

Artist Profile : Jean-Michel Basquiat

Jean-Michel Basquiat (December 22, 1960 - August 12, 1988) was an American artist born in Brooklyn, New York.

His mother, Matilde, was Puerto Rican and his father, Gerard, was of Haitian origin. From a young age, Jean-Michel was encouraged by his mother to draw, paint, and to participate in other art-related activities.

His art career progressed when he was 17, Jean-Michel and his friend Al Diaz started spray painting on subway cars and slum buildings in Manhattan, adding his infamous signature of SAMO, meaning Same Old Shit. One year later, he and Diaz quit school and survived by selling T-shirts and postcards. In the following years his works became recognised in his area and in 1980, he began exhibiting his work around New York with the help of two artists, Keith Haring and Barbara Kruger.

From 1980 to late 1982, Basquiat painted gestures on canvas, most often representing skeletal figures and mask-like faces that expressed his obsession with mortality, and imagery derived from his street existence, such as cars, buildings, police, children's sidewalk, games and graffiti. Basquiat painted with large brushstrokes and quantities of paint and used patches of colour.

In 1983, Basquiat met artist Andy Warhol and the two made a number of collaborative works. Often, they discussed and disputed about the lacking African American art and literature. They also painted together, influencing each others' work. Many claimed that Andy Warhol was merely using Basquiat for some of his techniques and insight, but this was never based on much fact, just mere speculation. Their relationship ended when Warhol died in 1987.

From late 1982 to 1985 Basquiat's work featured multipanel paintings and individual canvases with bold sections of colour, covered with writing, collage and unrelated imagery. These works reveal a strong interest in Basquiat's black and Hispanic identity and his identification with historical and contemporary black figures and events.

For years to come, he travelled to many places, including Africa, and his paintings were becoming very influential to the world. His style was very expressive and experimental - nervous, fierce and energetic.

Basquiat's art career is known for his three broad, though overlapping styles.

His last style from about 1986, to 1988, displays a new type of figurative depiction, in a new painterly style, with different symbols, sources, and content.

Basquiat's character has also been represented in motion pictures. Basquiat was addicted to heroin and died of an overdose on August 12, 1988. He was only 27 years old.