Big Idea & Exhibition Synopsis

A celebrated artist by age 20, Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) made innovative paintings that swiftly propelled him to the top of New York’s 1980’s art scene. Through drawings, paintings, and image and text collages, he represented the immediate world with a distinctive visual language and socially conscious voice that captivated the contemporary art world. Rich with symbols and cultural references, Basquiat’s images explore potent themes: from personal identity and power to entrenched racism and inequality. Today, Basquiat’s art still resonates. In all its raw beauty, complexity, and urgency, his work continues to challenge perceptions, provoke timely dialogue, and enables us to think critically about our world.

The exhibition is organized into the following sections:

1. Street as Studio: Presents the artist’s early works inspired by the urban landscape, car culture, subways and planes, sidewalk games, TV shows and cartoons.

2. Heroes and Saints: In his paintings, Basquiat honours black cultural icons (boxers, musicians, writers) by portraying them as kings and saints, but also warriors.

3. Reclaiming Histories: Racism, Social Hypocrisy, and Value: Presents images about the African Diaspora; legacies of black oppression, discrimination; violence as continuations of slavery and colonialism; and daily realities of racism, police brutality, and persecution.

4. Mirroring: This section reveals how Basquiat saw himself in others and identified deeply with the individuals he depicts in his paintings.

5. Dualities bring individuals, concepts, and objects together in ambiguous relationships to evoke tension and challenge perceptions.

6. Playing the Trickster: Cartoons and Provocation portrays the artist’s delight in appropriating and repurposing cartoon images for his own subversive acts of storytelling, including instances of irony, multiple meanings and humour transformed into symbols of social injustice.

7. Collaborations: Highlights the artist’s personal and professional relationship with the artist icon and NYC celebrity, Andy Warhol. Basquiat found in Warhol a trusted advisor, confidant and equal.

8. Sampling and Scratching: Music, Words and Collages reveal densely collaged images and works featuring single provocative phrases. Sampling from a vast array of sources, he had a poetic freestyle approach that embodies the spirit of hip hop and jazz.
Before Your Visit

Through his art, Jean-Michel Basquiat confronted difficult societal issues including racism, social hypocrisy and inequality. Exploring Basquiat’s work with your students will enable students to understand the important role artists have in society, promoting freedom of expression and their ability to promote dialogue on important issues. Basquiat’s work also encourages students to unpack visual images, ask questions and think critically.

There are several key themes that open a window into Basquiat’s work for students. These themes are cross-curricular and apply across grade levels. There is not one way to “read” or interpret Basquiat’s work, which is rich with multiple layers, meanings and contradictions.

**Suggested Grade Levels:** Grades 4 – 12.

**Key themes:** Justice, equality, inequality, racism, identity, innovation, history, power, heroes.

- Explore the following two works with your students before you visit the exhibition. You will find questions based on the critical analysis process to engage students in a discussion and stimulate ideas for further explorations to encourage a personal connection with Jean-Michel Basquiat’s work.
- Explore these works together as a class or provide questions for students to explore in pairs followed by a group discussion.

**First Impression/Description**

- What is your first impression of each artwork? Write down three words that come to mind.
- How do these paintings make you feel? Record the feelings.
- Describe what you see when you look at these works.

**Analysis/Interpretation**

- Revisit the list of feelings you recorded – how does Basquiat use the elements and principles of design to evoke that feeling? (i.e.: joy – the colours the artist used evoke a feeling of happiness)
- What artmaking processes and materials do you think he used? How do you imagine he made the marks he did?
- What symbols or words does Basquiat use in the work? What do you think they mean?

- What message do you think the artist Basquiat is trying to communicate through this work?

**Moving Towards an Informed Point of View**

- How would you change or alter the work if you could and why?
- What question would you ask Basquiat about this piece if you could?
- How does Basquiat’s view of the world compare to your own view of the world?

**Cultural Context**

You may need to provide some contextual information about Jean-Michel Basquiat after the initial discussion about the artwork.

- Is there a title for the work? Does it provide any additional information? If there is no title, why do you think this is?
- Think of an artwork that you feel relates to this work in some way (a painting, film, piece of music, photograph). What do they have in common? What are the cultural connections that you make between these works?
- What was happening in New York City and the USA at the time this work was created?
- What key societal and political issues is Basquiat responding to in his work?
- What type of art was valued in the 1980’s and what artists had access to the art world? Consider, race, class and gender.
- Why do you think Basquiat’s work was so groundbreaking at the time? Do you still consider his work to be groundbreaking today?

