The art of Jean-Michel Basquiat powerfully evokes shamanistic practices. However, while the traditional shaman sought to gain some measure of control over his natural environment through cave paintings or sand paintings, Basquiat sought to control, to master, the urban environment through his graffiti-like work that draws on a verbal as well as a visual vocabulary. A product of the early eighties when Neo-Expressionism was dominating the New York art scene, Basquiat’s works shared that movement’s roots in Abstract Expressionism and popular culture. What distinguishes Basquiat’s art from that of his contemporaries, however, is its obsessive nature, the multiplicity of its sources, and its indomitable vitality.

Born in Brooklyn in 1960, Basquiat displayed an interest in and ability for art at an early age, although he never received any formal training. His mother, a Brooklyn native whose parents were from Puerto Rico, exposed her son to the numerous museums in the New York area. His father, an accountant, with whom he lived after his parents’ separation, was born in Haiti. Rejecting conventional schooling, Basquiat attended an alternative high school for artistically talented students where he met Al Diaz, with whom he would eventually form a street art collaboration, SAMO.

SAMO, street slang for “same old shit,” got its name from a character created by Basquiat while he was working with a theater group. Basquiat and Diaz began writing graffiti on subway trains in lower Manhattan before eventually moving to strategically chosen walls above ground. This graffiti was primarily textual, consisting of short, witty philosophical phrases. The efforts of Basquiat and Diaz did not go unnoticed—their work was first acknowledged in an article in The Village Voice in December 1978. By early 1979, however, misunderstandings between the two had ended SAMO, and “SAMO is dead” appeared all over SoHo and the East Village.

The late seventies proved instrumental in launching Basquiat’s artistic career. The end of SAMO marked the end of his anonymity as an artist. Through his participation in the lower Manhattan club scene, Basquiat met those who would later be involved in his success. People such as Keith Haring, Freddy Braithwaite, Diego Cortez, Madonna, and later Mary Boone and Andy Warhol, became friends and supporters and helped contribute to his eventual renown.

At the height of his fame, Basquiat had a brief but productive stay in Dallas. In the summer of 1985, he came to Dallas to attend the opening of “Primitivism in 20th-Century Art” at the DMA. He stayed for three weeks, painting in a Turtle Creek apartment and producing monotypes at Peregrine Press. Unable to stretch canvases in his improvised studio, Basquiat revived his practice of painting on found objects. He painted on the end of a baby crib he purchased at a goodwill store in Oak Cliff. By turning the board on its side, he created a work included in this exhibition, whose structure recalls that of Dogon granary shutters. He also painted on a door discarded from the apartment building in which he was staying. The resulting portrait, Sam F., is one of the most poignant works in the exhibition, with the mail slot strategically placed in the area of Sam’s stomach.

Sam F. reflects Basquiat’s considerable involvement with the human figure and his sympathy for the physically handicapped. This concern dates back to a childhood incident: while playing ball on the street, Basquiat was hit by a car. In order for him to understand which parts of his body were injured and therefore hasten his recovery, his mother gave him a copy of Gray’s Anatomy. Consequently, anatomical drawings and skeletal figures became a significant element in his art, as can be seen in Untitled of 1985 in the Patsy R. and Raymond D. Nasher Collection. This painting also shows Basquiat’s habit of repeating the same image within a painting, creating a composition that suggests a graffiti-covered wall. At times, his untamed, gestural marks and bright colors are reminiscent of a child’s crayon drawings, as in Untitled of 1982 in the Marcia and Alan May Collection. However, drawing on his perspective from the American street culture, he transforms this seemingly innocent and childlike style into a highly sophisticated and challenging urban primitivism.
Basquiat's graffiti origins are apparent in his use of personal symbols like the crown, in his use of trademarks like Rinso, but especially in his use of text. He was an incessant list maker—lists of car manufacturers, lists of metals, lists of grains, and perhaps most importantly, lists of songs appear in his work.

Music accompanied Basquiat at all times and all places, and therefore references to the music world become a way of encoding his paintings and drawings with a subtext that often alludes to minority issues in America. In *Sam F.*, he not only lists a series of Cole Porter songs, but also a history of black music beginning with minstrel shows. The bird’s head above Sam may refer to his favorite black musician, Charlie Parker, who was known as "Bird" and who became a hero for young, disenfranchised African-Americans.

