

Rebellious Spirit in Jean-Michel Basquiat's Paintings

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ABSTRACT

Jean-Michel Basquiat, a trailblazing African American graffiti artist renowned for his rebellious spirit, transformed the 1980s art scene through his brief yet brilliant career. Against the backdrop of conservative artistic norms and cultural barriers, Basquiat's raw, intense, and symbol-rich paintings became a sweeping "rebellion" against Western art institutions and broader societal norms.

KEYWORDS

Basquiat; Rebellious spirit; Graffiti art; Art form

1 Introduction

Basquiat was born in the United States during the 1960s, a period that marked the beginning of the Kennedy administration. The era was characterized by economic stagnation, structural inequality within society, and the Cold War tensions between the US and the Soviet Union. While the environment was fraught with unpredictable upheavals, it paradoxically created opportunities for artistic development. New York gradually emerged as the most vibrant hub of contemporary art.

2 Biographical Overview

Born into a New York middle-class family, his father was a Haitian immigrant and his mother Puerto Rican, yet African-American families in that era struggled to gain social recognition. This reality made him acutely aware that the core of social identity wasn't economic status but cultural construction. He neither fit into the ghetto's Black community nor was accepted by mainstream elites. This sense of being an "outsider" became the spark that ignited his rebellious spirit.

Basquiat's mother profoundly influenced him. Her passion for art led her to frequently take him to museums and guide him in reading Symbolist poetry, mythology, and medical texts like Gray's Anatomy. Later, when his mother was hospitalized due to mental illness and tensions with his father escalated, Basquiat ultimately chose to run away from home, roaming the streets of New York. There, no rules existed—only survival, improvisation, and raw expression. This experience transformed his rebellious spirit into tangible action. By immersing himself in the realities of marginalized communities, he severed ties with institutional norms. His artistic materials (abandoned wooden planks, doors) were directly sourced from the streets, diverging from mainstream art's commercialized system. Between 1977 and 1980, Basquiat and his friend El Diaz created the street symbol "SAMO," meaning "old school" and filled with satire and mockery of contemporary society, culture, and art. This became a symbolic representation of Basquiat's rebellious artistic ethos.

Through the profound impact of the "SAMO" project, Basquiat connected with key figures including Andy Warhol, Madonna, and Keith Haring. With Andy Warhol's patronage, he rapidly transformed from a street artist into a rising star in the art market. His solo exhibitions sold out instantly, and his works skyrocketed in value. This meteoric rise placed immense pressure on him, as he grappled with fame, his Black identity, and complex interpersonal relationships, all of which strained his mental health. In 1988, Basquiat, then 27, died from a drug overdose in his New York studio. His untimely death tragically completed his legendary legacy.

3 The Rebellion of Materials and Forms

Basquiat's artistic choices in materials and forms were profoundly influenced by street culture, breaking through traditional boundaries in art and painting. His works showcase diverse media including sketches, collages, paintings, and prints, demonstrating remarkable versatility in material selection. He often sourced his painting mediums from everyday life—using reclaimed wooden boards, metal sheets, and even discarded windows. These materials frequently retained traces of original paint, textures, nail holes, and graffiti. Deeply inspired by street graffiti, Basquiat transformed these "ready-mades" bearing marks of daily life and secular culture into his artistic expressions. This approach transplanted the historical erosion of time and the lived experiences of marginalized communities from street walls into gallery spaces,

ultimately challenging the sanctity of art.

In form, Basquiat's paintings completely subvert classical compositional rules, creating a visual experience akin to urban information overload. His works typically lack focal perspective or visual centers, instead being filled with images, symbols, and text. This format compels viewers to piece together meaning through their own interpretations. The constant variation in text size, font, and color serves as visual symbols themselves, emphasizing repetition to amplify their visual impact rather than their literal meaning. Using seemingly naive lines and simplified forms, Basquiat mimics children's drawings and prehistoric cave murals—a rebellion against academic artistry. He pursues direct expression and emotional authenticity over technical perfection. His color palette employs high-saturation primary colors (red, yellow, blue) in stark contrast to black and white, reflecting his direct emotional expression and street-level visual experiences. This color scheme exudes an unpolished, raw impact.

Basquiat's rebellion against form and material declared that so-called "high" art could be built from so-called "low" street materials, and even without following the traditional academic system.

