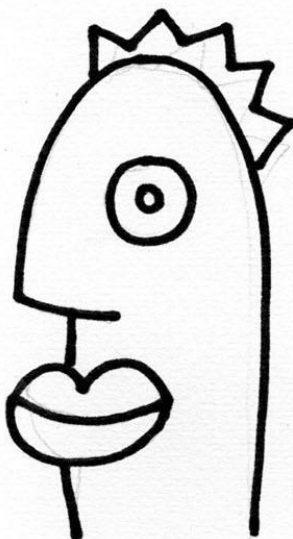
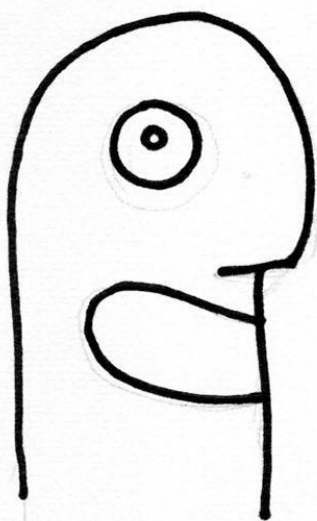
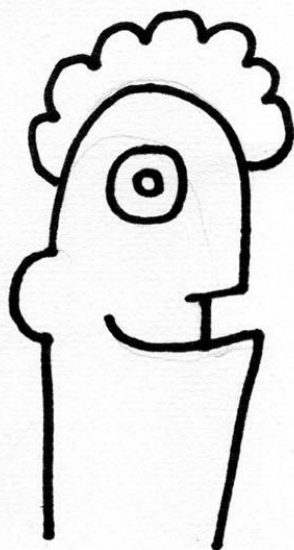
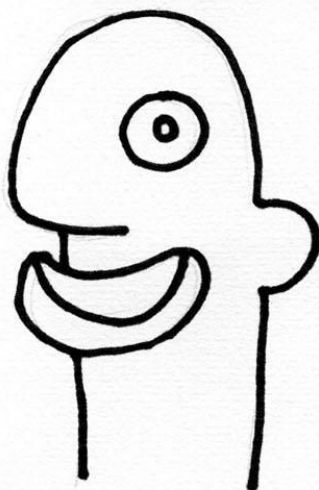
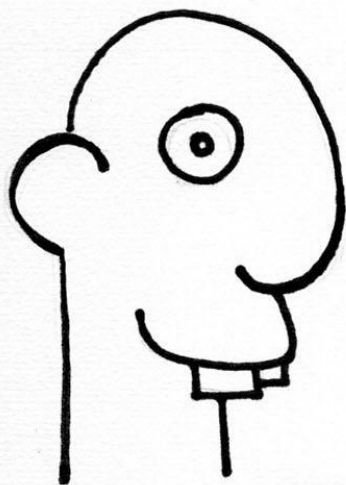
- <https://thierrynoir.com>
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QEVib_0d0ts (great short video featuring Thierry)

Street art:

- <https://urban-nation.com>
- <https://www.thecollector.com/how-does-street-art-shape-cities/>

Reflection:

- Why do you think artists might risk their safety to paint on the Berlin Wall?
- What is the difference between street art and graffiti? Have you seen street art in your city? How does it make you feel?
- How do you think street art might change a city for the people who live there?
- Do you believe art should have a message, or should it only be something pleasing to look at (art for art's sake)?
- If you want your art to send a message to people who see it, what is that message?



ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

THINGS ARE NEVER
 QUITE AS SCARY
 WHEN YOU'VE GOT
 A BEST FRIEND.
 - BILL WATTERSON

ALONE WE CAN DO SO LITTLE;
 TOGETHER WE CAN DO SO MUCH.
 - HELEN KELLER

TOGETHER, WE CAN OVERCOME ALL OBSTACLES

FRIENDSHIP STARTS
 WITH A SMILE

**ART MAKES
 ME HAPPY**

LOVE
 IS THE ONLY
 FORCE CAPABLE
 OF TRANSFORMING
 AN ENEMY
 INTO A FRIEND.
 - MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

TOGETHER WE CAN DO GREAT THINGS
 - MOTHER TERESA

**ONE WORLD,
 ONE PEOPLE**

STRENGTH LIES
 IN DIFFERENCES.
 NOT IN SIMILARITIES.
 - STEVEN COVEY

THE BEST MIRROR IS AN OLD FRIEND.
 - GEORGE HERBERT

FRIENDSHIP IS THE ONLY CEMENT
 THAT WILL EVER HOLD THE WORLD TOGETHER.
 - WOODROW WILSON

THE BEST WAY
 TO PREDICT THE FUTURE
 IS TO CREATE IT TOGETHER.
 - JOE ECHEVARRIA

ART BRINGS US TOGETHER

LIFE IS MORE FUN WHEN
 WE LIVE IT AS ONE

I DON'T LIKE THAT MAN.
 I MUST GET TO KNOW HIM BETTER.
 - ABRAHAM LINCOLN

WHAT BARRIER IS THERE THAT LOVE CANNOT BREAK?
 - MAHATMA GANDHI

NEVER TAKE YOURSELF TOO SERIOUSLY - JIM HENSON

TK-K Simple Message Examples



**BE
HAPPY!**

LOVE

**LET'S
BE
FRIENDS**

**MY
FRIEND**



**I
LOVE
YOU!**

**BE
KIND**