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## Masterpiece: Untitled, 1981 by Jean-Michel Basquiat

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**Keywords:** Graffiti, Neo-Expressionism,  
Mural

**Grade:** 5th

**Month:** February

**Activity:** Random Thoughts, Designs  
and Dreams

### Meet the Artist:

- Jean-Michel Basquiat was born in 1960 in Brooklyn, New York. He was the second of four children.
- His mother instilled a love for art in his young years by taking him to art museums in Manhattan and enrolling him as a junior member of the Brooklyn Museum of Art.
- He was an avid reader and spoke multiple languages including English, French and Spanish by age 11.
- Basquiat dropped out of High School in the tenth grade and his father banished him from the household. He stayed with friends and supported himself by selling T-shirts and homemade post cards.
- When he was 16, Basquiat and a friend began spray-painting graffiti on buildings in Lower Manhattan. The graffiti marked the "witty sayings of a precocious and worldly teenage mind" and fearlessly spoke about the social, economic, and political world through the eyes of a young African American.
- In 1980, at the age of 19 he had his first solo exhibition of his colorful acrylic and oil paintings.
- In 1981, at the age of 23, his first "Graffiti" painting was auctioned at the famous auction house in New York known as Christie's. This painting sold for \$19,000. From the sale of this painting and became instantly famous and his work was in high demand. In 2012, his Untitled (1981) piece, depicting a haloed, black-headed man with bright red skeletal body, with the artist's signature was sold at Christie's



- London for \$19.8 dollars thus setting a world auction record for Basquiat's work.
- Between 1983 and 1985, he worked on a series of collaborative paintings with Andy Warhol. The most famous was "Olympic Rings" where Warhol made several variations of the Olympic five-rings symbol, in the original primary colors to which Basquiat responded with his oppositional graffiti style.
  - He became well known for his quirky personality, wild hairdos and he rarely wore shoes. He would often paint in expensive Armani suits and would even appear in public in the same paint-spattered suits.
  - His work is well respected in the art community and categorized as Graffiti Art.
  - Throughout his career Basquiat focused on suggestive contradictions, such as wealth versus poverty, integration versus segregation, and inner versus outer experience. Basquiat's art utilized a combination of poetry, drawing, painting, and the use of pre-existing objects or images which joined text and image, abstraction and realism, and historical information mixed with contemporary critique.<sup>1</sup>
  - His brightly colored images typically contain broad brush strokes but are distinctly different from other graffiti artists because of their unique form and intellectual content.
  - As an African American artist, his work broke many barriers in the art community including a new respect and appreciation for the bold graffiti style.
  - He died in 1988 and left behind a diverse body of work including his colorful graffiti murals and wonderfully illustrated children's books.

## KEY WORD

*Neo-Expressionism:* A graphic and figurative style of the second half of the twentieth century (1980's and 1990's). Artists working in this movement were attempting to revive Expressionism (a movement created in the 1940's and 1950's that was characterized by haphazard, random brushstrokes, and bright, dramatic colors to create abstract images.

## Possible Questions:

- What is abstract about this image?
- What are the main colors he uses to express himself in his work?
- Do you see balance and symmetry in this image? Why or why not?
- Does a work of art such this inspire you? Why or why not?
- What type of message would you want to convey if you were to create a piece similar to this?

## **Activity: Random Thoughts, Designs and Dreams: A Cooperative Mural**

**\*\*Note to Art Guide:** Students may need a jump start with some suggestions of ideas for their message. Consider some of the following, but encourage the groups to brainstorm about their world to promote creativity and sharing of ideas. Write them on the board.

Earth and how we take care of it  
Natural environments  
Music / musicians  
Censorship  
Poetry or popular sayings  
Personal destiny or future  
Dream or desires  
Self Portrait, Loved ones  
Love vs. Money or other contradictions in Life  
News media  
Current events  
Public arts; theater, movies, outdoor sculptures, museums  
Sports; athletes, events, venues, Olympics and their icons

This project would work best outside so the paint dries quickly.

**Materials Needed:** 4'x5' canvas sheet or drop cloth, tempera paints (red, black, yellow, white), plates for paints, various sized paint brushes, black permanent markers.

### **Process:**

1. This is a cooperative project and requires the students to be divided into groups of four to five for each canvas sheet.
2. The goal is to consider a variety of ideas/messages that the students wish to convey in their mural. The theme is "Random thoughts, Design and Dreams", therefore, the students should be encouraged to brainstorm a variety of ideas and then decide which ideas to use and the best images to depict the theme. The message can be displayed in poetry, words, acronyms, or images or both like Jean-Michel Basquiat's work.
3. The students will use the paints and paint brushes to decorate the drop cloth to display themed images and words or poetry using the black markers.