



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

City as Canvas: Graffiti Art from the Martin Wong Collection

*First Exhibition of the Martin Wong Collection, Featuring 150 Works by
DAZE, DONDI, FUTURA 2000, Keith Haring, LADY PINK, LEE, and
More New York Graffiti Artists of the 1970s–'80s*

Opening Tuesday, February 4, 2014



Lee Quiñones, *Howard the Duck*, 1988

New York, December, 2013 – The Museum of the City of New York announces *City as Canvas: Graffiti Art from the Martin Wong Collection*, the first exhibition of the treasure trove of 1970s and '80s graffiti art amassed by artist and pioneering collector Martin Wong, who donated the entire collection to the City Museum in 1994. The exhibition features seminal paintings and “black book” sketches by DAZE (Chris Ellis), DONDI (Donald White), FUTURA 2000 (Leonard McGurr), Keith Haring, LADY PINK (Sandra Fabara), LEE (Lee Quiñones), RAMMELLZEE, SHARP (Aaron Goodstone), ZEPHYR (Andrew Witten), and many more New York graffiti artists, as well as photographs by Charlie Ahearn, Henry Chalfant, Martha Cooper, and others that show the era’s graffiti-covered subways and buildings. *City as Canvas* will open Tuesday, February 4, 2014, and remain on view until Sunday, August 24, 2014.

City as Canvas explores the cultural phenomenon of New York City graffiti art, beginning with historical photographs of graffiti long erased from subways and buildings, and delving into paintings and sketchbooks collected by Martin Wong (1946–1999). Graffiti emerged as a powerful

form of self-expression in New York City in the 1970s. With Wong and his friends at its epicenter, the movement evolved from illicit expressions on subway cars and station walls, to colorful paintings embraced as valuable works of art by collectors and patrons from the Downtown scene of the 1980s.

Wong was drawn to the ubiquitous graffiti writing he saw all over New York City when he moved from San Francisco in 1978. While working at Pearl Paint, an art supply store on Canal Street in Manhattan, he befriended New York City graffiti writers, many of whom were teenagers. At a time when others saw graffiti as an urban blight, Wong recognized the artistic and cultural value of his friends' work, which he began collecting through purchase or trade. The resulting collection features 55 sketchbooks—called “black books”—and more than 300 mixed media paintings on canvas, cardboard, paper, and plywood, many of which were permutations of spray-painted works on subways and buildings that were later erased or painted over. Interested in keeping the entire collection intact, Wong donated it to the City Museum in 1994 before returning to San Francisco, where he remained an active artist and friend of graffiti artists until his death from AIDS in 1999.

With nearly 150 works from Wong's collection on display, many of which were restored for this exhibition, *City As Canvas* highlights the vibrant colors, varying techniques, and personal styles that vividly reflect the culture and social pressures of the era. The exhibition also traces the evolution of the New York graffiti art movement at a moment when street art has emerged as an important part of the dialogue about art in public space. As revealed by the intense public reaction to Banksy's month-long New York “residency” in October, 2013 and the sudden whitewashing of Long Island City's legendary 5Pointz facade one month later, graffiti continues to elicit passionate emotions—both positive and negative—while fascinating New Yorkers and visitors from around the world.

“Graffiti art is now widely admired, but many questioned its merits during the movement's development in the 1970s. Martin Wong had the foresight to collect graffiti art and advocate for young ‘writers,’ just as New York City's street art scene was on the cusp of gaining international prominence,” said Susan Henshaw Jones, the Ronay Menschel Director of the Museum of the City of New York. “Understanding the importance of graffiti as an urban statement, the City Museum embraced the opportunity to acquire Martin Wong's collection, which included many works by artists living just blocks away. We're thrilled to show this rare collection for the first time since Wong donated it 20 years ago.”

Exhibition highlights include:

- Mixed media works on canvas, cardboard, paper, and plywood by icons of the New York graffiti art movement. Among the works featured are DAZE's *Transition* (1982), LADY PINK's *The Death of Graffiti* (1982), LEE's *Howard the Duck* (1988), a vivid oil painting of the artist's massive handball court mural, created 10 years earlier and since destroyed, at Corlears Junior High School on Manhattan's Lower East Side.
- Historical photographs by Charlie Ahearn, Henry Chalfant, Martha Cooper, Jon Naar, and Jack Stewart that document New York's graffiti art movement in 1970s and '80s. Included are Martha Cooper's full-color portraits of graffiti artists standing in front of their work, drawing in their sketchbooks, and breaking into subway layups (side tracks used for storage), as well as her landscape images of graffiti-covered subway trains rumbling through the city.

- Black book drawings by DONDI, RIFF 170, WICKED GARY (Gary Fritz), and others. The only museum collection like it in the world, the sketchbook drawings illustrate not only the artists' process and style, but the various purposes the black books served. In addition to sketching ideas for large works on subways and buildings, graffiti artists circulated their black books among friends to share drawings and lettering styles with one another.

