



# Examination of the Refugee Crisis Through Banksy's Works

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## ABSTRACT

This article researches the art of the British street artist Banksy in the face of the refugee crisis, one of the most important problems of today, regarding the effective power of art in the face of social problems. The refugee crisis, which dates back to ancient times, is growing day by day and has become a humanitarian problem whose solution is exhausted. The refugee crisis, which was experienced within certain borders in the past, has now become a compulsory common problem of all nations, with the effect of globalization, and has become an international issue that directly affects many countries. This crisis, which indirectly and directly concerns many areas such as political, geographical, economic and social, is frequently addressed. Of course, art could not remain indifferent to this problem, which deeply affects society in many areas. Art, which has dealt with social problems in every period throughout history, also fulfills its social responsibility in the refugee crisis, which is one of the most important problems of our time, and leaves important historical records that will transfer the problem and the effects of its solution to the next generation by visualizing it. In this context, the works of the artist Banksy are of great importance. It was aimed to prove through Banksy's critical, provocative, constructive, and sanctioning works that art should not only be seen as an area that has no sanctioning power within the framework of visual culture in community memory. There is a serious gap between the rights promised to refugees in the Convention on Human Rights and the rights realized by today's administrations.

As a result of factors such as the weak practices of the authorities like UN towards the refugee masses, the ignorance of the problem by the world states, and the racist attitudes of the societies, the refugee problem has turned into a major crisis, especially since the 2000s.

Banksy draws attention to the refugee crisis with his actional work on the international platform and sheds light on today's greatest humanitarian crisis with his work with his own satirical and political humor.

**Keywords:** Refugee Crisis, Banksy, Street Art, Social Memory

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Banksy is one of the most controversial street artists in the world for his street art. Very little is known about himself. Carefully preserving its mystery and anonymity, Banksy differs from other street artists with its unique unconventional art understanding. No claims made to reveal his identity could be confirmed.

Beginning his graffiti career by admiring the works of Blek Le Rat, Banksy worked with various graffiti bands such as DryBreadZ Crew in Bristol. In the process, he shaped his style with the new templates he created. Banksy, who moved from Bristol to London in the early 2000s, was now becoming famous not only in England but also internationally. During the years-long Israeli-Palestinian wars, Banksy went to Palestine and the West Bank to try to publicize the brutality experienced by Palestinian citizens by examining them closely, and painted 9 iconic walls on the West Bank Barrier built there (Street Art Bio).

The artist, who takes street art out of its place, refers to social events with satirical messages created in the triangle of art, politics, and philosophy.

Focusing mostly on global problems affecting all humanity such as war, violence, migration, refugee, climate problem, and poverty around the world, the artist has encouraged provocative perspectives with his political messages and destructive vision in modern history. It is possible to say that he brings alternative, questioning, thought-provoking, and analytical perspectives to the global graffiti scene with the global problems it carries (Street Art Bio).

A famous political theorist Hannah Arendt made impressive analyzes about the situation of stateless people with her academic studies between 1918-1945 (Wessel, 2016).

It's suggested that undocumented migrants are the new stateless refugees identified by Arendt. After the First World War and during the Second World War, it is possible to match the negativities experienced by minorities such as exclusion from all legal fields with the experiences of undocumented refugees today (Wessel, 2016).

When Hannah Arendt wrote about the situation of refugees in the 1940s on the total exclusion of refugees, she stated that human rights developed after the World Wars had nothing to do with stateless people. She argues that refugees have lost all their rights and are unlikely to take them back and that the gap created between state citizens and stateless people has been made unsurpassable (Wessel, 2016).

Every year, thousands of people fleeing their homes due to war, persecution, violence, and poverty die during their difficult journey. Especially Syrians who had to leave their countries due to the civil war in their country in recent years lost their lives in the cold waters of the Mediterranean in the hope of going to European countries for a better future.

However, thousands of people lost their lives during this dangerous journey. For people who reach Europe, besides physical difficulties, they face many factors that threaten also their mental health.

The fact that Europe strengthens its national borders against asylum seekers and even makes inhumane applications to prevent disasters in the Mediterranean Sea from reaching its borders is recorded in history as the most inhumane cases in recent years. Migrants who somehow reach Europe are exposed to a miserable life on the streets.

Susan M Akram, a professor of Clinical Law at Boston University Faculty of Law, stated that The Middle East States that host the majority of Palestinian refugees are persistent objectors to the Refugee and Statelessness Convention norms for historical reasons. She also stated that most Arab countries were not parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention. "Only nine of the 22 Arab States are parties to the Refugee Convention of 1951 or the Refugee Protocol of 1967. Of these nine States, eight are in North Africa: Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, and Tunisia, the ninth being Yemen, 'State Parties to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol'." (Akram, 2018).

