



HIGH MUSEUM OF ART ATLANTA

Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks

Teacher Resource: Grades 9–12

February 28–May 29, 2016

About the Exhibition

This exhibition will feature rare notebooks that artist Jean-Michel Basquiat created between 1980 and around 1987. Filled with his handwritten texts and sketches, the 160 unbound notebook pages will be presented alongside thirty related paintings, drawings, and mixed-media works. This exhibition offers a new perspective and rare glimpse inside the mind of this legendary artist. Use the following guide to facilitate teaching and learning inspired by Jean-Michel Basquiat's written and visual texts.

About the Artist

Jean-Michel Basquiat (American, 1960–1988) was born in Brooklyn, New York. Influenced by his Haitian and Puerto Rican heritage, he was able to read, write, and speak French, Spanish, and English by the time he was eleven. Basquiat came to the public's attention in the late 1970s through his collaborative spray-painted street writings under the tag name SAMO©. Within ten years, he had created over six hundred paintings and fifteen hundred drawings in addition to sculptures and mixed-media works. Though only twenty-seven at the time of his death, Basquiat was one of the most influential artists of his generation.



Tamra Davis (American, born 1962), still from *A Conversation with Basquiat*, 2006. 23 min., 22 sec. © Tamra Davis. Courtesy of the artist. By permission of the Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat, all rights reserved. Photo: Jonathan Dorado, Brooklyn Museum.

Art Practice

Much as American hip-hop did in the 1980s, street writing and countercultural art practice became increasingly recognized and embraced in the art world during Basquiat's time. Along with artists such as Julian Schnabel, Keith Haring, and Andy Warhol, Basquiat was part of an up-and-coming generation that challenged old definitions of art and influenced contemporary art as we know it.

Curriculum Connections

English/Language Arts

- Use Basquiat's notebooks to further your students' understanding of primary sources.
 - o Explore the notebook pages as artifacts. Ask students to consider:
 - What do you see? Describe a page of the notebook.
 - What can we learn about the maker by examining this artifact?
 - What can we learn about the time in which Basquiat lived?
 - For whom do you think this artifact was created?
- Ask students, individually or in groups, to explore Basquiat's writing by practicing close and critical reading.
 - o Answers to the following questions should be supported by textual evidence:
 - What inferences can you draw from the text about the author or what the author is communicating?
 - Which literary elements (style, point of view, irony, structure) do you notice?
 - What do you think is the theme or central idea of this text?
 - Can a straightforward interpretation or conclusion be drawn from this text? Why or why not?
- Go on a figurative-language scavenger hunt. Have students search for uses of various figures of speech in Basquiat's notebooks.
 - o Can they find any examples of simile? Metaphor? Allusion? Assonance? Hyperbole? Personification?
 - o How does figurative language affect the tone of the writing?
- Basquiat's notebooks often contain words and ideas also found in his larger works. Have students investigate how his written texts inform his visual art and vice versa.
 - o Many texts and drawings feature the fictional character Jimmy Best. Have students investigate the character's presence in Basquiat's wall writings, drawings, and texts. What kinds of inferences can they draw about this character?
- Basquiat carefully chose the words he used in his notebooks. Conduct a classroom discussion surrounding the connotative and denotative meanings of words. Which examples of these can be found in Basquiat's writing? Does he use words that hold multiple meanings?
- Open Basquiat's text to interpretation. In small groups, ask students to read and analyze a page from his notebooks. Together, students will produce a second document paraphrasing the original. Compare and contrast interpretations of Basquiat's writing.

Visual Arts

- Use Basquiat's notebooks as a springboard for using and exploring visual journals or process journals in your classroom. Encourage each student to maintain a journal to record thoughts, observations, and sketches.

