



Basquiat, 1983

Photograph: Lee Jaffe

Basquiat was [interviewed in 1982 at age 21](#) on the cusp of his rising international fame. He explains his interest in books and history, the relationship between words and images, and how he gathers inspiration. [Basquiat's sisters, Lisane and Jeanine, reflected](#) as adults about their brother's genius and legacy, and the sensitive man behind the provocative myth that grew after his death.

[The Brooklyn Museum](#) brought together over 100 works in their 2005 retrospective, showcasing many pieces never seen on U.S. soil and tracing the artist's development, legacy, and lasting relevance.

[Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks](#), organized by the Brooklyn Museum in 2015, gave audiences a glimpse into the mind and reflective process that fueled the artist. Alongside archival material and finished paintings, 160 pages of the deeply personal, rarely seen journals explored the importance of writing, sketching, and reflection in Basquiat's work.

PBS documentary series *American Masters* celebrated the 30th anniversary of Basquiat's death in 2018 with [Basquiat: Rage to Riches](#), an intimate profile compiled from archival footage and interviews with surviving family and friends.

In 2017, gallerist and curator Fred Hoffman, who worked closely with Basquiat for years in California, published [the first comprehensive art historical study](#) of the artist's career, with in-depth analysis of over 150 paintings and works on paper.

The Barbican Gallery, London, hosted [the UK's first large-scale survey of Basquiat's career](#) in 2018 with over 100 works supplemented by archival materials, film excerpts, and photographs. In conjunction with the show, [The Guardian](#) spoke with those closest to Basquiat during his days as a struggling artist and subsequent rise to fame in 1980s New York.

In 2019, [The Brant Foundation Art Study Center](#) opened their new East Village space – comprising 7,000 square feet across four floors – with an immersive and comprehensive homage to Basquiat's relationship with neighborhood and its artistic past. The foundation's exhibition website includes a virtual tour and extensive installation views of the 70 works on view.

[The Guggenheim's 2019 exhibition, Defacement](#), honored Basquiat's engagement with contemporary issues such as the neglect of and hostility towards black artists in a dominantly white art market, and the fragility of black bodies under the force of police and local authorities. The exhibition itself became [embroiled in conversations about equity and discrimination](#).

[Writing the Future](#) runs through spring 2021 at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, exploring Basquiat's relationships and collaborations with hip-hop community and how his career embodies the artistic and material transition of street art from haphazard graffiti adorning subways and sidewalks, to canvas and paper mounted in galleries. [Digital resources](#) explore the artist's and major themes in the show.



Basquiat, 1986



Jean-Michel Basquiat (American, 1960-88)

Untitled (The Black Athlete), 1982

Acrylic and oil stick on canvas

Private Collection; L2020:114.1

Jean-Michele Basquiat's interest in the human figure was sparked by a car accident. At the age of seven, the young artist was hit by a car while playing in his neighborhood of Flatbush, Brooklyn. A broken arm and serious internal injuries kept him in the hospital for weeks, where he was kept company by a copy of *Gray's Anatomy*—a gift from his mother, to help her son understand his injuries and recovery. Basquiat counted the medical textbook's detailed anatomical illustrations as one of his greatest influences, the foundation upon which he elaborated with his groundbreaking visual aesthetic. **Untitled (The Black Athlete)** belongs to a series Basquiat completed during his skyrocketing rise to artistic celebrity in the early 1980s. Exploring his own Haitian and Puerto Rican identity, and the segregation he witnessed growing up, Basquiat painted the heroic forms of Black athletes such as baseball player Hank Aaron and boxers Muhammad Ali, Jack Johnson, and Joe Lewis—each adorned with a crown to denote their eternal success, power, and victory.

