

21 Facts About Jean-Michel Basquiat

BY KATHLEEN WHITE | JUL 16, 2018

1. **Jean-Michel Basquiat** was born on 22 December 1960, in Brooklyn, New York. His father, Gérard, was born in Port au Prince, Haiti, and his mother Matilde was a New York-native of Puerto Rican descent. In this multicultural home, the artist grew up speaking Spanish, French and English.

2. Basquiat became a junior member of the **Brooklyn Museum**, his favorite museum, at the age of six. In the spring of 2018, the museum hosted **One Basquiat** an exhibition devoted solely to the artist's record-breaking **Untitled (1982)** which was purchased at Sotheby's by Japanese collector **Yusaku Maezawa** for \$110.5 million dollars — the most ever paid for an American artist at auction.

3. At eight-years-old, Basquiat was hit by a car while playing in the street and suffered a broken arm and severe internal injuries. While he was recuperating, his mother brought him a copy of the foundational medical textbook *Gray's Anatomy*. The volume's detailed anatomical drawings were eye opening to the young artist. Years later Basquiat named his industrial art noise band Gray (which counted actor Vicent Gallo as a member) in homage to this early influence.



PHOTOGRAPH BY EVELYN HOFER/GETTY IMAGES.
JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT, NEW YORK, 1985.

4. His father threw him out of the house when he dropped out of school at the age of seventeen. The teenager scraped by – selling sweatshirts and postcards marked with his drawings, panhandling and crashing with friends. His impoverished diet consisted primarily of copious amounts of cheap red wine and 15¢ bags of Cheetos.

5. It was his graffiti tag “SAMO” (shorthand for “same old shit”) that first drew public attention. Basquiat created “SAMO” with his friend Al Diaz while the pair were in high school and the tag, which often featured the copyright symbol, cropped up on buildings throughout lower Manhattan and Brooklyn between 1977 and 1980. “It was supposed to be a logo, like Pepsi.” Basquiat later told writer Anthony Haden-Guest. The end of the collaboration was announced in 1980 through a slue of tags declaring, “SAMO is dead.”

“Jean-Michel’s crown has three peaks, for his three royal lineages: the poet, the musician, the great boxing champion.”

