

The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century

The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century explores hip-hop's profound influence on modern culture. Having begun as one of the most vital musical and pop-cultural movements of the late 20th century, it is now a global industry and way of life. Its practitioners in the 21st century have harnessed digital technologies to gain unparalleled economic, social, and cultural capital.

Hip-hop emerged from The Bronx in the 1970s as a form of celebration expressed by local Black, Latine, and Afro-Caribbean youth. Over the past fifty years, it has deeply informed "The Culture," an expression of Black diasporic culture that has largely defined itself against white supremacy.

The Culture is organized around six themes: Language, Brand, Adornment, Tribute, Pose, and Ascension. Language explores hip-hop's strategies of subversion. Brand highlights the icons born from hip-hop, and the seduction of success. Adornment challenges Eurocentric ideas of taste, while Tribute testifies to hip-hop's development of a visual canon. Pose celebrates how hip-hop speaks through the body. Ascension explores mortality, spirituality, and the transcendent. Endlessly inventive and multifaceted, hip-hop—and the art it inspires—will continue to dazzle and empower.

The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century is organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Saint Louis Art

Museum. The Toronto presentation is organized by the Art Gallery of Ontario.

LANGUAGE

Hip-hop is intrinsically an art-form about language: the visual language of graffiti, a musical language that includes scratching and sampling, and, of course, the written and spoken word. Call-and-response chants, followed by rap rhymes and lyrics overlaid on tracks, are the foundations of hip-hop music. In addition to the poetry of the music, one of the most recognizable markers of hip-hop is graffiti. Since the 1970s, graffiti writers have coloured city trains, overpasses, and walls with vibrant hues of spray paint. Many writers sign their works with recognizable tags. Their exploration takes the recognizable shapes of letters and numbers and pushes their forms to—and beyond—the limits of legibility. Some messages are meant for anyone to understand, while others are coded in references, technologies, or forms that require insider knowledge, asserting the right not to be universally understood.

ADORNMENT

Now I like dollars/I like diamonds/I like stunting/I like shining,” Cardi B raps in “I Like It.” Her words capture the recurrent identification of self with adornment in the canon of hip-hop. While style often signifies class and politics, few subcultures are as self-referential or as influential as hip-hop. Reaching back from Big Daddy Kane and Rakim’s layers of gold chains through Lil’ Kim’s technicolor wigs to Jay-Z’s elevated blend of street style and luxury brands, some of the most important, enduring, and distinct looks in pop culture originate with hip-hop. Jewellery flashes, grills glint, and iconic Air Force One sneakers are meant to be seen. In

her 2015 book *Shine*, art historian Krista Thompson looks at how, within the African diaspora, light is caught and styled close to the body. She explores the ways people today “use objects to negotiate and represent their personhood,” in contrast to how their ancestors were defined as property.

BRAND

“I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man!” exclaimed Jay-Z in 2005. Soon after, he became the first rapper to cross the billion-dollar-net-worth threshold. The concept of a brand is not limited to marketing commercial goods, it extends to the ways an individual uses communication technologies—including social media—to position themselves in the public sphere. In previous decades, hip-hop artists functioned as unofficial promoters of major fashion brands that aligned with their style and public personae. Today, artists partner officially with companies or create their own independent brands. Whether designing fashion, recording music, or making art, artists blur the boundaries between these art forms, between being in business and being the business.

TRIBUTE

From name-dropping in a song to wearing a portrait of a deceased rapper on a T-shirt, tributes, respects, and shoutouts are fundamental to hip-hop culture. These references proclaim influence and who matters, honour legacies, and create networks of artistic associations. Elevating artists and styles contributes to

hip-hop's canonization—when certain artworks, songs, and rappers are collectively recognized for their artistic excellence and historical impact. Hip-hop as a global artform has become a touchstone for artists of the 21st century. As visual artists trace hip-hop's conceptual and social lineage through tribute, they engage the idea that the art historical canon, previously homogenous, white, and stable, is fluid depending on your own background and preferences, questioning what is beautiful, who is iconic, and whose histories are valued.

ASCENSION

Death—or the spectre of it—along with notions of ascension and the afterlife frequently appear in hip-hop lyrics: pouring out libations in honour of someone who has passed away, the precarity of being Black in an urban environment, meditations on the kind of immortality conferred by fame. Inspired by themes of ascent in the culture, artists create works that invite reflection. Ordinary objects transform into altars and monuments, and images of Black bodies melt into heavenly clouds. Hip-hop is a cultural form that artists use to process, self-reflect, lament, grieve, or remember those lost.

POSE

From the club to backyards and bedrooms, from online to the street and the stage, these works explore what one's gestures,

stance, and mode of presentation can communicate to others. Here, artists explore and explode stereotypes of gender and race, examine the line between appreciation and appropriation, consider the relationship between audience and performer, and ask which bodies are considered dangerous or vulnerable—and who decides. For some, self-presentation is a means of survival, for some it's a way to claim space in a hostile world, for some it's a tool in changing dominant narratives about what can be communicated through the body. As part of its total project of creating a new canon, hip-hop's aesthetics of the body refuse to conform to one standard and instead open up new ideas of what the body can say.