

# GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

Press release



The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents on July 3, 2015

## Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now's the Time

Sponsored by





Iberdrola is pleased and proud to support the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao's production of *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now's the Time*, one of the most important exhibitions ever devoted to this American artist and the first thematic examination of his output.

Though Basquiat was only active for a brief period in the 1980s, he produced one of the most remarkable bodies of work of the 20th century, with a formal and conceptual appeal that continues to fascinate audiences today. He combined images and texts in a unique style—mixing hieroglyphics and comics, high and low culture—to present a revealing vision of the world tinged with pain.

Basquiat's creations are manifestos that denounce inequality, racism, prejudice, and discrimination and defend the values of freedom, dignity, and respect. His art is steeped in music and poetry, harmoniously combining elements of everyday life with classic works of art, literature and music, anatomical drawings, and references to the world of sports, history (especially Afro-American history), life and death.

Throughout his brief, precocious career, Basquiat never stopped creating. Once, when asked about his prolific output, the artist replied that he simply did not know what else to do with himself. In other words, for him art was a necessity.

We hope and trust that visitors who come to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao will enjoy this exhibition, a tribute to Basquiat's brilliant and meteoric career. I congratulate the Museum and everyone who made it possible for this show to travel from Ontario, Canada, to our city, giving us a chance to enjoy the extraordinary work of this artist and takes its social message to heart.

**Ignacio S. Galán**  
**Chairman of Iberdrola**

### *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now's the Time*

- Curators: Dieter Buchhart and Álvaro Rodríguez Fominaya (Bilbao)
  - Dates: July 3–November 1, 2015
  - Sponsored by: Iberdrola
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- The exhibition features approximately one hundred key works organized around the themes that inspired Jean-Michel Basquiat in the course of his intense career, cut short by his untimely death at age 27
  - Described by the artist himself as a “springboard to deeper truths about the individual”, Basquiat’s powerful and emotionally charged works explore issues such as racial identity and history
  - Though Basquiat soon left the conceptual graffiti of his early days behind to exhibit in art galleries, his paintings use the language and symbols of the street, creating images that honor black men as kings and saints
  - As an artist, he immersed himself in high art and graffiti, jazz and rap, punk and pop culture, anatomy textbooks and comics, and then channeled this complexity into sophisticated, layered works that presaged today’s internet culture

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is pleased to present *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now's the Time*, an unprecedented exhibition in Europe that includes roughly one hundred large-scale paintings and drawings from public and private collections across the United States and Europe. This show, organized by the Art Gallery of Ontario in collaboration with the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, is the first thematic examination of Basquiat’s output and has been made possible by the generous sponsorship of Iberdrola.

Already famous at the age of 20 for his groundbreaking drawings and paintings, Jean-Michel Basquiat (b. 1960– d. 1988) took the New York art world by storm in the early 1980s. He gained international recognition by creating powerful and expressive works that confronted issues of racism, politics, and social hypocrisy. Although his career was cut short by his untimely death at age 27, his works remain hugely influential.

Described by the artist himself as a “springboard to deeper truths about the individual”, Basquiat’s vivid and poignant work regularly referenced street art, given his beginnings in conceptual graffiti and his use of salvaged materials such as abandoned doors and packing crates as canvases.

## From the Street to Stardom

In 1976, Basquiat and his friend Al Diaz began spray-painting the walls of lower Manhattan under the pseudonym SAMO©, a reference to the saying “same old shit”. Their work cleverly used and manipulated text with the intention of provoking passers-by. Basquiat’s renown quickly grew as he started a rock band, appeared in Edo Bertoglio’s indie film *Downtown 81*, and struck up a friendship with Andy Warhol. His first solo show, held in 1982 when he was just 21, sold out.

As a result of this sudden popularity, he found himself socializing and sharing ideas with celebrities like David Bowie and Madonna, whom he dated for a short time. He also appeared in music videos and was featured on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*. Now, 27 years after his death, his influence endures.

Basquiat’s innovative and provocative artistic approach translated the 1980s New York scene into a radical visual language that tackled issues of racism, class struggle, social hypocrisy, and black history. Inspired as much by high art—such as Abstract Expressionism and Conceptualism—as by hip hop, jazz, sports, comics, and graffiti, he used recurring motifs to explore issues that he constantly grappled with in his own art and life.