FRANCESCO CLEMENTE

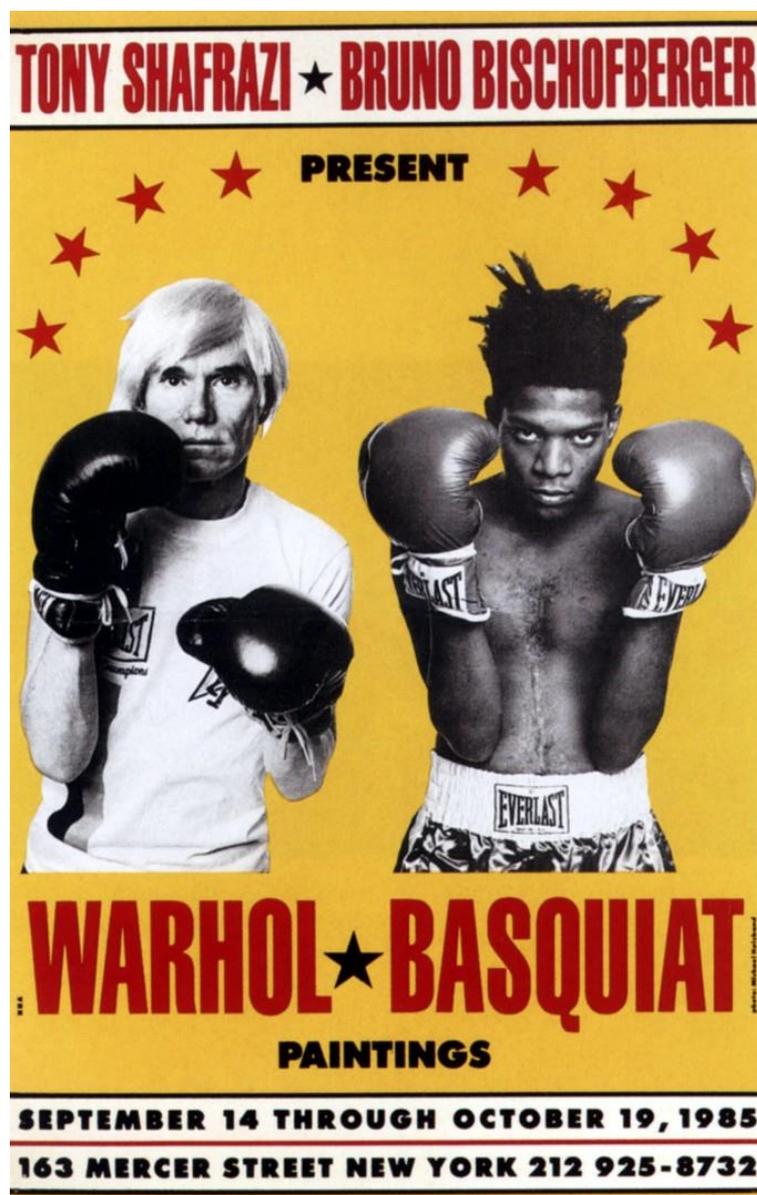


JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT, *UNTITLED*, 1982. SOLD FOR \$110.5 MILLION IN THE CONTEMPORARY ART EVENING AUCTION, MAY 2017.

7. The crown, Basquiat's signature artistic motif, both acknowledged and challenged the history of Western art. By adorning black male figures, including athletes, musicians and writers, with the crown, Basquiat raised these historically disenfranchised artists to royal even saintly stature. "Jean-Michel's crown has three peaks, for his three royal lineages: the poet, the musician, the great boxing champion," said his friend artist Francesco Clemente.

8. Basquiat became a regular on art writer Glenn O'Brien's public access television program *TV Party* — first appearing on the live show in 1979 with his head shaved down the middle. Two years later he appeared in O'Brien's film *Downtown '81* playing a nearly autobiographical character.

9. He produced a rap record with **Rammellzee** and K Robb titled "Beat Bop" (1983) and designed the cover for the single.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF PVDE /BRIDGEMAN IMAGES.

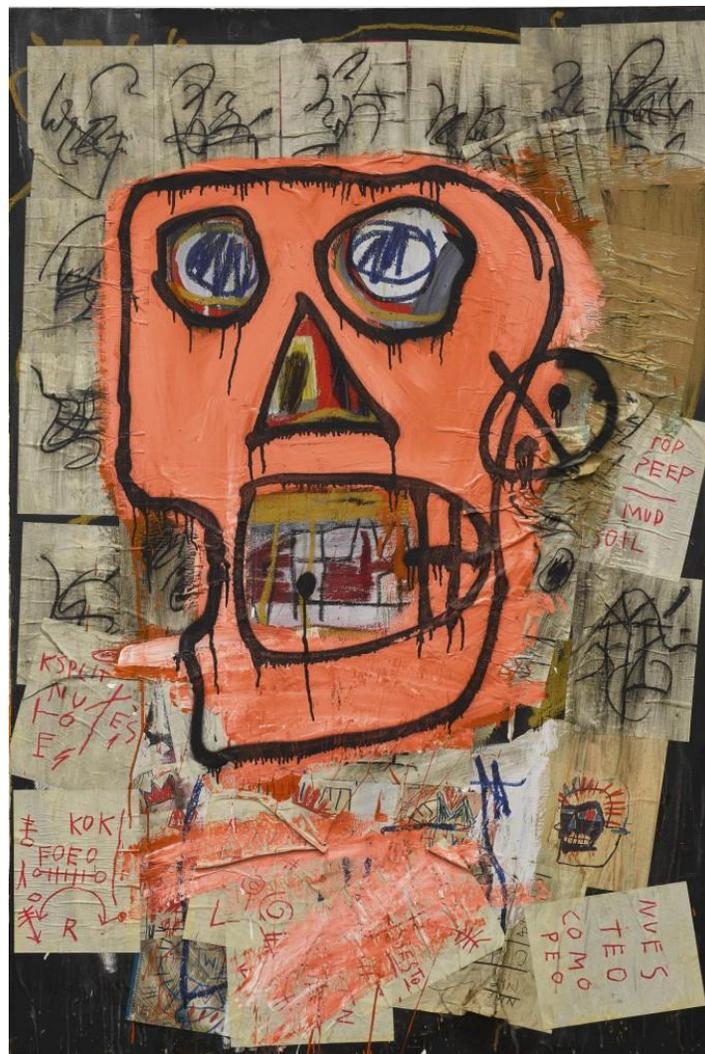
THE 1985 EXHIBITION POSTER FOR AN EXHIBITION OF ANDY WARHOL AND JEAN MICHEL BASQUIAT.

