

Black Artists through HISTORY

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BLACK ARTISTS THROUGH HISTORY, LESSON 5 (Untitled) Boxer by Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1982

1- This painting, which depicts a black boxer in the foreground of a white graffiti-filled backdrop, was sold at auction for \$13.5 million in 2008. It had been held as part of the private collection of Lars Ulrich, the drummer for the heavy metal band Metallica, who decided to sell this painting along with Basquiat's other masterpiece Profit I in order to raise funds to build a house for his family.

2- This painting is a typical example of Basquiat's bold graffiti style, used to enhance a heroic art piece into a full examination of the character's figure and stance, from the skeleton-like smile to the disfigured muscles in the arms and laces of the boxing gloves.

3- Jean-Michel Basquiat canonized Louis and other black boxing heroes in his paintings, depicting crowns or haloes circling their heads, as demonstrated by the suggestive halo form that arises from the head of the Boxer. In fact, some art critics consider the outstretched arms as a resemblance to Christ's upon the cross, while the halo might morph into a crown of thorns.

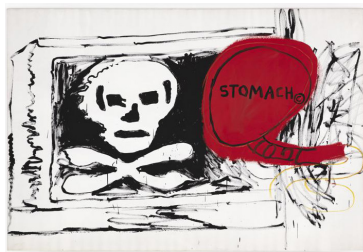
4- The upraised arms of the boxer in this painting invoke not only the victorious stance of the winner of a boxing match, but also a doubling of the raised fist of the Black Power salute. This gesture was famously on display at the 1968 Olympics, when American victors Tommie Smith and John Carlos made a powerful statement of solidarity with the Civil Rights movement by raising their fists when receiving their medals at the podium. Note the KO (knockout) letters by the boxer's right hand.

5- By the time he painted the Untitled (Boxer), Basquiat attained the financial success that allowed him to obtain professional art materials as well as a studio space, where for the first time he could create large-scale works such as the present painting. However, he remained acutely aware of the imbalance of power in the art world in which he triumphed.

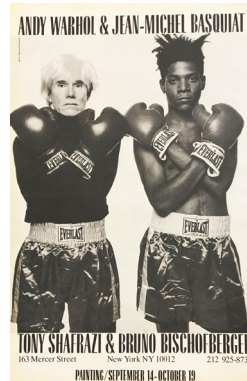
Basquiat & Warhol:



Jean-Michel Basquiat & Andy Warhol pose at the gallery.



Untitled - Basquiat & Warhol collaboration, 1987



6- Basquiat saw himself in this world as a defiant warrior who had risen from the streets through sheer tenacity and talent, a role he played out in an explicit yet humorous way in the photos where he posed as a prize-fighter with Andy Warhol to advertise the artistic collaboration of these art-world champions.

7- Basquiat and Warhol became close friends and collaborated in painting, such as the untitled piece featuring Basquiat's cartoonish depiction of a vibrant-red human stomach alongside Warhol's skull and crossbones, which recalls Warhol's silkscreen-and-paint "Skulls" series.

8- Warhol and Basquiat's relationship has been described as a symbiotic one: Basquiat relied on Warhol to both bolster his name and help him navigate his newfound celebrity; Warhol, in turn, capitalized on Basquiat's youthful energy to revitalize his image as an art-world rebel.

Activity: After studying the Untitled (Boxer), print the B&W outline and color it to match the artist's rendering -or- in your own style. I encourage you to use multi-media.



Untitled (Boxer) 1982, Acrylic and Crayon. 75.98" x 94.09" - Neo-Expressionism.



Facts about artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, born in 1960 and died 1988:

1- Born in Brooklyn to Haitian and Puerto Rican parents, Basquiat grew up in New York City where he confronted

racism and learned firsthand the realities of the socio-economic struggle of the working class.

2- Basquiat's art could be summarized in one of his quotes: "I don't think about art when I'm working. I try to think about life."

3- After growing up as part of a middle-class family in Brooklyn, at age seventeen, he headed to downtown Manhattan to drift between friends' apartments and abandoned warehouses for a period, making his mark with spray paint, while setting his sights firmly on making it in the New York art world. He started his career by spray-painting enigmatic slogans and symbols on city streets, coded criticisms of contemporary culture that set him apart from the colorful graffiti tags that predominated at the time.

4- As a child, he would visit the Brooklyn Museum of Art, not far from his home in Boerum Hill. "I realized that I didn't see many paintings with black people in them," he noted.

5- In a 1983 interview, he defined the subject of his art as "Royalty, heroism and the streets."

6- Basquiat celebrated many heroes of black history in his works, particularly athletes and musicians. He identified with their personal struggles and inner demons. Basquiat read extensively about these athletes, and was very well informed about the details of their lives and achievements, which he translated into his painting.

7- Basquiat had exhibits in New York, Los Angeles, Zurich, Rome and Rotterdam. He was also the youngest artist ever, 21 years old, to be included in the prestigious Documenta 7 exhibition in West Germany



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