4 The Rebellion of Self-Identity

As an African American artist, Basquiat faced immense pressure during an era of systemic social inequality. This compelled him to respond to the cultural tensions of identity through his artistic creations.

In his paintings, rebellion against identity permeates his entire creative practice. His works are filled with depictions of Black people and satirical portrayals of social events. The crown stands as the most iconic symbol in his art. As a young Black artist, he suddenly entered the art world dominated by mainstream elites, crowning himself and Black heroes with the crown—a symbol of power and supreme status. This act embodies both defiance of authority and profound self-affirmation. Through depictions and coronations of Black figures in works like "The Jazzman," "The Boxer," "The Warrior," and "Confronting the Medici," he showcases the indomitable spirit of Black perseverance, while forcefully elevating the Black community to the realms of glory and power.

In Basquiat's paintings, Black figures are often depicted with exposed teeth, internal organs, bones, and contorted limbs. The facial expressions incorporate elements of African masks, creating an exaggerated and mystical effect. These portrayals are not meant to grotesquely misrepresent Black people, but rather to position their bodies as vessels bearing historical trauma and contemporary social pressures. Deeply inspired by primitive art and African culture, Basquiat frequently incorporates African cultural symbols into his works. By juxtaposing Black figures, African masks, and African cultural icons with European art historical classics representing rationality and science (such as Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical drawings) within the same compositions, he engages in a self-ironic rebellion against his own identity.

Basquiat refused to be simply labeled as a "Black artist" or "street artist." Through the SAMO project, he crafted an anonymous mask that allowed him to freely express sharp social commentary without being constrained by his personal identity. He was both an insider and an outsider, both an art star and a street rebel. This fluidity of identity itself was a rebellion against any attempts to rigidify or categorize him. Basquiat's identity rebellion was a multidimensional cultural war. He wasn't just painting on canvas—he was using it to fight for Black identity's voice, rewrite history, and assert sovereignty. His art powerfully demonstrates that for marginalized groups, "self-identification" itself is the most fundamental and potent form of resistance.

5 The Rebellion of Cultural Knowledge

Basquiat was not merely a genius in the art world, but a deliberate "scholar-provoke" artist. He violently fused knowledge from disparate fields into a single canvas, shattering cultural hierarchies. His canvases became egalitarian stages where anatomical studies (Leonardo da Vinci's sketches), art history (masterpieces by European artists), and popular culture—like comics (Batman, Gordon Strachan) and street slang—merged with African art. This approach itself proclaimed: An anatomy textbook isn't nobler than a comic book; a Shakespearean line carries equal weight as street slang. Rejecting the Western knowledge system's pyramid structure, he created a "flattened" knowledge network that challenged viewers' preconceptions of high and low culture.

For Western classics, Basquiat did not merely quote them, but deliberately and provocatively "misread" and "alter" them. He repeatedly referenced anatomical diagrams by Leonardo da Vinci and others, yet these images representing rationality, science, and objectivity (the "universal" human form under mainstream perspectives) were juxtaposed with Black figures and African masks, or directly replaced with Black bodies. Like a cultural "reconstructor," he forcibly breached the core bastions of mainstream knowledge, implanting Black bodies and cultures excluded from it. As seen in his 1983 work *Crown*, the prominent crown and collaged manuscripts of saints in the composition were not merely decorative symbols, but declarations, coronation rituals, and political acts. Through this symbol, Basquiat successfully positioned

Black people, street culture, and his own genius identity within the realms of "kings" and "saints," thus staging the most profound and enduring rebellion against art history and cultural power structures. These simple three-line strokes demonstrated the subversive power of his visual "knowledge."

In the contemporary art scene of that era, boundaries between artistic forms were dissolving. The fusion of painting and sculpture, photography and installation emerged as a new trend. More importantly, art evolved beyond visual aesthetics to become vessels for ideas and powerful tools for critiquing social realities. Against this backdrop, Basquiat turned his gaze to street graffiti, children's drawings, and African primitive art—simple expressions overlooked by mainstream art circles. These visual languages, once neglected, gained renewed vitality and expressive power through his hands. His creations not only revolutionized contemporary art but also challenged the established elite art education system head-on.

