

# Abstract Portraits



**Jean-Michel Basquiat (American, 1960-1988) was a contemporary, neo-expressionism painter who created by using a mixed abstraction figuration technique. Basquiat's work focused on colorful shapes and bold lines that pay homage to his love for graffiti. Within ten years of being an artist, he created over six hundred paintings.**

*Untitled*, 1981  
Jean-Michel Basquiat  
Acrylic and oilstick on canvas  
81 x 69 ¼ in  
Courtesy of The BROAD  
Los Angeles.  
© The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat

Expressing himself in an autobiographical manner, Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Untitled* piece could be interpreted as a form of self-expression and self-portraiture. The eyes in the painting look very sad and the head appears as if it is subdued. Staying true to his style, Basquiat uses vibrant colors that are juxtaposed with black lines and a color block ground. Using influences from African masks, coupled with the exploration of identity, Basquiat created his own rendition

of iconography. Sometimes painting to the rhythmic melodies of jazz, Basquiat's artwork fuses together patterns, varied brushstrokes, anatomical figures, and diagrams to create complex themes and compositions. Basquiat was very vocal about race relations and social justice issues. Although Basquiat passed away at the age of 27, his work still lives on and is extremely relevant today.

Resource: The BROAD

## Objective

Students will create a mixed media portrait collage inspired by the work of American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.

## Essential Questions

How might you create a portrait? What materials could you use to create a portrait?

## Vocabulary

### *Composition*

The arrangement of elements in an artwork.

### *Painting*

A picture that is made by putting paint on canvas, board, etc.

### *Street Art*

An official and independent visual art created in public locations for public visibility.

### *Graffiti*

Pictures or words painted or drawn on a wall, building, etc.

## Materials

Drawing paper (Kraft or white paper)

Oil Pastels/ Crayons

Hairspray

Acrylic Paint

Paintbrushes

Embellishments (for students 6-12)

## Instructions

1. Have students view the Basquiat virtual exhibition hosted by the Brant Foundation.  
<https://brantfoundation.org/programs/jean-michel-basquiat/>
2. Introduce the vocabulary and discuss the meaning of composition, painting, street art, and graffiti.

## Instructions Cont.

3. View “*Untitled*” (above) and discuss how the artwork can be interpreted as a form of self-expression and self-portraiture. Ask students to consider:
  - What do you see? Why do you think the artwork was created?
  - What emotion is the artists trying to convey?
4. Distribute drawing paper.
5. Have students select three different colors of oil pastels based on feelings or colors they gravitate towards.
6. Play instrumental music that evokes mood or feeling while students are working.
7. Using their nondominant hand, have students work big in order to fill up the space with lines, color blocking, and drawings with oil pastels. (This will be the background of the artwork.)
8. Encourage students to close their eyes and listen to the music as they draw. Smudge marks are welcome.
9. On the drawing paper, instruct students to use a thin brush and black paint to draw a head shape, eyes, nose, ears, and mouth. (It does not have to be an exact self-portrait.)
10. Once dry, use oil pastels or crayons to fill in some of the area and add scribbles to the portrait. Leave some areas untouched.
11. Use a white crayon or pastel to trace around the head loosely.
12. Lastly, add text, doodles and/or symbols.

## Reflection

1. Organize a gallery show in the classroom, displaying the students’ artwork.
2. Ask students to discuss how their artwork can hold multiple meanings.
3. Ask students to share the symbolism they incorporated into their artwork.

## Additional Resources

[www.basquiat.com](http://www.basquiat.com)

The official website of the Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. The official website of the Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat offers a variety of information, including the transcript of a 1985 interview between Basquiat, Geoff Dunlop, and Sandy Nairne.

*Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child* (2010). Directed by Tamra Davis. Trailer at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXjR-y0WH-l>. This documentary features archival clips and interviews with Basquiat, close friends, and cultural critics to provide a look at his life and career. The full-length film is available for rent on YouTube.

Angelou, Maya and Sara Jane Boyers. *Life Doesn't Frighten Me*. Harry N. Abrams, 2018. Angelou's book is a great marriage between poetry and the visual representation of neo-expressionism and abstraction figuration in Basquiat's artwork.

*Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat* is a hardcover picture book written in October 25, 2016 by Javaka Steptoe. This visually stunning picture book is a biography about modern art phenomenon Jean-Michel Basquiat. Radiant Child is a great way to introduce symbolism and Black identity.