## Overview of the exhibition

### Early Work: “Street as Studio” and “Heroes and Saints”

The show is divided into eight different sections on the Museum’s third floor and begins in Gallery 305, where his earliest creations are displayed under two themes: “Street as Studio” and “Heroes and Saints”. The urban landscape inspired the subject matter, approach, and materials used in these pieces. Born in Brooklyn to a Haitian father and a Puerto Rican-American mother, at age 17 Basquiat made his debut on the New York art scene with conceptual graffiti. Political, poetic, and funny, these provocative messages were created by Basquiat and his friend Al Diaz, who worked together under the pseudonym SAMO©.

Basquiat did not consider himself a graffiti artist; he merely used spray paint as a crowbar to pry open the doors of the art world. He soon began to work with materials he found on the street: discarded foam, windows, and doors. In his distinctive style, Basquiat transcribed the city—with its cars, planes, trains, and sidewalk games—into these innovative early works, bringing the poetry of the street into the gallery. Highlights of this section include *Untitled/Car Crash* (1981) and *Number 4* (1981).

Commenting on those ironic images, Basquiat’s fellow artist and erstwhile collaborator Francesco Clemente stated: “Jean-Michel’s crown has three peaks, for his three royal lineages: the poet, the musician, the great boxing champion. Jean measured his skill against all he deemed strong, without prejudice as to their taste or age.”

Basquiat challenged Western history by creating images that honor black men as kings and saints. The artist used a crown, his signature recurring motif, to portray his heroes—renowned athletes, musicians, and writers—in a majestic light. Inspired by their accomplishments, Basquiat believed he was carrying on the work of this noble lineage, and he often depicted himself wearing the same crown in his self-portraits. Basquiat’s crown is a changeable symbol: at times a halo and at others a crown of thorns, emphasizing the martyrdom that often goes hand in hand with sainthood. For Basquiat, these heroes and saints are warriors, occasionally rendered triumphant with arms raised in victory. This aspect of his work is illustrated in *Busted Atlas 2* (1982), *Untitled* (1982), and *Dark Race Horse – Jesse Owens* (1983).

### **“Reclaiming Histories” and “Mirroring”**

The exhibition continues in Gallery 305 with two new themes: “Reclaiming Histories” and “Mirroring”.

The pieces in the first section seem to address events unfolding today in the United States. Like the signs recently carried by protesters in Ferguson, Missouri, and across North America, Basquiat’s works insist that black lives matter. The artist dealt with racism and social hypocrisy on a daily basis: he was celebrated by the art world but unable to catch a cab in New York City. He channeled these experiences into powerful paintings that draw on narratives of black history and the African diaspora.

His layered canvases explore slavery and colonialism while also connecting these historic persecutions to current racist practices like police brutality. After the death of his friend and fellow graffiti artist Michael Stewart, Jean-Michel Basquiat reflected, “It could have been me. It could have been me.” Choosing to confront these histories, Basquiat became an agent of change through works like *Water Worshipper* (1984) and, from the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Collection, *Moses and the Egyptians* (1982).

The “Mirroring” section reveals how Basquiat identified deeply with the individuals depicted in his paintings. His portraits explore issues of identity—specifically, black male identity—and can also be seen as mirror images of the artist himself. From his heroes to his friends, Basquiat painted people he related to and admired, conveying what he perceived as their shared experiences in his works.

### **“Dualities and Double Identities” and “Playing the Trickster: Cartoons and Provocations”**

In Gallery 307, under the title “Dualities and Double Identities”, we see how Basquiat paired individuals and objects in ambiguous relationships to create tension and challenge perceptions. Although it has often been said that Basquiat inhabited two worlds at once, as an “insider-outsider”, for the artist the notion of duality was something complex, related not only to his own identity but also to social systems of wealth and class. In these works, Basquiat recast ideas of black and white, dark and light, challenging conventions and standard perceptions of good and

evil. Some of those paintings reveal deep-seated conflicts, while others offer images of companionship.

