

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT

12/22/1960 – 8/12/1988



In the 1970s, cryptic graffiti messages began appearing in Manhattan signed SAMO©. SAMO© was the pseudonym of the teenaged Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Basquiat grew up in a middle-class environment in Brooklyn, the son of a Haitian father, an accountant, and a Puerto Rican mother. As a teenager, he left home to live in lower Manhattan, selling hand-painted t-shirts and postcards on the street. His work began to attract attention around 1980, after a group of underground artists held a public exhibition, the Times Square Show.

Basquiat's unique visual lexicon compounded of "graffiti symbols and urban rage" (*Publishers Weekly*) challenged accepted notions of art. His

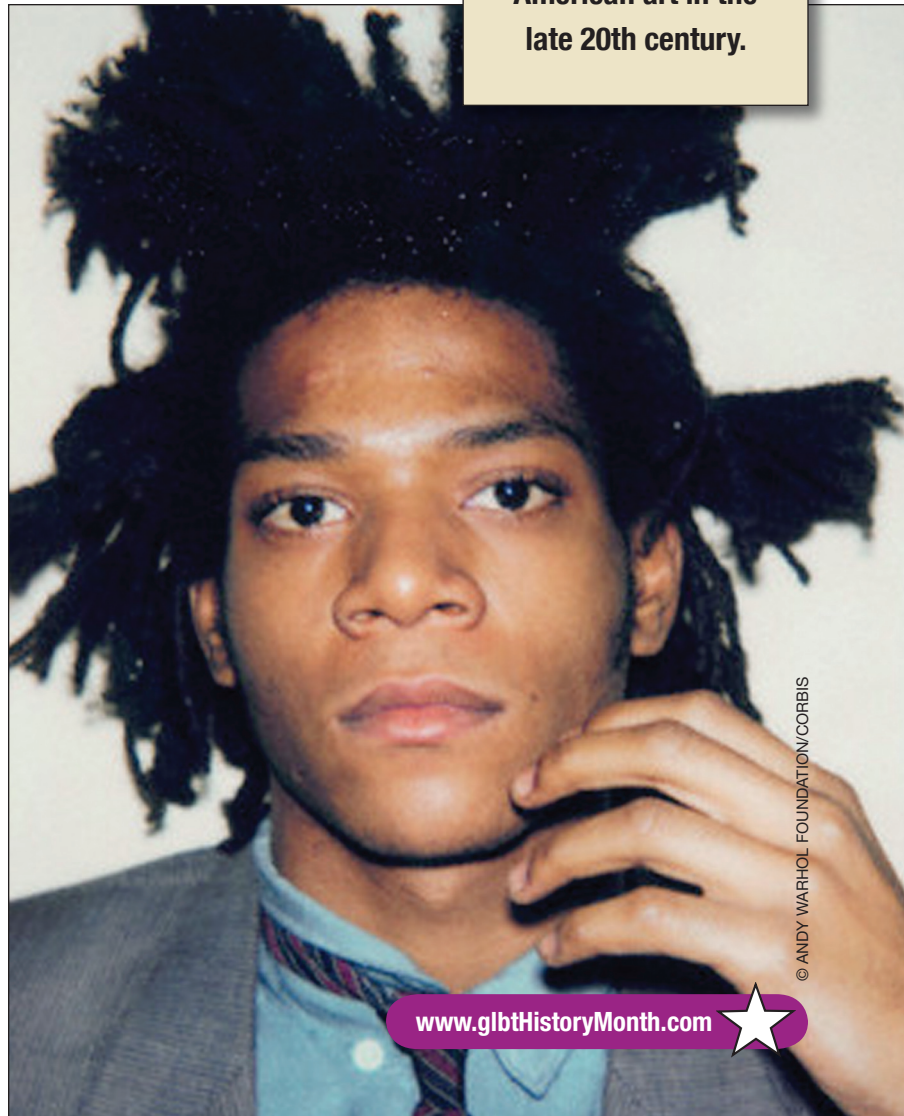
vivid paintings incorporated such diverse images as African masks, quotes from Leonardo da Vinci and Gray's Anatomy, Egyptian murals, pop culture, and jazz. His personal visual vocabulary included three-pronged crowns and the © symbol. Critics called his work "childlike and menacing" and "neo-primitive."

Basquiat associated with other "Neo-Expressionist" artists whose work drew from popular culture, including Andy Warhol, Julian Schnabel and Keith Haring. Haring said of Basquiat's early work: "The stuff I saw on the walls was more poetry than graffiti. They were sort of philosophical poems. ... On the surface they seemed really simple, but the minute I saw them I knew that they were more than that. From the beginning he was my favorite artist."

Embraced by the art world, Basquiat soared to international fame. In 1982, his work was exhibited in New York, Los Angeles, Rome, Rotterdam and Zurich, and he was the youngest artist ever to be included in the prestigious German exhibition, Documenta 7. In 1985, he appeared on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*.

The artist's close friends became increasingly concerned about his drug use and erratic behavior; Jean-Michel Basquiat died at the age of 27 of a heroin overdose.

Jean-Michel Basquiat was a graffiti artist whose painting became a major force in revitalizing American art in the late 20th century.



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