She stated that the inability to produce permanent solutions for stateless refugee communities caused the refugee problem to be transferred from generation to generation (Akram, 2018).

Banksy redesigned his iconic work "The Girl with Balloon" to commemorate the third anniversary of the Syrian civil war that began on March 15, 2011. In his work, which he designed by adapting to the religious and cultural values of the Syrian people, he depicts a Syrian refugee girl with a headscarf (Art Republic).



Image 1. Banksy, #WithSyria, 2011

Source: <https://artrepublic.com/blogs/blog/391-banksy-reworks-balloon-girl-image-to-mark-3rd-year-of-syrian-conflict.html>

In a statement on the website, Banksy realized a campaign together with actor Idris Elba and a group named Elbow to end the conflict in Syria with the #WithSyria hashtag, an online campaign to support 15 children arrested for writing pro-democracy graffiti articles that triggered protests against the Assad regime in March 2011.

In order to increase the effectiveness of the study, they applied for their works on various symbolized structures, including the Eiffel Tower and Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square (Art Republic).

The aim of Banksy and his friends was to make their voices heard to the political authorities in order to get rid of the persecution of the Syrian people as soon as possible. He first emphasized the situation of refugees with his works on the West Bank barrier in Bethlehem in 2003. However, it is understood that political authorities did not impose any significant sanctions in the process from 2011 to the present day (Art Republic).

Banksy, who is intolerant of the concept of refugee and has important efforts to change the ideas hidden behind the concept of nationalism with racist prejudices, presents the concept of refugee to the audience from a completely different perspective. It presents through a real character that refugeeism can also have advantages if it can be approached positively.

Banksy created a work of art depicting Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, on a concrete bridge at the Jungle refugee camp in Calais, France. He challenges racist attitudes towards Syrian refugees with the original Apple computer and a black garbage bag on his shoulder (Neuendorf, 2015).

In this mural, which includes Steve Jobs, whose family is also a Syrian immigrant, the artist points out that negative thoughts about the concept of a refugee should be questioned again.



Image 2. Banksy, Jungle, Calais, France, 2015. Photo: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/banksy-calais-artwork-steve-jobs-392042>

In his statement through his spokesperson “We’re often led to believe migration is a drain on the country’s resources, but Steve Jobs was the son of a Syrian migrant. Apple is the world’s most profitable company, it pays over \$7 billion a year in taxes, and it only exists because they allowed in a young man from Homs” he proves that if immigrants are allowed, this can also have benefits (Neuendorf, 2015).



Image 3. Banksy, The Raft of the Medusa, Calais, France, 2018. Photo: Via Banksy.co.uk

He created a new version of Théodore Géricault's “The Raft of the Medusa” (1818-1819) in the city center of Calais.

In this work, which the artist presented on his website under the title of “We are not all on the same ship”, a raft full of miserable immigrants trying to attract the attention of a distant passenger ship is depicted (Rea, 2018).

The artist has not only made efforts to make the voice of refugees heard in the world. He also tried to contribute to better their life through his artistic works. The Dismaland boat, which costs about \$2.50, is one of the most concrete examples of this.

Although the refugee crisis in our recent history has emerged as an increasing problem with the Syrian war, the refugee dramas in the Mediterranean and Aegean islands have shaded the war in this process. Thousands of millions of people fleeing from war have quietly lost their lives in these black waters, where they went down to their death for the sake of a better life dream.



Image 4. Banksy, Dream Boat / Dismaland, 2015.

Source: <https://untitled-magazine.com/banksy-to-raffle-dismaland-sculpture-bid-starts-at-2>



Banksy exhibited this installation at the temporary amusement park named “Dismaland” in 2015, which parodies Disneyland in an unused swimming pool complex in the British seaside town of Weston-super-Mare to help refugee support services (Leon, 2018).

An anti-fascist and anti-racist group of activists led by Clomp Louise Michel set sail from the Spanish seaport of Burriana on August 18 to rescue 89 distressed migrants stranded on a rubber dinghy in the middle of the Mediterranean. Banksy provided financial support to this rescue operation they secretly attempted (Waddoups, 2020).



Image 5. Banksy's rescue ship allocated to the refugees.