10. The limelight suited Basquiat. In 1980 he appeared in music video for Blondie’s song “Rapture.” It was lead singer Debbie Harry and her boyfriend Chris Stein who bought Basquiat’s first painting for a mere \$200.

11. Basquiat gained momentum with his first exhibition —the landmark DIY Times Square Show which opened in June of 1980 in an abandoned massage parlor off Seventh Avenue. The pioneering exhibition also featured works by Keith Haring, Kiki Smith, Jenny Holzer and Kenny Scharf.

12. Along with Julian Schnabel, Kenny Scarf and Francesco Clemente, Basquiat was considered one of the leading figures of Neo-Expressionism, an art movement that reasserted the primacy of the human figure in contemporary art. In 1996 fellow Neo-Expressionist Schnabel directed a biopic of the artist’s tumultuous life with Jeffrey Wright starring as Basquiat and David Bowie as Warhol.

13. In 1982, at the age of 25, he became the youngest artist to ever exhibit at Documenta in Kassel, Germany, when nearly 60 of his paintings were featured at the esteemed exhibition.



JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT, UNTITLED, 1982. SOLD FOR £14.7 IN THE CONTEMPORARY ART EVENING AUCTION, JUNE 2018.

14. He joined the Annina Nosei gallery in 1982, and had his first American one-man show in the spring of that same year. By 1984, Basquiat had left Annina Nosei for 1980s art-world powerhouse Mary Boone.

15. He met his lifelong friend and mentor Andy Warhol in 1981 at late-night hotspot Mr. Chow's. Swiss dealer Bruno Bischofberger later suggested the two collaborate on a series of paintings, and between 1983 and 1985 the pair made works that layered Basquiat's virtuosic graffiti scrawl over Warhol's bright Pop imagery.

