



Jean-Michel Basquiat at work in St Moritz, Switzerland in 1983

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

A street legend who became one of the greats, even after his death Jean-Michel Basquiat continues to inspire generations with his courageous and revolutionary visual language

WRITTEN BY JOSEPHINE HALL

Jean-Michel Basquiat was born on 22 December 1960 in Brooklyn, New York, to Matilde, of Puerto Rican descent, and Gérard Basquiat, from Haiti. From a young age, he loved drawing and was able to read and write by age four.

In 1968, age seven, Basquiat was hit by a car while playing in the street. He broke an arm and had internal injuries, undergoing a splenectomy. His mother brought him a copy of the 1858 medical textbook *Gray's Anatomy* to help ease his boredom while in hospital. The book became hugely influential in his future work.

His parents separated that year, and his mother was institutionalised with mental illness. The children lived with their father and Basquiat attended high school sporadically, dropping out in the tenth grade.

In 1978, aged 17, Basquiat moved to Lower Manhattan. He stayed with friends and made street art with Al Diaz, under the pseudonym SAMO ("same old sh*t"). The duo's graffiti was language-oriented and poetic, with phrases like, "A pin drops like a pungent odor".

In 1979, Basquiat and Michael Holman formed the noise rock band Gray, performing in venues including Mudd Club and CBGB.

While selling postcards on the streets of SoHo, Basquiat spotted his idol Andy Warhol having lunch. He sold him a card, planting the seeds of a future friendship.

In October 1979, Basquiat showed copies of SAMO montages at Arleen Schloss's open space and also created his "MAN MADE" clothing - second-hand clothes that he painted on.

In early 1980, Basquiat wrote the epitaph "SAMO IS DEAD" on the walls of SoHo buildings, ending the project. That year, he also starred in the independent film *Downtown 81* and exhibited in The Times Square Show, catching the eye of critics and curators.

His first solo show, in 1981, was a huge success and his first American one-person show was at the Annina Nosei Gallery in March 1982. That year, he became the youngest artist ever to show in the documenta exhibition in Kassel, Germany. Bruno Bischofberger introduced him to Andy Warhol and Basquiat painted a portrait of the two of them, igniting their friendship.

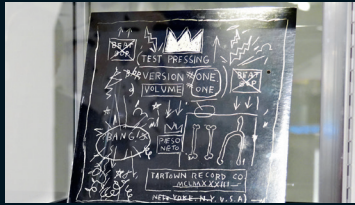
In November 1982, he went to West Hollywood to create work for his second show at the Gagosian Gallery. His girlfriend, Madonna (the then-unknown singer), joined him.

Basquiat was deeply affected by the murder of Michael Stewart, another black artist in the downtown scene, by police in 1983. He admitted to friends that he was using heroin.

Basquiat worked with Warhol, combining their distinctive and contrasting styles. Devastatingly,



BASQUIAT AND THE RISE OF HIP HOP



A Rammellzee vs K-Rob sealed *Beat Bop* 12-inch single (1983), on display during a preview at Sotheby's for their inaugural Hip Hop Auction in September 2020 in New York City

In the late 1970s, alongside the emergence of neo-expressionism in the art world and the explosion of graffiti on the streets, a new music scene was developing among African and Latino Americans in the Bronx. Basquiat could relate to the stylised rhythmic music, accompanied by rhyming speech.

In 1981, Basquiat appeared in the first rap video to air on MTV - *Rapture* by Blondie. He plays a nightclub DJ, a role originally intended for Grandmaster Flash, and his appearance is timed with a lyrical mention of Fab Five Freddy. Basquiat's transition from street artist into the high-end art world helped to galvanise the

unprecedented fusion of art, music, film and culture that defied long-standing racial divisions. In 1983, Basquiat produced a hip-hop single collaboration with K-Rob and Rammellzee and painted the cover image. Limited presses of the single were produced and became highly sought-after by both record and art collectors.

Big names like Jay-Z and Kanye West have referenced Basquiat and bought his work. In 2020, a new exhibition opened in Boston called *Writing the Future: Basquiat and the Hip-Hop Generation*. It showed Basquiat's work alongside many other multidisciplinary Black and Brown creative pioneers from the 1970s and 1980s.

their joint exhibition, *Paintings*, in 1985, was torn apart by critics and the media. Basquiat was referred to as Warhol's "mascot". Tension grew and they barely spoke afterwards.

Struggling to cope with the demands of his fame and the pressures of being Black in the White-dominated art world, Basquiat's drug use became excessive, but he continued to work. In 1986, he was greatly inspired by exhibiting in Abidjan on the Ivory Coast. Over the next two years, he presented work around the world while friends tried unsuccessfully to get him onto a methadone programme.

Andy Warhol died in February 1987, and Basquiat became increasingly reclusive. He still

created work but started talking about doing something other than art. In 1988, he returned from Hawaii saying he was sober, but his behaviour suggested otherwise and his friends were concerned.

Basquiat was found unresponsive in his studio in Manhattan on 12 August 1988. He had died from a heroin overdose, aged 27.

Keith Haring wrote in Basquiat's obituary for *Vogue*, "He truly created a lifetime of works in ten years... Only now will people begin to understand the magnitude of his contribution."

Despite his short life, Basquiat produced over 2,000 works. He fused his distinctive graphic style with African, Hispanic and ancient Roman

and Greek imagery, alongside biting social commentary, including on the oppression of Black people around the world.

In 2017, a Japanese billionaire bought Basquiat's piece *Untitled* (1982) at auction for \$110.5 million dollars. It is the most ever paid for an American artwork, surpassing his idol and friend Warhol.

Basquiat was one of the first African American artists to reach international status and wealth in the art world. His influence is evident not only in gallery shows, but also in film, on trainers and in hip-hop lyrics. In 2020, the Brooklyn Nets announced their new jersey design inspired by Basquiat's artwork.



A mural of Andy Warhol, Frida Kahlo, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat by artist Eduardo Kobra in Chelsea, New York City, 2020