**Untitled, 1981**
Basquiat created this work in 1981 when he was 21 years old. In the image, the head of a man is depicted with the skin peeled away revealing the skull and intricate workings of the mind, scars and newly stitched up wounds in the colours of turquoise, orange and yellow. The theme of identity can be explored, focusing on one’s interior and exterior identity as well as inner struggles, and what is revealed when you peel back the layers.

**Further Explorations:**
- This work is untitled by the artist, what title would you give the work?
- What would the work say if it could talk?
- What song, style of music or sound comes to mind when you look at this work?
- If you could speak to Basquiat, what is the one question you would ask him about this work?
- If you could touch this work, what do you think it feels like?
- If you recreate/reinterpret Basquiat’s painting as a 3D form, what materials would you use to convey the message of the work?
- Explore with students the idea of one’s public identity/exterior (what I show to others, and how other’s see me), and one’s private identity/interior (how I feel about myself). Are the private and public identities the same or different? Ask students to sketch out what is inside their head, reflecting on the ideas of interior and exterior identity.


**Horn Players, 1983**
Music was an important part of Basquiat’s life. He DJ’ed, was in a band called “Gray,” owned thousands of records and cassettes and constantly listened to music while painting. He was particularly inspired by bebop jazz musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, both featured in this work. Basquiat portrayed images of black men he admired (musicians, boxers, athletes) in his works, seeing them as heroes and inspiration for his own work. Ornithology (the study of birds) is a reference to Parker’s 1946 composition and his nickname, *Bird*. The word Pree is the name of Parker’s daughter who died at the age of 2. He also features the physical appearance of music by listing body parts he associates with listening dancing and singing; ear, feet, larynx and teeth. There is a musical pattern to the work; the heads are arranged in an up-and-down pattern, and words are scattered about the canvas.

**Further Explorations:**
- Make a list of all the words found in this work, explore what each of them means and why you think Basquiat included them in the work. Basquiat also scratched out some of the words, and painted over words, why do you think this is? Does scratching out a word give it more power, or less?
- Listen to songs by Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, like *Now’s the Time* or *Salt Peanuts*, recorded in Toronto at Massey Hall. For younger
students, ask them to respond to the music using their bodies, including some of the body parts Basquiat features in his work – ear, feet, larynx and teeth. For older students ask them to draw/sketch to the music, lines and shapes in response to what they hear and visualize.

Connections & Responses

**Elementary Students**

- **Herstory|History.** Have students draw, from memory, a life experience or event that shaped their life. Deep reflection is required for this visualizing task. Allow for full choice in format and media use (e.g. cartoon panels or graphic novel pages in pencil or pastel; drawing series; animated images as a flipbook, or Claymation video; a diorama or clay relief; etc.).

- **Protest Art.** The themes in Basquiat’s work reflect entrenched racism, inequality and power. How does Basquiat promote critical thinking and social change? Ask students to inquire about groups like Greenpeace, Idle No More, the Occupy movement, Amnesty International, the Sierra Club, ACT Up, Human Rights Watch, NAACP, etc. What kinds of strategies and actions do protest movements and activist groups use? What visual media, forms, and visual conventions do activists use? Examine examples of protest art with your students. Encourage students to develop a campaign of social protest using the visual arts about a local or global issue of their choice.

- **Heroes.** Basquiat’s work reflects on inequality and racism that he experienced as a black man. His art includes images of black men, his heroes, musicians, boxers and athletes portrayed as kings, saints and warriors because he did not see black people represented or even present in modern art. Brainstorm a list with students about those qualities/characteristics that make someone a hero. What challenges our ideas of what a hero is? Who are Canadian heroes? Who is represented as a hero and who is not? Do we need heroes? In what way do they support our efforts to change the world for the better? In what ways might the notions of heroes disempower us? Do you have a hero? A family member, a musician, someone that has inspired you? Encourage students to create a short list or brainstorm of words and/or symbols that they associate with this person or multiple people. Ask students to turn these ideas and words into an individual collage using mixed media. In the next step, encourage students to make a group collage. Make multiple photocopies of each student’s work. Working in groups, students use the photocopies of their own work to mix up/combine together to make a group collage combining heroes and inspiration. Ask the groups to share their collages with the class.

