



Work by Prime

# Collectors Who Create

Ed and Brandy Sweeney Donate a Book  
of L.A. Graffiti Artists to the GRI



Graffiti art permeates Los Angeles culture. From stylized murals on freeway underpasses to tagged initials on building exteriors, graffiti is everywhere—though not typically in a museum. The *LA Liber Amicorum* project (also known as the *Getty Black Book* or *Master Piece Book Project*) brings an important documentation of this transient art form to the Getty

Research Institute (GRI)—a collection of 143 works by L.A.'s most prominent graffiti and tattoo artists. Inspired by the black sketchbooks that these artists carry around and inscribe for each other, the book was first conceived of by collectors Ed and Brandy Sweeney. The project takes its name from the GRI's splendid *Liber amicorum*—a "Book of friends" originally bound with blank leaves that were subsequently filled from 1602 to 1612 with watercolors, painted coats of arms, poetry, and calligraphy that multiple contributors inscribed to the owner, Johann Heinrich Gruber.

This model of art coming out of and honoring friendship is a fitting approach to a project that grew from a spirit of friendship between artist and collector.

Corporate pilot Ed Sweeney and his wife, Brandy, began collecting modern and contemporary art more than a decade ago, with a special interest in artists from Los Angeles and Southern California. Their collection includes work from artists such as Laddie John Dill, Billy Al Bengston, Tony Berlant, Ed Moses, and Robert Irwin. They became involved with the GRI, meeting Chief Curator Marcia Reed, when they donated an Irwin diazotype to the institution.

In 2003 the Sweeneys met and struck up a friendship with Juan Carlos Muñoz Hernandez, a painter, sculptor, graffiti artist, and muralist who was working as a studio assistant to artist Robert Graham. Muñoz Hernandez (also called Heaven) was in one of the original graffiti art

crews in Los Angeles and showed the Sweeneys his art. Instantly attracted to the work, Ed and Brandy quickly became passionate about the field. As collectors the Sweeneys like to get to know artists and work closely with them, visiting studios and discussing practice, often commissioning new works. Muñoz Hernandez introduced Ed and Brandy to many graffiti artists and new friendships developed.

"We like a very personal relationship with the artist," said Ed. "We collect graffiti art the same way we collect anything, by going directly to the artist and bugging them until they are willing to do something for us."

Brandy and Ed often entertain the artists with backyard cookouts that include family and friends or by visiting murals downtown with an artist.

"I have real friendships with a lot of these artists now," said Ed. "We talk about their art, their representation, their families."

At galleries and parties with the artists, the Sweeneys began to take an interest in the black books they came across. As Brandy noted, "They become almost a personal yearbook and important cultural literature. There are stories in each and every one of them."

Getty Black Book cover





Work by Defer

The Sweeneys have collected several black books, as well as individual works of graffiti art, and are keenly aware of the often temporary nature of the medium.

"A lot of the places these guys used to paint, the prolific spots such as Belmont Tunnel, they're gone," explained Ed. "Embracing the walls is fantastic, but you'll bring someone to see something and that piece will be gone. I've been disappointed so many times."

On the other hand, while graffiti on the street is transient, the Sweeneys feel that graffiti art sold in galleries can lose its spontaneity and sense of "adrenaline of the moment." Through a black book, Ed felt they could better capture and preserve the spirit of graffiti art.

"It was with the black book that I found a unique balance that was both spontaneous and permanent. A black book could contain a graffiti masterpiece, a quick tag, slap stickers, photographs, a 'throwie,' or sketches of future walls," said Ed. "A beautiful amalgamation of artists, styles, and mediums. To the owner, a priceless family heirloom that is carefully guarded and could never be sold. It transcended the commerce of art much like a family Bible or photo album."

The Sweeneys felt that the model of the black book was a great way to help recognize artists, both in their own time and for posterity. Graffiti artist Axis helped Ed develop the concept of the project—to catch this important moment in local graffiti art history. Ed knew where a book like this belonged. He reached out to the GRI's Marcia Reed who welcomed the idea and connected Ed with David Brafman, the GRI's curator of rare books.

"We especially appreciate research and creative projects that focus on our special collections of original works from earlier periods, bringing new perspectives to them. This was a wonderful opportunity to show some of our most notable rare books and manuscripts to a new and highly receptive audience," said Reed. "The graffiti artists immediately saw the relationships to their own art, designing letters and using words as images. I am not sure if they had experienced such a direct connection with art history before their visits to our reading room."

