

Mad Society Kings & Art Work Rebels

Graffiti Crews that Tattoo

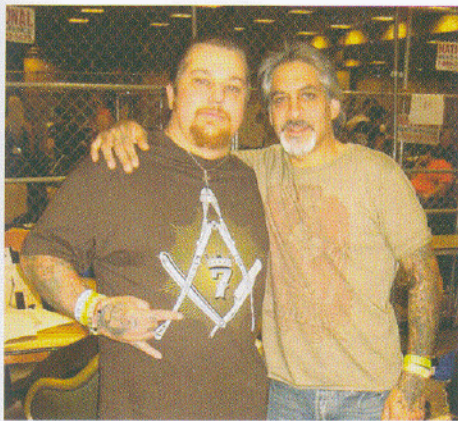
By Mattie John Bamman

grime



msk graffiti, artist unknown





Though tattooists and graffiti artists have shared the same circles for thousands of years, the crossover has never been stronger. It started in the 1980s, when graffiti garnered more respect as an art form and its reputation as an act of pure vandalism began to wear off. All of a sudden, graffiti artists were rock stars. The Mad Society Kings and Art Work Rebels, whose talented membership includes tattooists Baba and Rick Walters of Vintage Tattoo and Grime and NORM of Skull & Sword, are two graffiti crews that are taking tattoos to new levels.

When Baba founded the Mad Society Kings in Los Angeles in the early 80s, the competition amongst graffiti crews was at its peak. Numerous bands and rap artists were using graffiti art on their albums, music videos and clothing, and the high-profile graffiti battles between graffiti artists Hex and Slick eventually got their work onto MTV. Baba started MSK, in part, to gain control of a scene that was continually getting watered down. "We basically said, 'This is L.A. graffiti! We'll tag as best as we can, we'll do throw-ups, we'll push the envelope of every facet of graffiti; no more of this production only or characters only or airbrushed back grounds. It was about taking over.'"

The first member Baba asked to join MSK was Eklips, whose reputation as a graffiti artist is now respected worldwide. Eklips founded Art Work Rebels in 1987, and the two crews have worked

together ever since. To show their unity, the MSK/AWR family often works under the title The Seventh Letter.

Tattooing and graffiti are both ancient arts; evidence of tattoos dates back to at least 5000 BC and the first example of graffiti was found in the ancient Greek city of Ephesus (in what is now Turkey), dating back to the 5th Century BC: it was an advertisement for prostitutes. The ancient city of Pompeii in Italy is the place to find the most plentiful and well-preserved ancient graffiti. The word graffiti, broken down into its Greek roots, literally means 'to scratch' and 'to write', but Baba of Vintage Tattoo, gives it another meaning: "Forget the Greeks. Write MSK on the wall: That's what graffiti means." ➔



➔ Choosing a name is one of the most important aspects of graffiti, because a graffiti artist's reputation and name are inseparable. Once a name is chosen, an artist must make it visible to the public, whether on alleyways, street signs, billboards, sidewalks, or buildings. Graffiti is often seen as vandalism for this reason, though most graffiti artists view it as art, a way to create community, and take back the streets from advertisements.

In the late 80s, graffiti artists began crossing over to tattoos. One of the first people to do this successfully was Seen, aka The Godfather of Graffiti. Seen inspired many artists, including members of MSK/AWR, when he opened his shop, Tattoo Seen, in New York City around 1988. Baba explained, "The only person doing it right was Seen. He was rockin' burners on people. The other guys always did these shitty green and orange tattoos." The term *burner* generally means a graffiti piece with a lot of colour and artistry that took a considerable amount of time to complete.

Tattoo Seen was a success and it helped open the door to the tattoo community for many graffiti artists. Some graffiti artists simply wanted their graffiti-inspired tattoos to replace the bad work they were seeing. Others, like, Baba, found that tattooing filled him with a renewed creativity. Baba, like many graffiti artists, had already made a name for himself by founding MSK, doing documentaries, commercials, clothing design and airbrush work for hip-hop stars. But when he saw the awesome tattoos of Jonathan Shaw, he wanted to learn how to tattoo. "I walked into Jonathan Shaw's tattoo shop and that early childhood magic was reinstilled into me – like a ton of fucking bricks." Though Shaw regularly told him to get lost, Baba eventually earned his respect, and Shaw trained him. "I started tattooing just to do graffiti tattoos. I would do burners and characters on people." In 1995, he took his love of traditional and Americana style tattoos and started Vintage Tattoo. Today, it's one of the biggest shops in Los Angeles.

