



Fig. 1. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *A Panel of Experts*, 1982, acrylic and oil pastel on paper mounted on canvas, 152.5 x 152 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Jean-Michel Basquiat: A Childlike Exploration among *A Panel of Experts*

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Originally a graffiti artist in New York City, Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) created artworks exploring his own life alongside socio-political issues such as racism, sexism, violence and drug addiction. He drew inspiration from the everyday, whether it be popular culture or his black heritage. Basquiat's career can be divided into three periods marked by changes in his artistic style. The first, from 1980 to early 1982, is when Basquiat transferred his expertise in graffiti into gestural paintings with a focus on skeletal figures and death. The second, from late 1982 to 1985, involved multi-paneled paintings with exposed stretcher bars, disparate imagery and a strong attention to his ethnic identity. Lastly, from 1986 to 1988, Basquiat, under the increasing influence of drugs and as a result of his friendship with Andy Warhol (1928–1987), created distinctive painterly figures on plain backgrounds.¹

Basquiat's *A Panel of Experts* (1982) (fig. 1) belongs to the second phase, when the artist developed a unique and large handmade structure for his paintings, tying together pieces of wood with twine to form a base for his stretched canvas.² The painting demonstrates several key features of a Basquiat painting. The piece has an autobiographical quality to it, resembling a page out of a journal, a characteristic present throughout the artist's body of work. The strong contrast between black and white draws attention to the text and imagery, as well as to the accents of primary colours. Basquiat combines acrylic paint and oil pastel in a layered manner, with several coats painted one on top of the other. He begins by sketching figures, and then he applies a black background, which overlaps some of the drawing. Finally, he writes the text. Basquiat's method of representing subject matter evokes a sense of innocence. This comes from

the artist's use of flattened, two-dimensional, stick-like figures and the elimination of perspective to create a flat-planed narrative reminiscent of child art. This aesthetic dimension is cleverly juxtaposed with the mature content of his visual imagery.



Fig. 1. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *A Panel of Experts*, 1982, acrylic and oil pastel on paper mounted on canvas, 152.5 x 152 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

In his simulation of child art, Basquiat followed in the footsteps of modern artists such as Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985). In Dubuffet’s painting *Pépinieriste* (Nurseryman) (1944) (fig. 2), for example, the artist portrays stick-like figures surrounded by a field of flattened greenery. Dubuffet playfully represents the “Nurseryman” situated in the window frame of what appears to be his work space.



Fig. 2. Jean Dubuffet, *Pépinieriste*, 1944, oil on canvas, Philbrook Museum of Art.
<https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/asset-viewer/pépinieriste/hgEq7mGylCX9-w?hl=en>.

The grid-like depiction of the space resembles a child's take on visualizing a cityscape.³ Similar to Basquiat, Dubuffet incorporates the technique of layering into his work, demonstrated in the piling of colours, followed by lines and, in some areas, the introduction of new layers of colours on top of those lines. The two male figures seem to have been added last. The artist's use of black lines as a means of separating elements from each other results in the creation of units, some of which contain unmixed colour, variations of green, orange and subtle yellow, applied in a pulsating manner. The resultant gritty and textured surface became a recurring characteristic of Dubuffet's work, leading to a new style the artist called "Hourloupe" in the 1960s.⁴ Dubuffet wanted to stay away from conformist mainstream culture by adopting a style that was not affiliated with artistic trends or movements.⁵ The seemingly unlearned and spontaneous quality of Dubuffet's paintings displays an innovative method of personal expression in modern art.⁶

Children depict the familiar and the invisible, giving life to feelings in their drawings through the use of basic shapes and colours. These characteristics can be visually compelling when revived within the context of a work of art.⁷ The pure freedom associated with childhood can be captured through an openness to the power of mark making. As a result, modern artists indebted to child art, including Dubuffet as well as Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Paul Klee (1879–1940), Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964) and Joan Miró (1893–1983), to name only a few, play with the notion of learning to unlearn, allowing themselves to favour simple shapes, forms and lines.⁸

Child art influenced Basquiat's practice in a number of ways. The awkward, childlike way he held his pen or brush when he drew allowed for the lines produced to vary between precision and spontaneity,⁹ echoing the developing motor skills of a child.¹⁰ Moreover, he experimented with the process of transmitting an image from mind to paper, ignoring the formal elements of proportion and perspective.¹¹ Basquiat focused on various schematic symbols found in children's drawings, cartoons and comics, such as the duck, bird, cloud and crown shapes in *A Panel of Experts*. He devised a personal language with such imagery; for instance, the recurring symbol of the crown has often been construed as a symbol asserting the artist's power.¹² Basquiat was very much a product of his place and time, affected by the questioning attitudes of postmodernism and interested in new ways of approaching concepts, processes and forms.

Basquiat's simplification of form in *A Panel of Experts* belies its complex content. The focus is shifted away from the formal elements of the work toward the powerful immediacy of the subject. For instance, the words "cartoon," "sugar" and "sugar coated corn puffs" are accompanied by a copyright symbol because these are products of consumerism. "Sugar" can be

connected to “sugar coated corn puffs” and “Saturday morning cartooning”—all possibly consumed by a young Basquiat as part of the mundane routine of an American child's Saturday morning. Below these elements, the artist includes the image of a gun firing a bullet, pointed at what looks like a wounded man—perhaps Basquiat’s way of commenting on the violence in New York City. The names “Venus” and “Madonna” (with a copyright icon) in the top left corner of the panel refer to both the public and the personal. At first glance these names appear to refer to the popular subjects of sacred and profane art. More than likely, however, the artist is referring to the pop star Madonna, with whom he is said to have had a relationship prior to meeting Suzanna Mullock, a girlfriend who was nicknamed “Venus.”¹³

Among the words featured on the canvas, Basquiat scrawls “KRAK” in black on white and in white on black in the centre of the painting, and again in smaller red letters next to a figure being struck by a bolt of lightning. The word is perhaps an onomatopoeia in relation to the wounded man, but it is more likely Basquiat's way of calling attention to drugs, a topic he examines on numerous occasions and the cause of his early demise. At the time, drugs containing ketamine possessed the street name “Special K.”¹⁴ Thus, the popular American children’s breakfast cereal takes on a multi-layered meaning in its association with the artist’s cocaine addiction and the exploding drug scene of the 1980s.

