

Kids @ CAM – At Home Family Projects

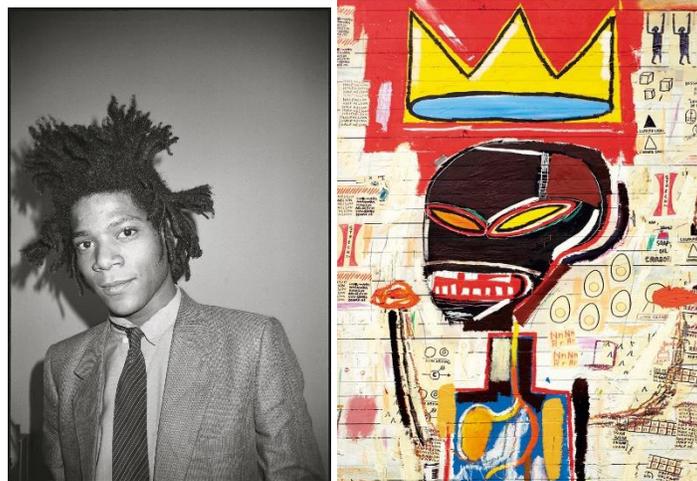
Spotlight on Art History

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

About the Artist:

“I don’t think about art when I’m working. I think about life.”

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960 – 1988) was a New York street graffiti artist who at a young age became very prominent Neo-Expressionist artist. He was the son of a middle-class Haitian father and Puerto Rican mother. He was a very forward child, being able to read and write at four years of age, he became fluent in English, Spanish and French at eleven. After his parents had separated and his mother committed to a mental institution, Jean-Michel dropped out of school and ran away from home. Staying with friends in Brooklyn, he started creating artwork to sell on the streets to support himself. At the age of sixteen, Basquiat began producing graffiti using spray-paint in Lower Manhattan, using the alias SAMO. Later he went on to form a rock band which performed at various New York clubs. He met the famous artist Andy Warhol at a restaurant and showed Warhol samples of his artwork. Warhol was so impressed by Basquiat's talent that they worked together on a series of projects. Jean-Michel's work appeared at a multi-artist exhibition on The Times Square Show, and this introduced Basquiat’s work to the wider art world. He often used crowns in his work. The first crown appeared in his *Red Kings* (1981). The painting contains two images in the same portrait. On the left side of the canvas you can see Basquiat himself, tellingly by the initials B, Q. and S. On the right of the portrait is a skull representing one of Basquiat influencers Pablo Picasso. There are many theories as to why Basquiat used crowns in so many of his works. Many critics argue that it was a combination of seeing himself the artist as king, his association with people he considered kings (such as his heroes), and his ambition to become great. One friend who knew him early on wrote: “He could walk into a thrift store with five bucks and come out looking like a king. In fact, he basically behaved like a king who had accidentally switched lives with an identical pauper.” Jean-Michel Basquiat was a very prolific artist and produced many paintings in the same Neo-Expressionism style as *Bird on Money*. Titles of his paintings include *Dustheads*, *Hollywood Africans*, *Horn Players*, and *Trumpet*. Work produced in collaboration with Andy Warhol include *Arm and Hammer*, and *Ten Punching Bags*. In only a few years Basquiat rose to fame that was to exceed by far his short lifetime, which was sadly ended in 1988.



ART AT HOME – Basquiat Crown Portrait

What You Will Need:

- Large sheet of craft paper or canvas
- Paints
- Paintbrushes (different sizes)
- Cardboard
- Strong glue
- Scissors
- Aluminum foil
- Collage materials (optional)
- Table cover

Look at images of Basquiat’s paintings, especially those that incorporate crowns. Notice how he incorporate graffiti and abstract imagery into many of his works, adding figures and words at his discretion. Use these as inspiration for your creation of an abstract portrait of yourself or someone you look up to.

- Step 1 – Paint an abstract background onto your canvas then allow it to dry.
- Step 2 – Create a portrait on top of the dried background using different colors so it pops out.
- Step 3 – Using your cardboard, cut out a simple crown shape.
- Step 4 – Paint the crown and glue on aluminum foil if you like to make it shine.
- Step 5 – Once your painting is entirely dry, glue your crown on the top of your head!
- Step 6 – Glue on any additional collage materials you think will complete your portrait.
- Step 7 – Clean up your work area.

Tips:

- When you add details to the background, they only need to make sense to you. You can add words for your own reasons, or figures or characters that appeal to you.
- Because Basquiat’s work was often very large, sometimes he laid his canvas on the ground and painted it by walking around it. Feel free to try that approach and see how it feels.

Questions for Discussion:

- Talk about why you added different details to the background.
- Write down the different reasons you deserve to wear the crown, or why the person you chose to depict in the portrait deserves to wear a crown.
- If you could ask Basquiat one question, what would it be?

Follow Up Project Idea:

- Create a crown using cardboard for you to wear on your head. Cut the cardboard so it fits your head and add any decorations you like. Attach ribbons to each side so you can wear it.