Complementing the black books is *Wicked Gary's Tag Collection* (1970–72), a large work that showcases ink-drawn “tags,” or signatures used by more than 70 graffiti artists. The work functions as a who's who of New York graffiti writers, and includes tags by the movement's pioneers such as PHASE II, COCO 144, and SNAKE I (Eddie Rodriguez).

- The exhibition also features acrylic paintings by Wong, an artist “whose meticulous visionary realism is among the lasting legacies of New York's East Village art scene of the 1980s,” according to *The New York Times*. The featured paintings reflect the influence of Wong's friends on his own work. In *Sharp Paints a Picture* (1997–98), Wong depicts a shirtless SHARP wearing a respirator while standing in front of his painting. In *C76, Junior* (1988), Wong paints a scene of SHARP tucked into bed within a Riker's Island jail cell.
- *Graf Obsession: The Martin Wong Collection at The Museum of The City of New York* (2014), a new 13-minute documentary by Charlie Ahearn, director of *Wild Style* (1983), the first feature film on the New York City graffiti scene. *Graf Obsession* contains rare, previously unseen footage of Martin Wong surrounded by both his paintings and his graffiti collection in his Eldridge Street tenement apartment. It also includes interviews with DAZE, LEE, and SHARP as they discuss the importance of Martin Wong and his collection.

Background on Graffiti Art and the Martin Wong Collection

Modern graffiti came to New York City in the late 1960s and exploded in the 1970s. For a time, graffiti not only defined the city, but much like Hip Hop, it positioned New York as home of the movement. Covering subway cars, station walls, and building facades, the work produced was unprecedented. Growing media attention paid to “street art” led to interest from commercial galleries and collectors. As a result, by 1980, several gallery impresarios convinced young artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and FUTURA 2000 to produce works on canvas. While these commissioned works survived, few of the original examples of graffiti exist today due to in large part to the municipal efforts to remove graffiti from subways and buildings in the late 1980s and '90s.

LEE was one of Wong's first points of contact with the graffiti-writing movement, and he convinced the artist to paint him a surrogate *Howard the Duck* canvas, which would become one of Wong's prized paintings. As he learned more about the graffiti writing of the early 1970s, Wong sought out black book drawings, and acquired a collection by Wicked Gary—a founding member of the first graffiti writing club, the Ex-Vandals, and a member of the United Graffiti Artists, a collective of young writers who were the first to exhibit their work in a traditional gallery setting.

Wong also collected early work by RAMMELLZEE, who developed a complex philosophy of alphabetology he called “Iconoklast Panzerism.” Additionally, he scored a number of seminal works by FUTURA 2000, a graffiti artist whose abstract Kandinsky-like paintings have attained artistic accolades, and Keith Haring, who built a name for himself in New York's graffiti writing

movement of the 1970s and went on to gain commercial success worldwide. However, it was Keith's collaborator, LAII (Angel Ortiz), who captured Wong's attention. Wong's collection includes not only his sketchbooks and paintings, but LAII's childhood memorabilia.

City as Canvas is curated by Sean Corcoran, the City Museum's Curator of Prints and Photographs.

The accompanying catalogue, *City as Canvas: New York City Graffiti from the Martin Wong Collection* was edited by Sean Corcoran and Carlo McCormick, and published by Skira Rizzoli. The Museum is grateful to Florence Wong Fie and The Martin Wong Foundation for their generous support of the catalogue.

About Martin Wong

Born in Portland, Oregon, and raised in San Francisco, California, Chinese-American artist Martin Wong is best known for his elegiac realist paintings of Lower East Side tenements and their inhabitants. Wong moved from the West Coast to New York City in 1978. Trained as a ceramicist, the colors that Wong used were culled from the paint hues in his ceramics from iron oxides to gold, accenting the decaying brick walls of abandoned Lower East Side tenements. Wong would come to be an influential artist within the Downtown scene and a mentor to a league of young artists, including LADY PINK, DAZE, and LEE, among others. In 1998, Dan Cameron, then curator at the New Museum, and Barry Blinderman, who had been Wong's art dealer and had become the director at the Illinois State University Galleries at Normal, organized a major retrospective for Wong at the New Museum.

Wong's work is also in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, among other collections. After his death on August 12, 1999, his mother Florence Wong Fie established The Martin Wong Foundation, which continues to support artists and educational programs in the arts.

About the Museum of the City of New York

The Museum of the City of New York celebrates and interprets the city, educating the public about its distinctive character, especially its heritage of diversity, opportunity, and perpetual transformation. Founded in 1923 as a private, nonprofit corporation, the Museum connects the past, present, and future of New York City. It serves the people of New York and visitors from around the world through exhibitions, school and public programs, publications, and collections. For more information, visit www.mcny.org.

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