By combining disparate elements in a single work of art, Basquiat also suggested that opposing forces can be united to form a whole. Among the masterpieces displayed here are *Six Crimee* (1982) and *Dark Milk* (1986), of which the poet Rene Ricard said, “The startling wit of his juxtapositions can throw a beam of recognition on the events surrounding us.”

The other theme featured in this gallery is something that characterized the artist’s entire career: “Playing the Trickster: Cartoons and Provocations”. On this subject, the curator and art historian Richard D. Marshall noted that Basquiat saw in these popular cartoons and consumer items a deeper reflection of institutionalized racism. Growing up, Basquiat excelled at art and wanted to be a cartoonist. In these works, he appropriated and repurposed cartoon images for his own subversive acts of storytelling.

The artist provided multiple entry points for viewers, and the works’ pared-down, familiar qualities make them approachable. In these pieces dripping with irony, Basquiat places recognizable symbols in dialogue with serious social issues. Although the figures may appear comical on the surface, he also highlights their more sadistic features, and his characters act as tricksters—deities with secret knowledge who break the rules and flout convention. Like the artist himself, these works take on multiple forms and refuse to play just one role. This is exemplified by pieces like *Exu* (1988) and a work in the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Collection, *Man from Naples* (1982).

### **Basquiat and Warhol: The Odd Couple of the Art World**

The show continues in Gallery 303, where visitors will find an impressive selection of works produced by Basquiat in collaboration with Andy Warhol, Francesco Clemente, Keith Haring, and Kenny Scharf. Deeply involved in the New York cultural scene of the 1980s, Basquiat participated in a number of collaborative projects with other artists, musicians, and filmmakers.

At a time when fame and fortune had made friendships difficult and isolation a harsh reality, Basquiat found a trusted advisor, confidant, and equal in Andy Warhol, by then a veteran of the art world. Warhol in turn was inspired by Basquiat’s immense energy and exuberant creativity. In 1984 and 1985, the two collaborated on a series of works that combine their distinctive styles in silkscreen and painting, an innovative and prolific partnership which ultimately accounted for a tenth part of Basquiat’s entire oeuvre. Ronnie Cutrone, Warhol’s friend and studio assistant, described this collaboration: “It was like some crazy art-world marriage and they were the odd couple. The relationship was symbiotic. Jean-Michel thought he needed Andy’s fame, and Andy thought he needed Jean-Michel’s new blood. Jean-Michel gave Andy a rebellious image again.” The large-scale works shown in this gallery include *Win \$1,000,000* (1984) and *Sin More!* (1985).

## “Sampling and Scratching: Music, Words, and Collage”

The show concludes in Gallery 302 with another pivotal theme in Basquiat’s career, “Sampling and Scratching: Music, Words, and Collage”. The very title of this exhibition alludes to Charlie Parker and Martin Luther King. Basquiat found inspiration in everything around him; he was an avid reader and often listened to music or watched television while painting.

The artist immersed himself in high art and graffiti, jazz and rap, punk and pop culture, medical textbooks and comics, and then channeled this complexity into sophisticated, layered works that presaged today’s internet culture. Music was a huge influence. Sampling from a vast array of sources, Basquiat employed a poetic freestyle approach that embodied the spirit of hip hop, whose rise paralleled his own. Producing densely collaged images as well as works featuring a single, provocative phrase, Basquiat pieced together symbols and texts to realize an artistic vision as multifarious as his sources. In the words of the critic Franklin Sirmans, “Basquiat synthesized performance, music, and visual art in a way that was then unprecedented and is now unparalleled.” *Eroica* (1987) and *Oreo* (1988) are examples of the works on display in this section.

### **Educational spaces**

The educational part of this exhibition can be found on the balcony overlooking Gallery 208 and in Galleries 301 and 304. This area aims to explain how the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat can be seen as an artistic instrument of self-realization, but also a reminder of Afro-American history and a denunciation of political and social injustice in the United States. Basquiat’s works contain layer upon layer of information and a critique of social issues that are still relevant today, such as racial discrimination and civil rights.