- Pose visual prompts inspired by Basquiat's notebooks.
 - Basquiat often wrote lists in his notebooks. The subject matter ranged from celebrities to things he noticed in his community. Have students write lists of things that stand out to them in a single day: celebrities they hear about in the media, social issues that interest them, etc. Taking cues from Basquiat, students can consider how to organize the lists (alphabetically or categorically).
 - Basquiat sketched and recorded observations of life in New York City and the broader culture. He made allusions to pop stars, athletes, city traffic, and even children's games. Have students record observations about their own communities, culture, or current events.
 - One of the best-known images from Basquiat's works is the crown, which has come to represent the artist's aesthetic. Have students discuss what the symbolism of the crown might be, especially in relation to other themes that recur in his work. Students then can create symbols they associate with their own identities or interests.
- What types of similarities or differences can students find between Basquiat's notebooks and Leonardo da Vinci's? Or between Basquiat's notebooks and John Locke's commonplace books? Investigate other artists or authors who used notebooks or sketchbooks. Have students discuss why artists use these tools and how visual journaling might enhance their own artistic practice. At the end of the semester, students can exhibit pages from their own visual journals and write artists statements explaining their use.
- In 1979, Basquiat was in a band called Gray that performed alongside Blondie, Madonna, and the Talking Heads. He was influenced by these artists and hip-hop music of the 1980s. Play music inspired by these artists and have students create a tempera painting responding to repetition. Then ask them to write about the ways Basquiat may have been influenced by hip-hop.
- Before becoming a studio artist, Basquiat made small collages. He used materials such as baseball cards, PEZ wrappers, barcodes, and discarded packaging. Have students combine items with disparate visual or contextual elements to create new meanings. Students can make their own collages using found materials.
- Basquiat stated, "The black person is the protagonist in most of my paintings. I realized I didn't see many paintings with black people in them." Many of his artworks explore social inequality and racism. Allow students to create their own works of art investigating contemporary movements surrounding race and inequality.

Additional Resources

Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child (2010). Directed by Tamra Davis. Color, sound, 93 minutes.

www.basquiat.com [\[\[this link doesn't work\]\]](#)

Brooklyn Museum of Art's Teacher Resource:

https://d1lfxha3ugu3d4.cloudfront.net/education/docs/2015_Basquiat_Teacher_Packet_sm.pdf

Standards

English Language Arts

- ELAGSE9-10RL1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- ELAGSE9-10RL2: Determine a theme or central idea of text and closely analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- ELAGSE9-10RL4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone
- ELAGSE9-10RL7: Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic media, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment.
- ELAGSE9-10RI4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).
- ELAGSE9-10RI6: Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text, and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.
- ELAGSE9-10W10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.
- ELAGSE9-10SL5: Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence, as well as to add interest.
- ELAGSE11-12RL1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
- ELAGSE11-12RL4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

Visual Arts

- VAHSDRMC.1 Engages in the creative process; imagines new ideas by using mental and visual imagery, conceptualizes these ideas by using artistic language and contextual understandings, and accesses learning. The student develops a personal artistic voice that gives unique form to these concepts.
- VAHSVAMC.2 Finds and solves problems through open-ended inquiry, the consideration of multiple options, weighing consequences, and assessing results.
 - a. Uses sketchbook or journal to research and experiment with artistic conventions to communicate ideas.
- VAHSDRMC.3 Cultivates critical thinking and logical argumentation in aesthetics.
- VAHSDRMC.4 Analyzes the origins of one's own ideas in relation to community, culture, and the world
- VAHSDRCU.1 Articulates ideas and universal themes from diverse cultures of the past and present.
- VAHSDRCU.2 Demonstrates an understanding of how art history impacts the creative process of art making.
- VAHSDRPR.1 Incorporates elements and principles of design to solve specific visual arts problems and to communicate ideas and emotions, culminating in a finished work of art.
- VAHSDRPR.4 Keeps a visual/verbal sketchbook journal, consistently throughout the course, to collect, develop, and preserve ideas in order to produce works of art around themes of personal meaning.
- VAHSDRC.1 Applies information from other disciplines to enhance the understanding and production of artworks.