On view February 3 – May 9, 2021

Jean-Michel Basquiat (American, 1960-88)

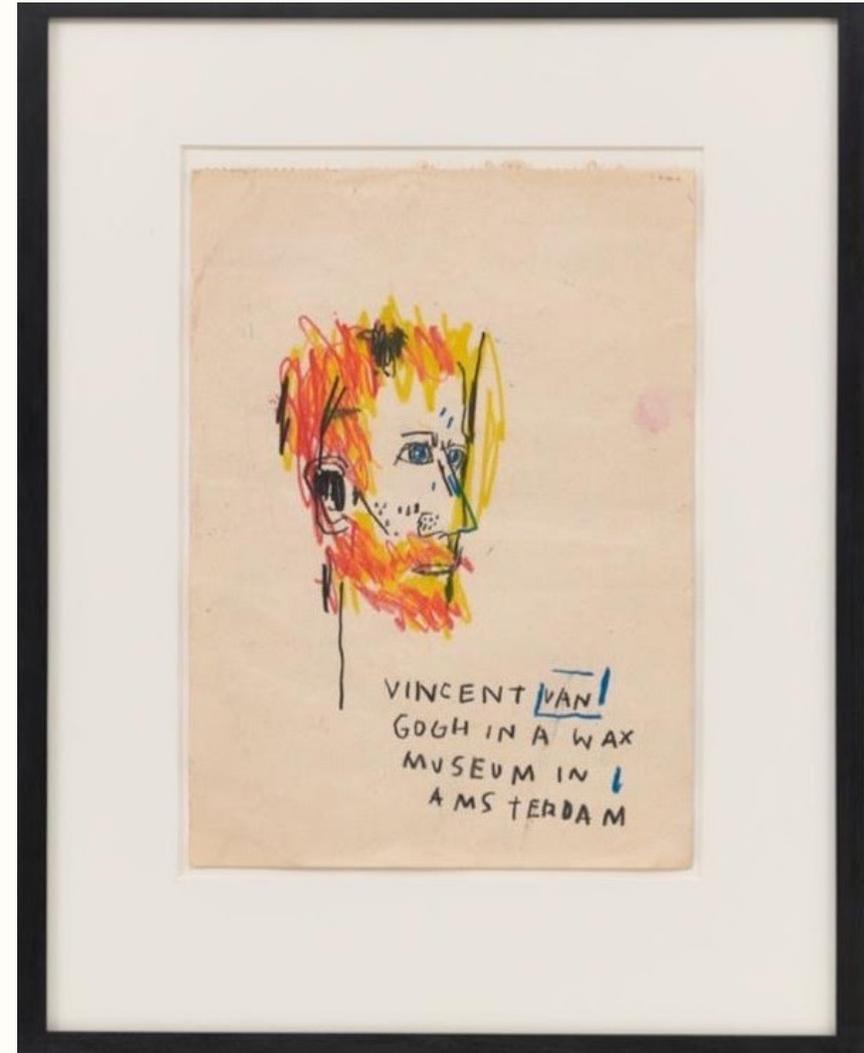
Vincent Van Gogh in a Wax Museum in Amsterdam, 1985

Oilstick on paper

Private Collection; L2020:103.5

The brief career of Jean-Michel Basquiat was fostered through a creatively diverse childhood and the influence of music and street art. Basquiat found professional and popular success in the 1980s alongside Neo-Expressionism—characterized by raw brushwork, intense color, and an embrace of an untrained aesthetic—and was the youngest artist included in the 1983 Whitney Biennial. Grounded in complex racial and political themes and dedicated to highlighting the lack of diversity in the art world, his practice was fueled by asking difficult questions, exposing the divides created by wealth and power, and honoring the value of different experiences. Basquiat’s favored medium of oil sticks drawn on paper or unprimed canvas emulates the impulsive expression of graffiti artists, creating images that often challenge viewers with an uneasy ambiguity and deceptive simplicity. Expression, gesture, and sensory impact initially appear to take precedence over compositional structure in his work, producing a raw energy and apparent spontaneity intent on provoking a visceral response. Yet Basquiat adroitly choreographs the space in his works, too, using “empty” areas to stage the drama of his staccato mark-making.

On view December 16, 2020 – March 21, 2021





Jean-Michel Basquiat (American, 1960-88)

Untitled (Buck), 1982

Oilstick on paper

Private Collection; L2020:103.4

On view December 16, 2020 – March 21, 2021