**Secondary Students**

- **Herstory|History.** Have students draw, from memory, a life experience or event that shaped their life. Deep reflection is required for this visualizing task. Allow for full choice in format and media use (e.g. cartoon panels or diagram in pencil or pastel; drawing series; animated images as a flipbook, Claymation or stop-motion video; acrylic or tempera painting with various narrative moments pictured all at once; etc.).

- **Outside-in Identity.** Basquiat saw himself in others and identified with those he depicted in his works revealing the complexity of identity. Create a self-portrait assignment that explores identity by sparking new understandings about students’ lives and interpersonal connections with people and things: What images are on your cell phone (that you’re willing to share)? What things do you collect and why? What spaces make you comfortable and uncomfortable? What is your relationship to money and material items? If you could be rebuilt like Frankenstein’s monster—from parts of different people—whose parts would you use and why? How are your hair and clothing choices influenced by others, or by our consumer culture? (Alter your outward appearance to make people believe you have been transformed in some way. How do they react?)

- **Gender Roles.** Basquiat explores duality in his work, challenging perceptions and creating tension. How are females and males socialized in 2015? What codes, traditions, images, ceremonies, and values have contributed to your understandings about gender and identity? Explore gender stereotypes found in various forms of media including advertising and art. For example, examine two artworks of the same subject, one created by a female artist and the other by a male. What similarities and differences do you observe? What is the “male gaze” and how has it dominated historical visual culture? Use a female gaze to
counteract/balance out this implied male viewer. Unpack the stereotypes and assumptions that might underlie student’s impressions. Ask students to create a dual image of themselves, one that “fits inside” and one that “fits outside” the social constructions of gender.

Ideas for Contemporary Connections

The following questions can foster a more personal connection between students and Basquiat’s art. They can be used to solicit initial reactions prior to the exhibition OR for reflection following a more extended study of artworks.

- Find an artwork that reminds you of something from your past. Think about those connections.
- Find an artwork that, for you, embodies pure joy!
- Find an artwork that surprises you.
- Find an artwork that appears to be telling a story. What might happen next?
- Find an image of a person you would like to meet. What might your conversation be about?
- Find an artwork that you like, for whatever reason. How would you describe it to a friend or family member you are talking to by cell phone?
- Find an image of a person and imagine what they would have been like at another moment in their life.
- Find an artwork that has something to say about some aspect of love or hatred.
- Find an artwork that puzzles or intrigues you. What question(s) might you ask the artist, if you could?
- Find an artwork that you would like to walk into. What would you see that we cannot? What might you smell, hear or touch?

- Basquiat’s work is often associated with graffiti and street art, although he developed a more complex visual collage/montage style—incorporating strategies of ambiguity, disparate imagery, and cultural symbols—and text as narrative or label. Have students compare Basquiat’s works with those of graffiti artists, in Toronto, LA, New York and Miami. How does Basquiat’s work compare with tags, pieces, and styles by current street artists?

- Basquiat was caught up in the growth of the high-priced, glamorous New York art world, and its celebrity culture, during the 1980s. His rise as an artist altered his status and wealth. How do artists (actors, musicians) today struggle to maintain their agency in a career that can be driven by money and capitalism? What does it mean when we say an artist is “selling out”? What artists do you perceive as “selling out” and why? Have students investigate celebrity culture and how people in the entertainment industry become commodities.

- Basquiat immersed himself in high art and graffiti, jazz and rap, punk and pop culture, and then channeled this into a sophisticated collage style that anticipated today’s Internet culture. Music was a hugely influential. Sampling from a vast array of sources, the artist employed a poetic freestyle approach that embodied the spirit of hip hop, an exploding urban cultural phenomenon that paralleled his own. Students can research the development of hip hop culture and its visual parallels in Basquiat’s paintings.

- The title of the exhibition, Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now’s the Time, refers to Charlie Parker’s song by the same title. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used the phrase “Now is the time” many times in his “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963. Brainstorm/mind map with students, why is now the time for Basquiat? What themes, ideas, innovations and approaches did Basquiat use that makes now the right time for his work? Why are his works relevant to Toronto, Ontario, Canada today? What does Basquiat mean or represent to you?