Source: <https://www.surfacemag.com/articles/banksy-migration-boat-louise-michel>

In a video posted on his Instagram account, Banksy stated that European authorities did not act when faced with emergency calls. Banksy commented that “Like most people who make it in the art world, I bought a yacht to cruise the Med. We converted into a lifeboat because EU authorities deliberately ignore distress calls from ‘non-Europeans.’” (Waddoups, 2020).

Likewise, Louise Michel’s crew echoed his concerns, urging EU member states to open their ports to migrants “The obligation to rescue at sea is an obligation under international maritime law. This obligation applies to every person in danger at sea, regardless of nationality, reason for flight, or legal status” (Waddoups, 2020).



Image 6. Banksy, Mural, Porte de la Chapelle, Paris, France, 2018. Photo: Philippe Lopez / AFP / Getty Images. Source: <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/banksy-paris-1308641>

The refugee problem is a case that occurs in many parts of the world. There is no difference in the lives of refugees in developed or developing countries. Banksy, who produces works regarding that civilization should not be limited to borders, offers a critical interpretation of anti-racist policies with this work (Image 6) he did in Paris on June 24, 2018. Even in the developed and civilized countries of the world, the fact that immigrants have to live on the streets is exhibited on the walls of France and refers to the French who are insensitive to this refugee crisis happening in civilization (Rea, 2018).

This is a development which should of course be seen in the context of a more general ongoing process in which street art is being integrated in the established art world (Bengtson, 2016).

In response to the illegal practices applied to refugees in the refugee camp in France (reports of the use of CS gas), the artist displayed his political stance with a striking work themed “Les Misérables” opposite the wall of the French embassy.



Image 7. Banksy, *The Miserables*, Paris, France, 2016.

Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jan/24/banksy-uses-new-artwork-to-criticise-use-of-teargas-in-calais-refugee-camp>

In this work criticizing the pepper gas used in the Calais refugee camp, he depicted a young girl's helplessness and misery in tears by spraying CS gas on her.

In this work, in which he interpreted the treatment of refugees, the worn-out French flag, which flaps behind the young girl, appears to be a political message that the French authorities are controlling the refugees illegally.

Another important detail in the study is the inclusion of the QR code. "For the first time in his art, Banksy accompanies the piece with a QR code. The code leads audiences to a YouTube video of a raid on 'The Jungle' camp after dark on January 5th, which seems to demonstrate that the authorities did, indeed, utilize tear gas. The video was posted by the activist group 'Calais Migrant Solidarity,' and Banksy shows his own solidarity with them through this link." (Aggarwal, 2017).

Although the past of the artist's reactionary work on inhuman practices towards refugees was in the early 2000s, the ongoing refugee problems have become a part of Banksy's art.

In this work (Image 8), which was created as a commentary on extreme right-wing policies towards immigrants, there is also an image of a small immigrant girl.

It is seen that the little immigrant girl sprays a pink wallpaper pattern over a swastika on a wall next to her sleeping bag and a teddy bear in an attempt to make her patch of pavement cozier. It is depicted as a real reflection of the drama people live in on the street (Hurriyet Daily News).

This wall work has not been done in a random place. It was painted on a wall in northern Paris next to an official refugee shelter which was controversially closed in March despite protests from the city's Socialist mayor Anne Hidalgo. Since then, around 2,000 migrants, including children and teenagers, have been sleeping rough along canals and under motorway bridges (Hurriyet Daily News).

Migrants were still sleeping next to the mural on June 24. Experts said the image echoes the artist's 2009 painting "Go Flock Yourself." (Hurriyet Daily News).



Image 8. Banksy, *Mural*, Paris, France. Photo: Philippe Lopez / AFP / Getty Images.

Source: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/banksy-paris-new-art-nicolas-laugero-lasserre-france-migration-crisis-refugee-a8417086.html>

Mona Lisa, which has an important place in art history, has also inspired many artists. Like the feature that makes this work of Leonardo Da Vinci so important in every period, it is possible that it was drawn in the process of transition from the dark era of the Renaissance to civilization. The fact that the outdated cases experienced in today's

refugee crisis are emphasized through the work of the Mona Lisa, which is described as a symbol of a transition in the history of humanity, is a harsh criticism of today's modern humankind.

The artist, who depicts Mona Lisa, who represents civilization, with a rocket launcher on her shoulder with a smile, presents today's outdated events in a high-contrast way.

The soft but disturbing emphasis of today's people on their insensitivity to the refugee tragedy through the Mona Lisa, a timeless icon, has once again proved Banksy's strong art.



