

« (/read-267812/?page=15#booktxt)	11 (/read-267812/?page=11#booktxt)	12 (/read-267812/?page=12#booktxt)
13 (/read-267812/?page=13#booktxt)	14 (/read-267812/?page=14#booktxt)	15 (/read-267812/?page=15#booktxt)
16 (/read-267812/?page=16#booktxt)	17 (/read-267812/?page=17#booktxt)	18 (/read-267812/?page=18#booktxt)
19 (/read-267812/?page=19#booktxt)	20 (/read-267812/?page=20#booktxt)	21 (/read-267812/?page=21#booktxt)
... (/read-267812/?page=31#booktxt)	32 (/read-267812/?page=32#booktxt)	» (/read-267812/?page=17#booktxt)
17		Перейти!

NemaloKnig.net (/) / Документальная литература (/genre/dokumentalnaia-literatura/) / Публицистика (/genre/nonf_publicism/) /
Toth J. (/author-87759/) / книга «The Mole People»

More than a decade ago, when trains wore graffiti, Chris gave designs to graffiti gangs eager to prove their daring by executing them. He was far less interested in braving the dangers than in seeing his concept completed and appreciated.

One spring day, as he and I are watching a group of boys play baseball in Riverside Park, a long ball comes our way and stops next to a grating. The fielder rushes after it, and as he bends down to retrieve it, something through the grate catches his eye.

“Whoa, look at this!” he shouts to the other players, and they, ignoring the runners, come to see.

“Wow, it’s Ted Williams,” says a teammate, crouching down.

Chris smiles. They are viewing his tunnel portrait of the onetime baseball star painted much like he appears on the baseball cards that occupy much of Chris’s aboveground life.

“That’s what it’s all about,” Chris says quietly, wearing a broad, proud grin as he watches the discovery of his work.

Chris in his early years often spent his few dollars on paints rather than dinner. One winter he came down with bronchitis, which became pneumonia and mononucleosis, but he continued to crawl down into the tunnels to satisfy what he now regards as his obsession. He was in the Riverside Park tunnel before Bernard arrived, and when Bernard appeared, Chris ignored him, preferring to stay as anonymous as possible. He was also doing graffiti on subway cars at the time—“a chameleon,” as he says. Bernard finally persuaded Chris to have a cup of tea at his fire and frightened him badly, much as he once did me.

Bernard had been talking about the discoveries that can be made in trash and refuse, then abruptly turned his tall frame from the fire to reach into his shirt and bring out a long, glistening butcher’s knife. “Like this,” he said, fingering the sharp edges. Chris reached for his spray can, ready to fire it into Bernard’s face, but Bernard put the weapon away and the two resumed talking about art. They laugh about the incident now.

Bernard claims he did not know Chris was afraid of him. “I only thought you were very quiet, a little weird.”

Sometimes, Bernard recalls, the homeless found Chris lying by a mural because he was very weak, or breathing heavily. He tried to convince Chris to give up graffiti writing in the tunnels, at least until he recovered his health. Often he brought blankets to throw over Chris’s shoulders. Once Chris passed out and Bernard carried him to the fire.

While Sane and Smith created sporadically on the tunnel walls, Chris used most of the available wall space along thirty underground blocks of the Riverside Park tunnel walls as his personal gallery. As with the portrait of Ted Williams, he cleverly capitalizes on whatever sunlight penetrates to the underground and incorporates it into his works along with the natural breaks and textures of the walls themselves. Much of his work is derivative—Dali-esque melting watches that ooze down from catwalks and rafters and through grates in the ceiling, for example—although he believes it also asserts that time is running out on the lives of underground homeless. In another mural, a bizarre cherub with an automatic rifle floats above a green man with a ragged scar across his face. Another, titled *History of Graffiti*, chronicles graffiti on a sweeping train, each car a tribute to great “writers” and their styles. Yet another portrays a silver-black Madonna, face aglow with golden light, peacefully regarding the denizens of the tunnel who pass. The most romantic of his murals portrays an exotic woman with dark hair swept back to reveal features more blunt than flattering and mysterious but solicitous eyes. The treatment suggests he once loved her.

Perhaps his most famous work is the mural that took up the side of an entire subway car, a photograph of which almost got to the Museum of Modern Art as part of its “High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture” show. The exhibit featured great masters, their impact on street art, and in turn, street art’s impact on them. Freedom’s work was a version of Michelangelo’s *Creation*, an ephemeral hand reaching down from a white cloud to touch fingertips with another from below. Across the bottom he scrawled the words “What is Art. Why is art.” The photograph of the car with the mural was incorporated into the sixty-page catalog, but in the end the museum chose not to display the picture for fear it would alienate trustees and donors who might interpret it as an endorsement of graffiti.