**Inspiration and Collaboration**

- As a teenager, Basquiat was influenced by his urban environment. He introduced himself to the downtown New York Art scene with conceptual graffiti, although he did not consider himself a graffiti artist.
- Basquiat was deeply engaged in the New York cultural scene of the 1980s, and participated in a number of collaborative projects with musicians, filmmakers and artists including Keith Haring and Debbie Harry.
- As Basquiat’s fame and fortune rose, Andy Warhol became a trusted advisor, confident and equal. The two collaborated on a series of works in 1984 and 1985 that combined their distinctive styles.
- Basquiat was inspired by everything around him, he was always reading (art books, medical textbooks, comics) listening to music and watching television, often while painting
- Music was a huge influence and he was inspired by bebop jazz musicians Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker.
- Basquiat’s own rise to fame and style of sampling and scratching paralleled the rise of hip hop music and its freestyle approach. Basquiat was close friends with Fred Brathwaite, a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy.

“I think there are a lot of people who are neglected in art. Black people are never really portrayed realistically, not even portrayed in modern art.”
- Jean-Michel Basquiat

**Selective Biography**

1960 - 1970
- Jean-Michel Basquiat born Dec. 22 to Gerard Basquiat (Haitian-born) and Matilda Andradas (Puerto Rican descent); family lived in Brooklyn, including sisters Lisane (1963) and Jeanine (1966)
- Basquiat created drawings from TV shows and cartoons from the age of four and Basquiat visited New York City museums and galleries with his mother.
- Basquiat can read Spanish, French, and English, is an accomplished student, and competent track athlete; later drawings include images from films, comic books, Mad magazine, and cars
- In May ‘68, Basquiat is hospitalized after being hit by a car and suffers a broken arm and his spleen is removed. A copy of *Gray’s Anatomy*, from his mother, will greatly influence future imagery.

1970 - 1980
- Basquiat’s parents separate and he and sisters remain with their father. From ’71-74, Basquiat attends various public schools and his family moves to Puerto Rico in ’74 due to father’s job; while there, Basquiat proves difficult to handle and temporarily runs away
- Back in Brooklyn (’76), Basquiat attends the progressive City-as-School, and meets graffiti artist, Al Diaz. He creates the creates fictional character of SAMO© (Same Old Shit) with Diaz, they spray-paint semi-religious, philosophical, and political writings on subway cars
- Basquiat leaves home for good (’78) and crashes with various friends; he sells postcards and T-shirts of his art to make money and frequents Greenwich Village clubs like the Mudd Club and Club 57, associating with artists, filmmakers, and music celebrities and Hip-Hop culture.
• Basquiat’s SAMO© writings are highlighted by a Village Voice critic and Basquiat and Diaz split and SAMO© “dies”.

1980 – 1988
• Basquiat has solo exhibitions in work in New York and LA and is invited to show his work in Italy. He is the youngest artist in Documenta 7, in Kassel, Germany.
• His paintings pay homage to jazz greats Charlie Parker and Billie Holiday, and writers Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs. In March ’83, paintings portray roles of blacks in Hollywood’s film history; Basquiat is deeply shaken by the death, while in NYC police custody, of graffiti artist Michael Stewart.
• Basquiat collaborates with Andy Warhol and Francesco Clemente on paintings, though he is filled with self-doubt about his work.
• Basquiat featured in NY Times Magazine article.
• In ’86, there is growing criticism about Basquiat’s work that sparks attacks of racism.
• By ’88, there have been no major exhibitions of Basquiat’s work in more than a year, but this is followed by solo shows in Dusseldorf and Paris, and a show at NYC which reclaims his reputation.
• On Friday, Aug. 12, 1988, Basquiat dies. He is 27 years old.

Resources and References

BOOKS & CATALOGUES


FILMS
Davis, Tamra (Director). The Radiant Child. (Documentary), 2010.

WEBSITES

Art Gallery of Ontario: Basquiat Now
<http://basquiatnow.com>

The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat
<http://basquiat.com/>

Artnet <http://www.artnet.com/artists/jean-michel-basquiat/>

The Brooklyn Museum: Street to Studio—The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat

<http://www.theartstory.org/artist-basquiat-jean-michel.htm>

Basquiat Biography
<http://www.basquiatbiography.com/>

“The more I paint, the more I like everything.”
-Jean-Michel Basquiat