Image 9. Banksy, Refugee Mona Lisa, Source: <https://www.amsterdamstreetart.com/mona-refugee/>

Banksy, who contributed financially as well as his artistic actions in the face of the refugee crisis, donated a triple painting called "Mediterranean Sea View 2017", whose value ranged from £800,000 to £1.2 million, referring to the refugee crisis at a charity auction held in Sotheby's to raise aid to a hospital in Bethlehem (O'Connor, 2020).



Image 10. Banksy, Mediterranean Sea View 2017, Sotheby's.  
Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-53564953>



Image 11. Banksy, Mediterranean Sea View 2017, Sotheby's.  
Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-53564953>



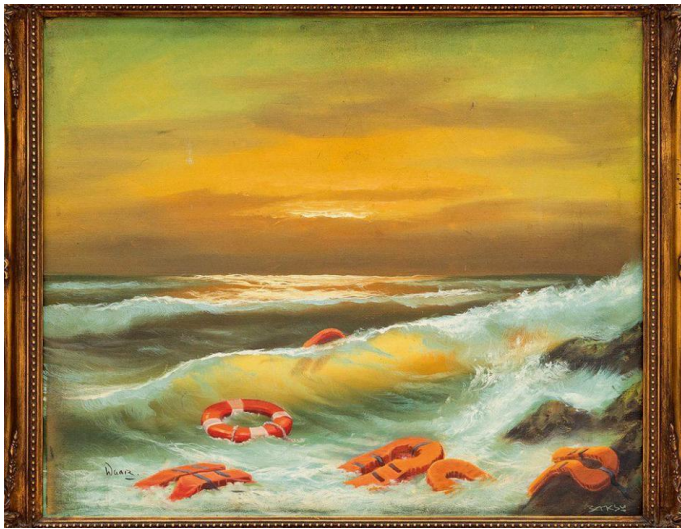


Image 12. Banksy, Mediterranean Sea View 2017, Sotheby's. Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-53564953>

Alex Branczik, Sotheby's head of contemporary art for Europe, said "In Rembrandt to Richter, this triptych hangs in Sotheby's galleries alongside works by some of history's greatest landscape painters, including Bellotto, Van Goyen, and Turner. Banksy's work, however, stands alone for its potent political message." (BBC, ty).

Referring to the political boundaries that Europeans reinforce against refugees, the artist has reworked romantic period-style oil paintings by using the tragedy in the Aegean and Mediterranean, which has been a grave for thousands of refugees in recent years, and life vests symbolized by refugee deaths. This study, which has been carried out as a reaction to the increasing immigrant crisis in recent years, is also a clear indicator of the transformation of art in the face of social problems (BBC, ty).

Recognizing that some states bear a disproportionate share of this burden for which other states have the responsibility to mitigate, burden sharing implies a state's obligation to support refugee protection beyond its territory (Field, 2010).

In conclusion, the Refugee Compact demonstrates a welcome recognition of the need to ensure that academic perspectives and research findings are effectively integrated into the international community's efforts on behalf of exiled and displaced populations. (Crisp, 2018).

Along with Banksy's art, we recall that it could not be concluded that only the aesthetic dimension of art could not be proved with stereotyped established art methods. From Duchamp, it is possible to see the intellectual and critical obligation that directs conceptual art in Banksy's works (Bullen, 2010).

## 2. CONCLUSION

The refugee crisis in our recent history is a global problem whose effects are increasing day by day. The fact that states cannot produce constructive and sincere solutions in the face of the refugee crisis, which affects societies socially, culturally, economically, geographically, and politically, contributes to the further growth of the problem. However, in such cases that affect the internal structure of the society, authorities that shed light on history such as art have had various sanctions every period.

The artist and activist Banksy examined the human drama experienced in the region as a result of the Israeli-Palestinian wars in the early 2000s on the issue of the refugee crisis, which deeply affected the society with his mysterious identity and extraordinary art, and tried to announce the seriousness of the situation to the whole world with his artistic projects in the region. The existence of the refugee crisis, which reached its peak with the Syrian civil war in addition to the wars in the Middle East, and the fact that the drama experienced is a humanitarian and common problem of the whole world have attracted great attention with its artistic works carried out on international platforms.

Created with simple, plain, satirical, critical and political message concern, Banksy's works can be considered as a one-man powerful movement that directs heavy criticism to countries that close their borders to the refugee crisis. Not only did he support refugee lives with his visual work, but he also provided various support to fund a rescue boat to save thousands of refugees stranded in the Mediterranean. We have once again witnessed the power of Banksy's questioning, critical, solution-producing, sanctioning and promising art in the face of global crises such as the refugee crisis, which correctly uses the influence of art against social problems.

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