WHEN CHRIS IS WORKING ON HIS TUNNEL ART HE IS FREEDOM. Recently, he and Smith have agreed to collaborate, but they are not agreed on the subject. Freedom wants to do Picasso’s *Guernica*, but Smith argues for Goya’s *Third of May*. Freedom agrees, recalling the sense of violence and terrorism in the original, which he wants to transfer onto the tunnel wall in an attempt to dramatize his fear and horror of that world. The campfire will illuminate the stinging colors, he explains, and the homeless around it will live with the scene even as they are part of it.

A twenty-foot ladder is trundled several miles along the tracks to Bernard’s camp. Next come cartons of spray-paint cans. The work begins one morning before sunup. By the firelight, Freedom and Smith—and now the wakened Bernard—whitewash a thirty-foot-long, sixteen-foot-high section of wall.

It will be the largest piece in the tunnel, they say, and as they work, determined and intense, tunnel dwellers passing by only whisper lest they disturb the effort. Holding a picture of the original, Freedom outlines the scene with light blue paint. Neither he, with baseball cap under hooded sweatshirt, nor Smith, in green army jacket and heavy boots, talk much. From across the tracks, Bernard hands over old clothes for rags.

A train approaches and everyone freezes, melting against the tunnel’s gray walls to escape sight. When it passes, the ladder is erected again and the work continues. Smith moves smoothly from side to side while Freedom, on the ladder, nearly falls several times.

Smith becomes impatient. He usually completes his murals within hours. Freedom is slower and more critical. When a figure looks wrong to him, he repaints it, despite Smith’s objections. However, at the end of the first day, when they step back to regard their work, they agree it will be great. It will be big, big.

The word had reached the homeless on the surface by the next morning. “They’re doing something big,” one man says as I begin down the slope toward the tunnel’s entrance. “Real big. For us.”

Another man cautions me against going into the tunnels alone, and he comes with me. As we watch the second day begin, he says “Everyone down here knows about it. This is going to be the biggest thing in our tunnel. Too bad, though. A lot of people will want to come down here now to settle.”

Bernard is not happy. As the mural takes shape, he sees the blood and gore and begins to reconsider his permission for the work right there across from his campfire. For the sake of friendship, he says, he shrugs off his doubts and Freedom and Smith continue to fill in the figures they have sketched and add lines that bring the figures to life. Smith completes the top of the cathedral and sprays the misty blue sky that symbolizes hope above the violent execution scene.

A man and woman who live in the tunnel pass by. “I think we should put this piece in our den,” the man jokes.

“Do you think they’ll eat sandwiches if we bring some?” the woman asks. “They’re outsiders and I just don’t want to intrude,” she explains to me.

“We’ll have to visit Bernard more often now,” says another man to a group as they watch briefly. “It’s civil here.”

Toward the end of the day, Bernard tells Smith to walk me to the exit, but Smith is impatient to finish. He resists until Bernard orders him, almost threatening. “It’s the law of the tunnel,” he says, probably inventing a new law for the occasion, “that a woman visitor doesn’t leave here alone. And you’re in a tunnel.”

Icy rain and bitter cold weather prevent Freedom and Smith from completing the work the next day. They wear light layers of clothes, Smith in an army jacket and Freedom in his bomber jacket, to allow flexible movement. Nothing can protect their hands and fingers spraying the paint, though. Even on a warm day, I can only spurt the paint for a few minutes at a time. Graffiti writers spend hours at a time.

The piece is completed a few days later. It spreads large and wide and intricately. The gruesome scene is alarming, just the effect Freedom wanted. The misty cathedral promises detail from afar, but up close turns out to be only an image—a sign of Smith’s mastery of his material. Smith hands the signing paint can to Freedom. At first he refuses, for some reason I do not understand. Then he writes his tag. So does Smith. And he adds Sane’s tag.

As I leave, the day seems more sweet than others despite the brisk chill blowing off the river. I feel I have witnessed something remarkable being created underground, a bit of wonder, if not beauty, for homeless underground people to appreciate and call their own.

“I like the place,” Tony tells me. “It gets damp, but it’s safe enough, and there’s OK people down here, and I like the art,” he says, almost embarrassed to use the word. “It makes me feel human, you know. And underground, believe me, you can feel like the animal they think you are upstairs.”



The May Third Mural By Chris Pape And Roger Smith. Photo By Thomas Bornemann

13 *Graffiti*

IT WAS THE CHRISTMAS SEASON IN NEW YORK IN 1978. THE lights were still on in the Brooklyn train lay-up and Lee didn't like it.

"Let's go home," he told Mono.

"Yo, you crazy, man?" Mono was in his face. "We racked up all this paint," he yelled at the suitcases full of spray-paint cans they had stolen over several weeks and carried on subway trains, through stations, and finally into the tunnel. Their goal was to "do"—to cover with graffiti—the side of an entire ten-car train, which had never been done before.

The two men, along with a third, Slave, belong to the Fabulous Five, New York's most notorious graffiti gang. They crouched at the end of the tunnel before it opens into the train yard, or lay-up. They refused to allow Doc to take part because he was wasted on alcohol, and Dirty Slug, the fifth member, seldom joined them anymore.