16. Madonna and Basquiat dated in 1982 while both were on the precipice of mainstream stardom.



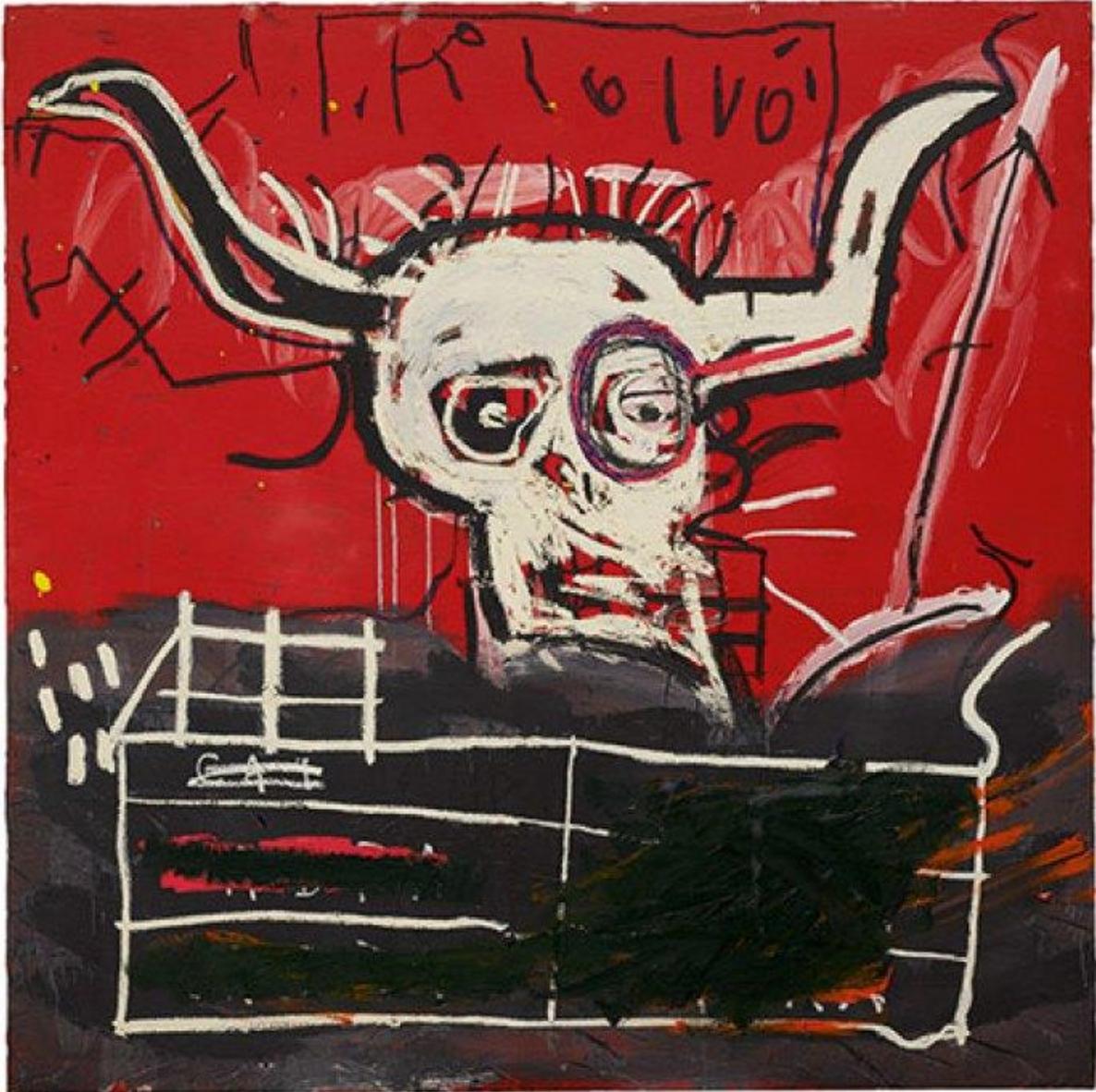
PHOTOGRAPH BY LEE JAFFE/GETTY IMAGES.
JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT PAINTING IN ST. MORITZ, SWITZERLAND, 1983.

17. That same year, Basquiat moved to Los Angeles where he lived with the gallerist Larry Gagosian as he prepared for an upcoming solo show at the gallery's West Coast location. Madonna even joined them for a few months.

18. With newfound commercial success he spent lavish amounts of money on Armani suits, expensive wines and the finest hotels. "From being so critical of the art scene, Jean-Michel was all of a sudden becoming the thing he criticized," said Keith Haring, his longtime friend. But his libertine squandering were marked by irreverence — he was known for painting over his designer suits, lending obscene sums of money, even throwing \$100 dollar bills out of his limousine window to panhandlers.

"I'm not a real person. I'm a legend."

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT



JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT, *CABRA*, 1981–82. SOLD FOR \$11 MILLION IN THE CONTEMPORARY ART EVENING AUCTION, NOVEMBER 2017.

19. Both the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art rejected submissions of his work.

20. Basquiat died of an accidental drug overdose on August 12, 1988, at his Great Jones Street studio. He was 27 years old. In the months preceding his death, the troubled artist claimed to be using a hundred bags of heroin a day. Curator and gallerist Jeffrey Deitch delivered a eulogy during his burial at Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn.

21. "I'm not a real person. I'm a legend," Basquiat once claimed. In the decades since his death, the artist has become just that with his works collected by the likes of Kanye West, Swizz Beatz and Jay Z. His name and unique personal style have become frequent reference points in popular culture. Fellow Brooklyn-native Jay-Z, for instance, famously paralleled himself to the artist in his 2013 song "Picasso Baby," saying "It ain't hard to tell, I'm the new Jean-Michel."