"Tattooing is a service, graffiti is a disservice" Grime



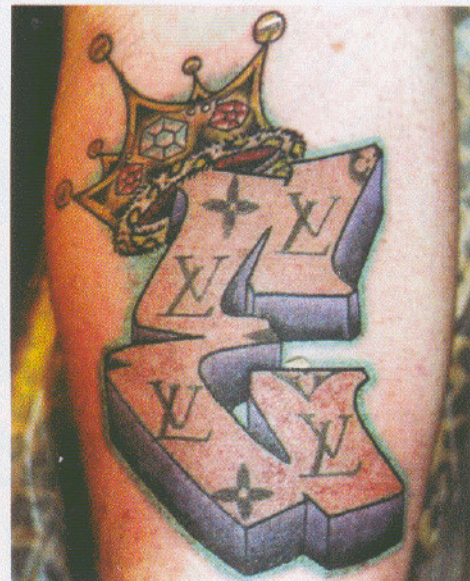
baba



MSK/AWR's impressive list of graffiti artists turned tattooists includes Blitz of Pure Tattoo, Jason Kundell of Seventh Son Tattoo, Phil Holt of Skull & Sword and Daver of Unbreakable Tattoo. MSK/AWR has recently gained the legendary tattooist Rick Walters as a member. Walters ran Bert Grimm's, the oldest consecutively run tattoo shop in the United States, for twenty-five years. He now works out of Vintage Tattoo. Though he is best known for his work in tattooing, Walters has been doing graffiti since 1959. "It wasn't a disrespect thing, you just wrote your name and where you were from. It was a style of writing that would be shared and displayed by an entire neighborhood." Rick drew on the table where we were sitting to give me an idea of what he meant: his name characterized by even lines, MSK, AWR, and TSL written beneath it.

The ability to write even letters is as important in tattooing as in graffiti. Just think of the traditional 'Mom' tattoo, one of the most popular tattoos in the world. Walters explained, "We didn't have paper stencils back then, and with a tattoo of a name paying ten dollars, you didn't want to take the time to cut a stencil out of hard plastic. Bob Shaw told me that if you want to do a name, put a line here, and a line there and, as long as all the letters are the same height and same spacing, it'll look good."

Baba explained the concept of letter balance with an anecdote: "I learned a big lesson from Duster (a Los Angeles graffiti artist). I'm doing every trick I can to impress him, and I'm looking at Duster and he's doing these big stupid letters, nothing special, no wild-style. We're like, 'What the hell?' But when we walked away and got to the freeway, all we could see was 'Dusty,' and our pieces were two little squiggles. That's what I mean by letter balance: You can recognise what it is from miles away while driving forty miles an hour." Walters added, "It's simple: If you can't tell what a tattoo is from twenty feet away, you didn't do your job."



When Baba began to focus on Vintage Tattoo, Eklips took control of MSK and continued to gather great artists under its name. One MSK/AWR member, Saber, did a piece in the bed of the L.A. River that was so large that NASA took a picture of it from outer space. Then a new wave of graffiti-artists-turned-tattooists began to step it up a notch. They called themselves New Skool and the group included Paco Excel, Adrian Lee and the awesome tattooist Grime.

If you ask California tattooists who they think is the most innovative tattooist around, more often than not the name you'll hear is Grime. Working out of Skull & Sword in San Francisco, his inventiveness, combined with an incredible use of color, has pushed the concept of tattooing nearer to the fine arts. Grime began graffiti in 1984, at the age of twelve, and he started hanging out with members of MSK/AWR when he moved to San Francisco in 1997. He became an AWR member in 2001. Grime and Jason Kundell opened Art Work Rebels tattoo shop: the first tattoo shop to use name. (????? Check this sentence with Mattie)

Grime is given credit for expanding the range of colours in tattoos, though he sees it a bit differently. "In '97 or '98, I happened upon a colour that a lot of people use now: olive green. It was an accident, which is the way most things happen. I got black in my fucking yellow and it turned green and I said, 'This is a weird color.'" It was easy for me to imagine that Grime's background in graffiti, with its complex colour combinations, aided him in his tattoo career, but he is hesitant to say so. "Graffiti can only have so much influence on tattooing because the approach of tattooing is not really that close to what you can do with graffiti. I can't say, 'I guess I'm gonna do a dark fill-in with a little white outline today,' because it doesn't work as a tattoo."