Considering many of Basquiat’s works have remained unnamed, the fact that this painting is titled *A Panel of Experts* raises the question as to who these “experts” are. Perhaps they are the influences that inspired the creation of this canvas panel. Alternatively, the title may refer to the panel of people viewing the work in a formal setting, attempting to make sense of what Basquiat

is trying to express, as if studying the pages of a journal he has left open for strangers to read. In fact, this analysis of *A Panel of Experts* is my attempt as an art history student to uncover the meaning of this painting. But I also realize that the power of Basquiat's art, despite its references to the personal and social, lies in its puzzling, unexplainable aspects. Formal elements similar to those in *A Panel of Experts* appear in Basquiat's *Seascape* (1983) (fig. 3), but the content continues to resist my analysis.



Fig. 3. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Seascape*, 1983, acrylic and oil pastel on paper mounted on canvas, 92.4 x 91.2 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

I could discuss the artist's panel structure, use of specific materials and techniques, but as far as the meaning goes, the artist's motives and the subject matter remain inaccessible to me.

Unquestionably, this encourages viewers to experience the work abstractly as a language of shapes, colours and gestural marks with a degree of independence from visual reality.

Although it may not be evident in all of his artworks, Basquiat's naïve and childlike style draws attention to the complex subject matter he is addressing. Not only does he assert an opinionated reflection on the human condition, but he also creates in his paintings an atmosphere that allows the viewer to try and imagine his point of view, in an attempt to decipher the clues he leaves behind on the canvas.

NOTES

¹ Richard Marshall, "Repelling Ghosts," in *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, ed. Richard Marshall (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), 15.

² "Jean-Michel Basquiat: Biography," Artsy, accessed October 19, 2015, <https://www.artsy.net/artist/jean-michel-basquiat>.

³ "Famous French Artist's Oil Painting Acquired by Tulsa Museum; Dubuffet Now Part of Philbrook Museum of Art Collection," PR Newswire, last modified May 16, 2006, <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/famous-french-artists-oil-painting-acquired-by-tulsa-museum-dubuffet-now-part-of-philbrook-museum-of-art-collection-56422632.html>.

⁴ This style focused on the way objects appear in the mind and was Dubuffet's method of creating a contrast between physical and mental depictions. See "Jean Dubuffet," *The Art Story: Modern Art Insight*, accessed December 17, 2015, <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-dubuffet-jean.htm>.

⁵ Instead, Dubuffet developed an aesthetic that demonstrates a rougher, more gestural line making inspired by work created by children and psychiatric patients. This style inspired a new art movement called "Art Brut" (French for "raw/rough art"). See "Jean Dubuffet."

⁶ Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 210.

⁷ Such characteristics include "geometrical primaries and the straight blacks and whites, the reds and blues and yellows, from which the world composes itself." See Rudolf Arnheim, "Beginning with the Child," in *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism and Modernism*, ed. Jonathan Fineberg (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 15.

⁸ Paul Klee's theory of "the art of unlearning" was used to unwrap the truth of things. See Werner Hofmann, "The Art of Unlearning," in *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism and Modernism*, ed. Jonathan Fineberg (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 13.

⁹ American hip hop artist, visual artist and filmmaker Fab Five Freddy (b. 1959) describes his friend Basquiat's drawing technique: "The way he would hold a pencil sometimes was like he was a cripple or something. He wouldn't hold it in a formal way." See Dieter Buchhart, "Jean-Michel Basquiat: A Revolutionary Caught between Everyday Life, Knowledge, and Myth," in *Basquiat*, ed. Dieter Buchhart and Sam Keller (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), xi.

¹⁰ "[R]oundness and straightness are kept from perfection by two factors: the motor activity of the child's hand and arm is not yet fully controlled." See Arnheim, 16.

¹¹ G. G. Pospelov states, “Children are not interested in the result ... but in the process. They not only represent the world as it exists, but it is also as if they themselves participate in its formation on the paper sheet.” Basquiat engaged in a similar process through the physical labour and narrative he put into his works, inviting the viewer to see what he sees. See G. G. Pospelov, “Larionov and Children’s Drawings,” in *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism and Modernism*, ed. Jonathan Fineberg (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 46.

¹² The crown motif carries several different interpretations, including the artist’s assertion of power, a reference to the hierarchy present within the New York graffiti movement, and possibly referencing the credits of *Little Rascals*, one of Basquiat’s favourite cartoons. See Anton Stuebner, “Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art,” Art Practical, last modified October 7, 2014, <http://www.artpractical.com/column/printed-matters-reading-basquiat-exploring-ambivalence-in-american-art/>.

¹³ *A Panel of Experts* illustrates a fight that happened between Suzanna and Madonna at the Roxy, represented by the two stick figures below their names. See “Intersecting Icons: Keith Haring, Madonna, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol,” MadonnaArtVision, last modified December 24, 2013, <http://www.madonna-art-vision.com/article-intersecting-icons-keith-haring-madonna-jean-michel-basquiat-and-andy-warhol-121730255.html>.

¹⁴ Amanda D. Gaston, “The Jean-Michel Basquiat Project – Part 2,” https://amandagaston.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/basquiat_part2.pdf.

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