

Culture and the Arts: 'King Pleasure' Lives Up to Its Name. Jean-Michel Basquiat

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Jean-Michel Basquiat: *King Pleasure, on view at the Starrett-Lehigh Building in Chelsea, features more than 200 artworks and artifacts from the artist's estate - 177 of which have never been exhibited before. This highly unusual and intimate exhibition was assembled not by a curator or art historian, but by Basquiat's two younger sisters, Lisane Basquiat and Jeanine Heriveaux, and his stepmother, Nora Fitzpatrick.*

Concurrent with King Pleasure, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts is hosting Seeing Loud: **Basquiat and Music, which features some 100 works by the artist underscoring the significance of music in Basquiat's oeuvre**, and his many references to classical music, opera, jazz, and bebop. Also running now at the Albertina in Vienna is Basquiat: Of Symbols and Signs, a retrospective including 80 major works. These exhibitions reflect the explosion of popular interest in this American artist, who in the span of seven years created a body of work of over a thousand paintings and a thousand drawings.



Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988), *A Panel of Experts*, 1982, acrylic and oil pastel on paper mounted on canvas, 152.5 x 152 x 4.5 cm. MMFA, gift of Ira Young. © [Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat](#). Licensed by Artestar, New York. Photo Douglas M. Parker

What distinguishes King Pleasure is that it offers not only Basquiat’s art, but also childhood home videos, reminiscences, and full-scale recreations of the family living-room where they grew up, as well as Basquiat’s art studio on Great Jones Street where he spent the last five years of his life, replete with books, movies, and jazz records that he would play while painting.

Undoubtedly, the most spectacular reconstruction is that of the Palladium nightclub where Basquiat installed two monumental-sized paintings in the VIP lounge, including *Nu-Nile* (1985), which is over 8 ft. high and 40 ft. long, and *Untitled (Palladium)*, which features a massive dragon’s head, the source material for which is a small wooden sculpture that can be found among the show’s assortment of artifacts. Indeed, on display are scores of varied objects that Basquiat collected - including, masks, drums, a monkey’s skull, small animal sculptures, as well as a metal dagger and wood shield, among other things the artist purchased during his 1988 trip to the Ivory Coast.

In the exhibition catalog Lisane Basquiat writes: “What is important for everyone to understand... is that he was a son, and a brother, and a grandson, and a nephew, and a cousin, and a friend. He was all of that in addition to being a groundbreaking artist.” It is perhaps not surprising that King Pleasure presents the public with a Basquiat for the whole family, so to speak. The artist’s untimely death of a heroin overdose at the age of 27 goes

virtually unmentioned.

Image: Jean-Michel Basquiat: King Pleasure © [The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat](#)



Basquiat was a compulsive painter who would turn doors, refrigerators, wooden fencing and more into a canvas for his art. The exhibition provides examples of this with works such as *Untitled* (1984): painted on two groups of narrow wooden planks, the piece features on the left-hand side, the rather menacing head of an ass, above which the painter has written “ASS” – it bares its teeth as it chews on some vegetation; presumably the tall, green flora that we find on the right. The ass is, in fact, a recurring motif in Basquiat’s work – one that relates to the story of Samson and the ‘jawbone of an ass,’ with which he slew the Philistines, as described in the Book of Judges. The undated *Laugh of Sleep*, for example, includes a diagrammatic sketch of a jawbone and below it the words “JAWBONE OF AN ASS” – and below that, “240 B.C.”

Samson represents the prototypical hero-martyr, a recurring figure in Basquiat’s work and one that occupies a place of royalty in the artist’s lexicon – it includes great Black American musicians such as Charlie Parker, and athletes such as Joe Louis. Though not on view, in *Obnoxious Liberals* (1982), Samson is depicted as a black figure, head shorn, chained to the classical columns that he is soon to topple, and with them the temple of the Philistines.

Another standout work is *Jailbirds* (1983), a painting that portrays two grinning police officers as they use their batons to strike a small boy. This visceral depiction of senseless police brutality is echoed in another painting from that year – *The Death of Michael Stewart* (1983) – which was the focal point of the 2019 Guggenheim exhibition, *Basquiat’s Defacement: The Untold Story*, curated by Chaédria LaBouvier. Both paintings can be viewed in relation to one of the great themes of Western art – namely, the flagellation of Christ.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Jailbirds*, 1983. © [The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat](#)

The crown and the halo – these two signs were central to Basquiat’s language, to the alphabet he invented, which as John Berger observed, “consists not of twenty-six signs but of hundreds of signs.” The crown and the halo are symbols of valorization – and the halo is in its way no less a sign of royalty than the crown – they are also indications of solitude, of isolation: no one is more alone than Basquiat’s hero-martyrs, than Samson and Christ, or their modern-day avatars. Perhaps more than any other of his images, Basquiat’s three-pointed crown has been appropriated and commodified, emblazoned on t-shirts, handbags, and coffee-cups. What gets obfuscated by all the commercializing is the protestation, the subversive, and furious energy of Basquiat’s hero-martyrs.

Jean-Michel Basquiat was a multi-layered and complex artist whose work will fascinate and challenge scholars and patrons for generations to come. If the relevance of his work to the times in which we find ourselves has only grown, it is despite the standardization and commercial ubiquity of his images – not to speak of the bloated, hyper-inflated art market and its vultures. Nevertheless, we can be sure that Basquiat will continue to hold up an ironic mirror to the society from which he emerged, challenging us to look at ourselves without illusions or lies.

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