"Ah, fuck it, man, let's do it," Lee agreed. The Transit Authority was cracking down on graffiti writers, increasing its police force to 4,300 in an effort to stop the "vandalism" that constituted "pollution of the eye and mind," as officials put it, and the gang might not get this close to sleeping subway trains again.

They apportioned the paint among the cars, donned gloves, and got to work. Lee had studied the train for two nights. He would do the first car—cascade green and faded blue—then Mono would do the next, Slave the third, then another by Mono, then a car with a Mickey Mouse and the Fabulous Five tag, then two holiday-festooned cars that would say "Merry Christmas, New York," and so on.

"When we started piecing, I did my first car in less than an hour," Lee recalls. "I was bombing. The colors were coming and it burned."^[3] (/read-267812/?page=32#n_3)

About two hundred paint cans were empty, and eight of the ten cars were finished when the cops arrived. "Move, move!" shouted Mono as he waved toward a cluster of big flashlights coming down the tracks. "Cops, man, cops!"

Mono began running, fell, got up, and raced off. Slave had disappeared. Lee failed to see another train arriving on the next track before it sideswiped him, knocking him under the graffitied cars. He saw shiny, black shoes approaching.

"We got you now, c'mon out!" one voice called out loudly, but from a distance, so he bolted for the tunnel's mouth, stopping just inside for breath. Mono came out of the darkness, and they crouched in near panic near the spot where their evening adventure had begun.

Suddenly, both were caught in a flashlight beam. "Freeze!" the voice ordered.

Again they ran, across tracks and up a flight of stairs, clawing and scrambling toward an exit grate they knew. It was stuck, and they had to jump up in unison and push the grating free before they emerged onto the street. "There were people waiting for a bus. Dunno what they thought when they saw us coming out of the sidewalk, all dirty with our hands bleeding," Lee laughs now, "and these voices yelling up from the tunnels, and we just ran. Bang! We were out of there."

They walked around Brooklyn until the adrenaline wore off and Mono persuaded Lee to return to the tunnel to complete the work. To leave it unfinished would tell other graffiti writers that they had run and "lost the game," as he said. So they went back and painted the final two cars that same night, without any more interruptions.

The next morning at about 7 A.M., Lee went to the Brooklyn Bridge Station. It was the accepted time and place, amid the early morning commuter rush, for graffiti writers to gather and view each other's work from the previous night before the Transit Authority could pull the trains out of service for an acid bath to erase the paint.

“Oh, man! Oh man!” someone shouted at Lee. “I’ve seen it! A whole train! It’s bad style, Lee,” he yelled approvingly. He had seen it on another line, so Lee had to ride one train after another much of the day until he saw it. Even Lee was stunned. “The first cars came in like a roaring horse,” he remembers. “You could barely see the side of it, all the colors flashing out of the windows we’d blanketed with paint.”

He boarded the train and watched others on the platforms looking in amazement as it passed. “It was like crazy, like you could see the reflection in their eyes.” Some viewers applauded. Even the “Wall Street Journals,” as he calls businessmen with briefcases, were awed. A short, red-haired cop, watching the train unfold back to the fir-treed Merry Christmas cars, shook his head in admiration and smiled.

Inside, “people were looking at each other in confusion, like they were in church with stained glass windows, and talking about it. Some positive, some negative. But I knew they would talk about it at home,” he says proudly, “and that’s what New York is all about. It’s giving to people with nothing in return.”

GRAFFITI COMES FROM THE ITALIAN WORD, *GRAFFIO*, WHICH MEANS TO scratch. It is used to describe many different kinds of wall writings, and dates back at least to ancient Egypt. In ancient Rome, an inscription on private property asked people not to scribble on the walls. New York graffitists take credit for beginning, in the late sixties, the wave of contemporary graffiti writings not only in the United States but in Europe as well. A *New York Times* reporter tracked down a Washington Heights teenager named Demetrius, who signed his nickname and his street name, “Taki 183,” on hundreds of walls, stoops, monuments, and subways. “Not for the girls,” he said, “they don’t care. You do it for yourself.” Most of his successors were boys, but a few were girls, like Lady Pink.

« (/read-267812/?page=15#booktxt)	11 (/read-267812/?page=11#booktxt)	12 (/read-267812/?page=12#booktxt)
13 (/read-267812/?page=13#booktxt)	14 (/read-267812/?page=14#booktxt)	15 (/read-267812/?page=15#booktxt)
16 (/read-267812/?page=16#booktxt)	17 (/read-267812/?page=17#booktxt)	18 (/read-267812/?page=18#booktxt)
19 (/read-267812/?page=19#booktxt)	20 (/read-267812/?page=20#booktxt)	21 (/read-267812/?page=21#booktxt)
... (/read-267812/?page=31#booktxt)	32 (/read-267812/?page=32#booktxt)	» (/read-267812/?page=17#booktxt)
17		Перейти!

В начало книги (/read-267812/#booktxt)

шрифт:

14

▼

Times New Roman

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В закладки