Tragically, Basquiat’s brilliant career was cut short by an overdose of heroin in 1988. His success was accompanied by a tendency toward self-destruction, not unlike that of his heroes Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix who also died at age 27, but the importance of his brief career cannot be overlooked. Basquiat’s agile mind absorbed everything it came in contact with. Although a high school dropout, he learned from the Hispanic and African-American cultures of his parents, from museums, books, and television, from his heroes in the music world, from boxers Sugar Ray Robinson and Joe Louis, from artists like Andy Warhol with whom he collaborated, but most of all from the streets of New York. He was driven by a need to express his experiences and his thoughts on paper, canvas, doors, headboards, any available surface; and he worked wherever he happened to be. Basquiat never lost touch with his beginnings as a street artist. He created works whose raw gesturalism, brilliant coloring, and social criticism reflect the hedonistic decade in which they were produced.

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DALLAS COLLECTS

Jean-Michel Basquiat

January 31 - March 28, 1993
Dallas Museum of Art
Curated by Annegreth Nill

Cover:
Sam F., 1985, acrylic, oil, oil paintstick, and collage on wood, 80 in. x 36 in., Collection Mr. and Mrs. Sam Feldman

Inside:
Untitled, 1985, acrylic and paper on canvas, 86 in. x 68 in., the Patsy R. and Raymond D. Nasher Collection, Dallas, Texas

Photo credit: Richard Leslie Shulman, 1984

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WORKS EXHIBITED

Untitled, n.d.
oil paintstick on paper
Lent by Benjamin Barzune

Untitled, n.d.
watercolor and oil paintstick on paper
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Sam Feldman

Untitled, n.d.
oil paintstick on paper
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Sam Feldman

Untitled, n.d.
oil paintstick on paper
Lent by Marcia and Alan May

Untitled, 1981-82
acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas and collage on canvas
Lent by the Patsy R. and Raymond D. Nasher Collection, Dallas, Texas

Untitled, (yellow crown with figure), 1981-82
oil paintstick and acrylic on paper
Private collection, Dallas

New Rinso, 1981-82
acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas
Lent by Alexandra May

Untitled, 1982
acrylic on wood
Lent by Alexandra May

Cassius Clay, 1982
acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas
Lent by the Patsy R. and Raymond D. Nasher Collection, Dallas, Texas

Bushwick Avenue, 1984
acrylic and oil on canvas
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Sam Feldman

Untitled, (self portrait), 1985
oil paintstick on paper mounted on board
Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Burton Einspruch and Alexander Einspruch

Untitled, 1985
pencil and crayon on paper
Lent by The Harriet and Harmon Kelley Foundation for the Arts

Untitled, 1985
acrylic and oil paintstick on wood
Lent by Marcia and Alan May

Untitled, 1985
acrylic and paper on wood
Lent by the Patsy R. and Raymond D. Nasher Collection, Dallas, Texas

Untitled, 1985
acrylic and paper on canvas
Lent by the Patsy R. and Raymond D. Nasher Collection, Dallas, Texas

Sam F., 1985
acrylic, oil, oil paintstick, and collage on wood
Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Sam Feldman

EXHIBITION HISTORY

Beginning in 1981 until his death in 1988, Jean-Michel Basquiat exhibited widely in the United States, Europe, and Japan. He had one-person exhibitions at such renowned galleries as Annina Nosei (New York), Mary Boone-Michael Werner (New York), Tony Shafrazi (New York), Carpenter + Hochman (Dallas), Larry Gagosian (Los Angeles), Bruno Bischofberger (Zurich), Thaddaeus Ropac (Salzburg), Yvon Lambert (Paris), and Akira Ikeda (Tokyo). The first extensive traveling exhibition of his work was organized by The Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1984. Basquiat also participated in such prominent group shows as Documenta 7 (1982), Kassel, the 1983 Biennial Exhibition of the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the XII Biennale de Paris (1985). For further information, see:


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