Ed's idea reminded David of some of the books in the GRI collections. He introduced Ed and a group of artists to the seventeenth-century *Liber amicorum* (Book of friends) and the artists immediately felt a connection to it. In the autographs



Juan Carlos Muñoz Hernandez (left) and Ed Sweeney at the black book viewing.

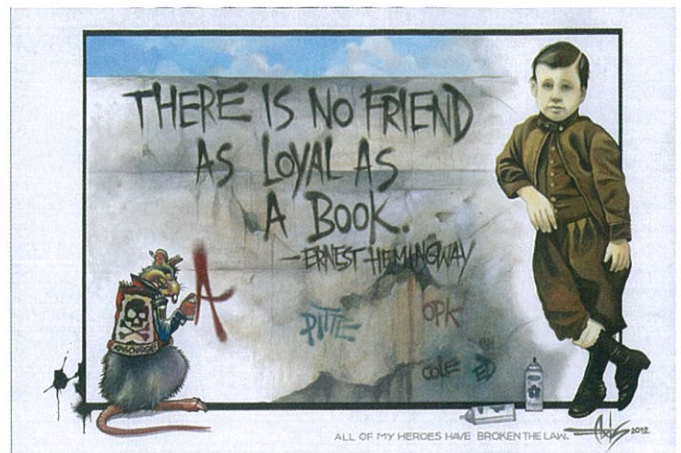
and drawings of Gruber's friends and acquaintances, the artists recognized commonalities with their work—particularly in the book's attention to lettering. The artists were also drawn to a number of books from the Renaissance through the Baroque on calligraphy, perspective, emblematic symbolism, and color theory.

"They not only implicitly understood the artistic practice that crafted the fonts, forms, and allegorical symbolism in the early modern books I showed them, but also that they were part of that same artistic tradition," explained Brafman. "It may be cliché about graffiti art, but I don't think you can overemphasize how words and letters use the composition of line, color, and form to designate meaning."

Graffiti artists Axis, Cre8, Defer, EyeOne, Heaven, ManOne and Prime helped Ed and David to curate the project. They began by creating a who's who list of graffiti artists, selecting whom to solicit and sending them pages to create whatever they wanted. All the chosen artists have worked extensively in Los Angeles and have contributed to the L.A. graffiti art scene. The artists who chose to participate drew, painted, and collaged—some adding materials and extra paper to the pages.

"These curators, along with a number of other artists who embraced and helped the project, should all be congratulated for a fantastic, historical document," said Ed.

Ed set about the work of putting the book together, and found himself faced with some difficult choices. It was imperative that the cover art be created by someone the other artists saw as legitimate, as well as someone who represented the spirit of the project. Prime, one of the first graffiti artists in L.A., fit the bill and created a cover design: a stylized "LA." Another tough choice was how to organize the book—would the artists be grouped by crew? Or would they be organized according to the dates they were most active? Each of these approaches



Work by Axis

seemed divisive, pitting crews or individual artists against one another. Ultimately, the pages were organized largely in alphabetical order according to each artist's most commonly used street name, without consideration of rivalries or any possible hierarchies. This structure allowed the book to more closely mimic the original *Liber amicorum*—a book of friends united by their willingness to help canonize L.A. graffiti art.

"One really interesting thing that came out of this is that you had these rival crews, guys who wouldn't even talk to each other, and this book helped to unify them. Several of them are collaborating on projects and working together now," said Ed. "This book has opened a dialogue."

"That's one of the most wonderful aspects about the whole thing," added Brandy. "Seeing people come together who would have had nothing to do with each other because of rivalries."

For the Sweeneys, putting the black book together has been a fun but labor-intensive project, taking up much of their free time for the last year. They'll take some time off from this project-driven collecting for now, but Ed does have ideas for future projects. He is currently thinking about ways to combine his interests in both contemporary gallery art and graffiti art.

The *LA Liber Amicorum* is one of the first projects of its kind to compile the unique letterforms, characters, and themes that represent the regionally and culturally diverse landscape of graffiti and street art in Los Angeles. Various holdings in the GRI's rare book and manuscript collections inspired the artists to pay tribute to their own Los Angeles roots and add an important dimension to the ongoing study of artistic lettering throughout the ages. The book is part of the special collections at the GRI and is now available to view online. [http://www.getty.edu/research/special\\_collections/notable/la\\_liber\\_amicorum/index.html](http://www.getty.edu/research/special_collections/notable/la_liber_amicorum/index.html).