His interest in history, politics, music, literature, film, and photography is explained through selected texts, images, and audiovisual footage featuring the artist himself, complemented by a reading area and a playlist with songs that reflect Basquiat’s musical tastes, such as jazz and hip hop, as well as the greatest hits of the 1980s and tracks composed by his band, Gray. The artwork featured in the show will thus be combined with interpretation resources and hands-on graffiti and photography activities led by the Gallery Guides to encourage audience participation.

Finally, the exhibition’s Didaktika section also explores the most private facet of Basquiat’s brief yet intense life, documenting his personal and professional relationships with many fellow artists, including Andy Warhol and Keith Haring, which led to interesting collaborative projects.

**Cover image:**

Jean Michel Basquiat

*Self-Portrait*, 1984

Acrylic and oil stick on paper mounted on canvas

100 x 70 cm

Yoav Harlap Collection

© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York

**For more information:**

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For further information, please contact the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao Press Department: tel. +34 944 35 90 08 and email: [media@guggenheim-bilbao.es](mailto:media@guggenheim-bilbao.es)

Jean-Michel Basquiat

*Number 4*, 1981

Acrylic, oil stick, and paper collage on canvas

167 x 137 cm

Collection Andre Sakhai, Courtesy Marianne

Boesky Gallery, New York

Photo by Jason Wyche

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Jean Michel Basquiat

*The Ring*, 1981

Acrylic and oil stick on canvas

152.4 x 121.9 cm

Private collection, Courtesy Acquavella Galleries

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Jean Michel Basquiat

*Irony of a Negro Policeman*, 1981

Acrylic and crayon on canvas

183 x 122 cm

Private collection

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Jean-Michel Basquiat

*Untitled*, 1982

Acrylic and oil on linen

193 x 239 cm

Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

Photo by Studio Tromp, Rotterdam

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Licensed by Artestar, New York



Jean-Michel Basquiat  
*A Panel of Experts*, 1982  
Acrylic and oil pastel on paper mounted on canvas  
152.4 x 152.4 x 4.5 cm  
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts  
Gift of Ira Young  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat  
Licensed by Artestar, New York



Jean-Michel Basquiat  
*Moses and the Egyptians*, 1982  
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas  
185 x 137 cm  
Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa  
Gift, Bruno Bischoffberger, Zurich  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York



Jean-Michel Basquiat  
*Man from Naples*, 1982  
Acrylic and collage on wood  
122 x 244.5 cm  
Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York



Jean-Michel Basquiat  
*Six Crimee*, 1982  
Acrylic and oil stick on Masonite  
Three panels  
183 x 366 x 2.5 cm overall  
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, The Scott D.F. Spiegel Collection  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York



Jean-Michel Basquiat  
*Loin*, 1982  
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas  
183 x 122 cm  
Private collection, Courtesy Acquavella Galleries  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York



Jean-Michel Basquiat  
*CPRKR*, 1982  
Acrylic, oil, collage, and paper on canvas with visible wooden supports  
152.4 x 101.6 cm  
Collection of Donald Baechler  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York



Jean-Michel Basquiat  
*Dark Race Horse—Jesse Owens*, 1983  
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas  
213.5 x 91.5 cm  
Collection of the Jean-Michel Basquiat Estate  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York



Jean Michel Basquiat  
*Self-Portrait*, 1984  
Acrylic and oil stick on paper mounted on canvas  
100 x 70 cm  
Yoav Harlap Collection  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York



Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol  
*Win \$ 1'000'000*, 1984  
Acrylic on canvas  
170 x 288.5 cm  
Collection Bischofberger, Switzerland  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York



Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol  
*Ailing Ali in Fight of Life*, 1984  
Acrylic on canvas  
193 x 267 cm  
Collection Bischofberger, Switzerland  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York



Jean Michel Basquiat  
*Dark Milk*, 1986  
Acrylic, Xerox collage, and paper collage on canvas  
172.5 x 219.5 cm  
Private collection  
Photo courtesy Gagosian Gallery  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York



Jean-Michel Basquiat  
*Eroica*, 1987  
Acrylic, oil stick, and Xerox collage on paper mounted on canvas  
228.5 x 271.5 cm  
Private collection  
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Licensed by Artestar, New York



Jean Michel Basquiat  
*Exu*, 1988  
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas  
199.3 x 254 cm  
Private collection  
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Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1984  
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Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1984  
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Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1984  
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