



Very Little
Helps/Tesco Flag
(2008), mural in
North London

ICON

ARTIST ANONYMOUS

Banksy's unique brand of 'art for all' has broken every rule. Three decades later, it stands true to its purpose and continues to disrupt. Here's looking at the art world's most popular and revolutionary vandal. By **Somak Ghoshal**



Rage, The
Flower Thrower
(2005), mural
in Bethlehem,
Jerusalem

In the few days that passed between thinking about this essay and writing it, its subject created a stir in the art world, as he routinely has every few months for the last three decades. Such is the ubiquity and potency of Banksy, the British artist whose identity no one knows for certain, despite the paparazzi's dogged persistence to expose him for years. Many of his fans don't even want to know the person behind the moniker. They prefer the romantic, Robin Hood-like Banksy to the flesh-and-blood figure who is one of the most popular and recognisable makers of public art in the world.

On October 3, *Devolved Parliament*, a painting by Banksy which shows the House of Commons packed with chimpanzees in place of ministers, hammered down at £9.88 million (over ₹90 crore) at Sotheby's in London, breaking his previous auction record. He was quick to respond on Instagram, with a quote by art critic Robert Hughes: "But the price of a work of art is now part of its function, its new job is to sit on the wall and get more expensive. Instead of being the common property of humankind the way a book is, art becomes the particular property of somebody who can afford it..." A telling quote, captioned: "Record price for a Banksy painting set at auction tonight. Shame I [Banksy] didn't still own it." Created in 2009, it seems like a prophetic vision of British politics circa 2019 amid the mayhem of Brexit.

PUBLIC AFFAIR

While it is fair to describe this work and his response as public-minded, it was with another, more explicitly public kind of art that Banksy entered the scene. In Bristol, where it is assumed he grew up in a volatile, working-class neighbourhood, Banksy began to create his unique brand of 'art for all' in the 1990s. Armed with cans of spray paint, a tool wielded by generations of graffiti artists before and after him, Banksy painted across his home town with vivid colours. His magic touch turned the familiar into something provocative, literally and metaphorically changing the writing on the wall.

Walls are useful structures for states to keep people apart. But walls also bristle with subversive potential—they can act as a primal canvas for the expression of emotions. Our ancient ancestors left paintings on the walls of caves, like cryptic messages from another era. More recently, until 1989, Germany was divided by the Berlin Wall, the remnants of which now bear >

GETTY IMAGES