As cultural vessels that "solidify" information and enable its transmission across time and space, Basquiat frequently employs collage and graffiti techniques in his paintings to layer and repeat words—such as anatomical terms, product labels, and historical figures' names—creating his distinctive "cultural maps." His most iconic approach involves erasing text. A simple horizontal line carries profound power: it shatters language's fixed role as information carrier, transforming each word into a battleground for meaning. These erased yet legible characters seem to whisper suppressed voices silenced by mainstream discourse. Through these creative practices, Basquiat not only challenges established knowledge systems but also wages a war over meaning attribution on the invisible battlefield of language. In his paintings, texts originally separated by strict cultural boundaries are placed together, blurring the line between highbrow and lowbrow. His canvases freely incorporate humanity's rich cultural heritage, granting equal expressive authority and existential value to elements categorized as either refined or vulgar.

6 The Art Market's Rebellion

The success of Basquiat in the art market was itself a highly influential act of rebellion. A young Black street artist who received no formal academic training became a superstar of the art world at the time, and his works were highly sought after by capital.

Basquiat's entry into the art market was facilitated through the 'illegal' form of street graffiti (SAMO). By late 1980, having already gained recognition through the SAMO project, Basquiat made his first group exhibition appearance. His works quickly captured critical attention and became the sole artist featured in *American Art* magazine. This marked the beginning of Basquiat's dedicated focus on graffiti art and his emergence in the art capital market.

His unconventional entry into the "system" demonstrated that in the media age, accessing the art market isn't limited to academic credentials. Even street art perceived as "lowbrow" could become a symbol of capital. In an art world dominated by mainstream elitist aesthetics, Basquiat defied established norms by centering his work on African American culture, Black symbolism, and social conflicts. His refusal to conform to mainstream assimilation forced the art market to expand its acceptance, granting African American cultural expressions unprecedented recognition and economic value in mainstream art. While Basquiat's works became highly sought-after, they consistently maintained critical edges. Take his piece "Profit I" – though ostensibly satirizing capitalism, it ironically became the market's most coveted commodity.

Basquiat's life came to an abrupt end at 27, a tragedy caused by drug overdose that sealed his final chapter in artistic rebellion. This untimely death prevented him from facing the creative dilemmas often associated with commercial success. We will never see him compromise his art for market demands or be tamed by capital. His premature death became a perfect legend, etched into art history forever. His life story itself stands as a priceless masterpiece. As his "final" creation, he achieved his most complete artistic expression through death.

Throughout Basquiat's market journey, his rebellion manifested in multifaceted dimensions. He first redefined the path to success for artists in the art market, breaking free from the constraints of self-identity. Amidst the commercialization wave, he steadfastly preserved the critical spirit in his works, ultimately achieving the ultimate crystallization of this rebellion through his life.

7 Conclusion

In the brief yet brilliant career of Basquiat, we can clearly see that "rebellious spirit" permeates his entire artistic practice. This rebellion is not an emotional confrontation, but a profound and constructive cultural strategy manifested in various dimensions including form, identity, knowledge, and even market dynamics. Fundamentally, Basquiat's rebellion manifests as a deliberate challenge to established norms of form and materials. He consciously abandoned traditional canvases and refined techniques, adopting street elements as his creative medium. By introducing the raw immediacy, vitality, and even traces of trauma from the streets into so-called "refined" art spaces, his compositions radiate an

unfinished chaos. The interplay and layering of text and imagery create a visual "noise" that shatters classical art's harmony and modernist purity, mirroring the experience of urban information overload. On a conceptual level, Basquiat's rebellion targets entrenched social structures and cultural power dynamics. During a period of severe social injustice, as an African American artist, his paintings became a cultural struggle to voice the silenced and rehabilitate marginalized historical narratives. By juxtaposing anatomical illustrations, European art history classics, street slang, comic characters, and African primitive art symbols, Basquiat shattered the rigid divide between "refined" and "vulgar" cultures. This "intellectual collage" itself represents a democratic transformation and rebellion against Western knowledge systems.

Basquiat's artistic career was brief yet brilliant, proving through his creative journey that true rebellion isn't just about destruction—it's about reconstruction. He boldly expanded the boundaries of art, creating space for voices marginalized by mainstream discourse. Thus, Baskett's legacy transcends mere auction house figures; it embodies his uncompromising rebellious spirit. This legacy reveals that contemporary art must evolve through constant self-criticism, rejecting rigid conventions and embracing the ever-changing tides of time.

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