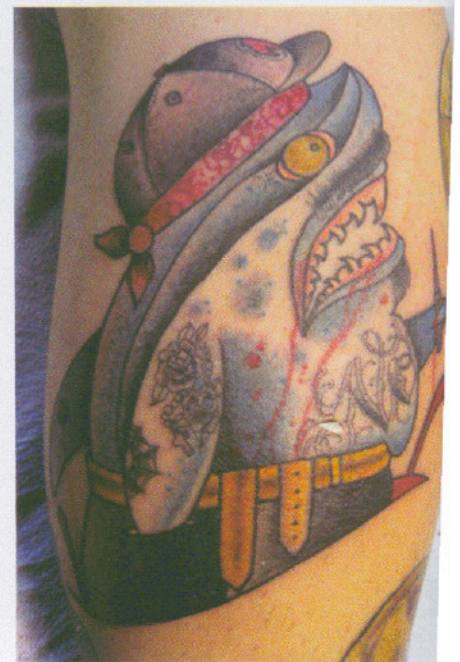


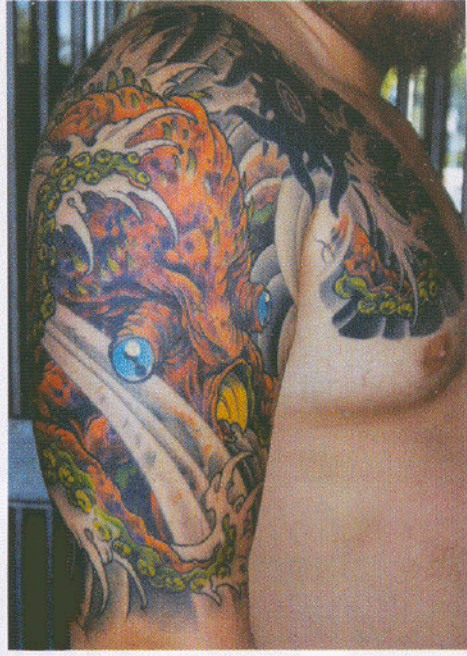
Graffiti has slowly become less a part of Grime's life. "I'd rather be a great tattooer, than a good tattooer and paint a lot of graffiti. That's just where my passion lies." Graffiti art still adorns the walls of Grime's shop, as do the vintage skateboards that inspire his tattooing. Grime also has a book coming out that includes a section on the graffiti artist Chaz, called "The Unofficial Guide to the L.A. River."

NORM is another artist working out of Skull & Sword, and he is currently in an apprenticeship with Grime. NORM has been a member of MSK/AWR since 2000 and he is part of the next wave of talented graffiti artists who are entering the field of tattooing. "NORM does shit that inspires me," Baba said. "There's no telling' how far that kid will go." NORM's graffiti constantly raises the bar and his tattoo career is just beginning. He began doing graffiti in 1998 and, at the age of twenty-two, he was a late beginner. But he didn't let that stop him. "My graffiti looked like



grime





shit and a lot of people told me to quit. But eventually I found something that I liked." His graffiti writing is often massive but even then, Rick Walters notes, "it's perfectly even."

The physical feats NORM achieves are awe inspiring, such as a piece he threw up on a billboard 250 feet in the air. I had a hard time imagining what it would be like to climb that tiny ladder with a full bag of spray paint. "It's amazing. To be able just to climb up on some crazy building in the middle of, say, Manhattan, and after you're done painting just look out over the city. I've been to a lot of places that are pretty scary where I was close to falling off. Luckily, I've never hurt myself painting – well, once I broke my foot running across a freeway."

The transition from graffiti to tattooing is not easy, and NORM has been apprenticing under Grime for two years now. The differences between the arts are readily apparent once you consider the physical acts. Grime provided a nice summation. "Painting, for me, is a pretty solitary thing and tattooing is not. Tattooing is a service, graffiti is a disservice."

The careers of the members of Mad Society Kings and the Art Work Rebels continue to expand as their talents blast through a variety of mediums. Baba, who once was the sole member of MSK, is now the Master Sponsor the Body Art Expo, which brings hundreds of tattooists to several major U.S. cities each year. Grime has been publishing books and he has a three year waiting list at his shop. "We are the true L.A. graffiti kings," says Baba. "We will do tags better than anybody, straight letters better than anybody, throw-ups, burners, bomb trains... We've got books and we've got galleries. I mean, Seventh Letter rules the world."

