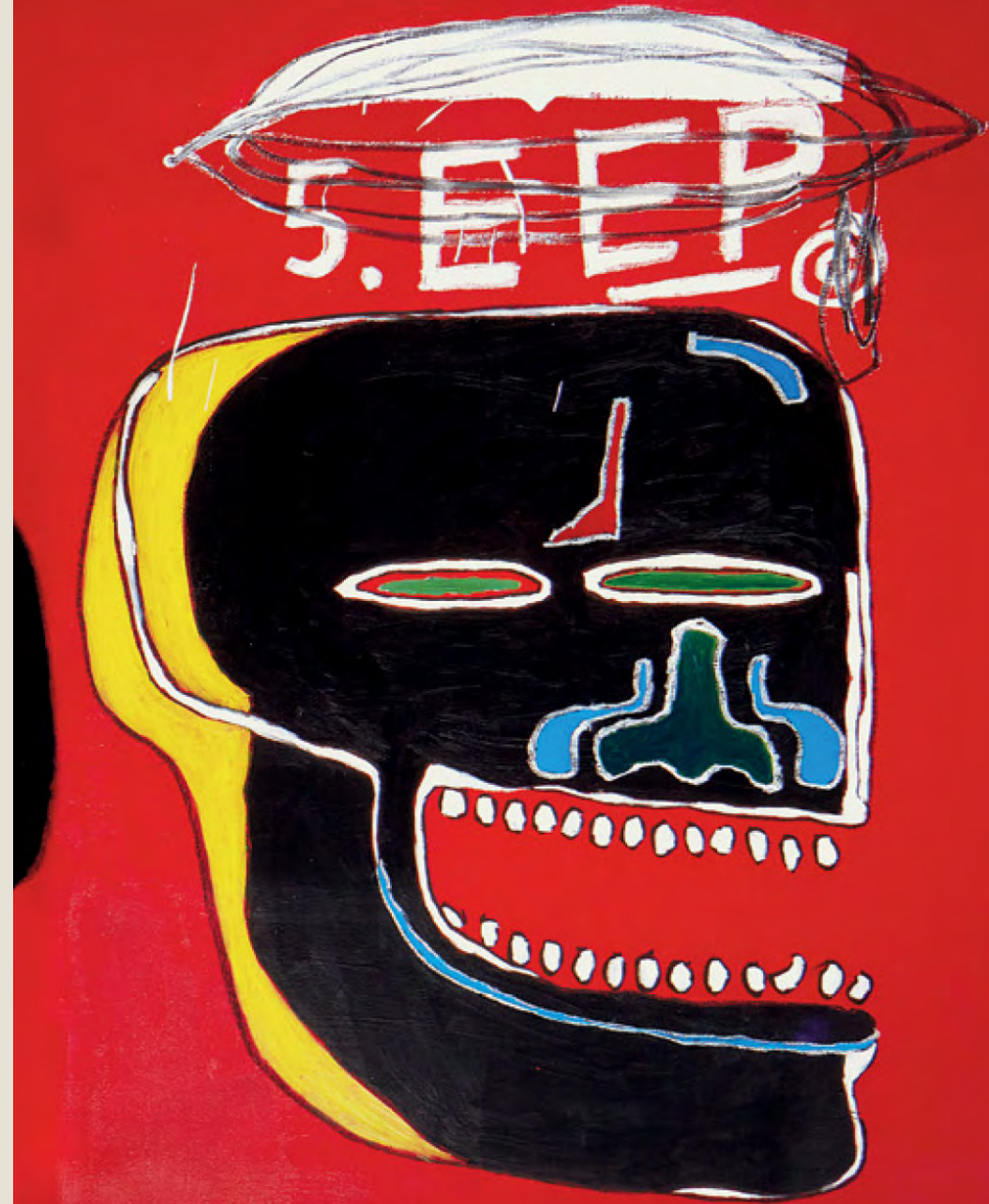


**JEAN-  
MICHEL  
BASQUIAT:  
KING  
PLEASURE<sup>©</sup>**

Curriculum Guide  
*Grades 6–12*

*Nu Nile*, 1985. Oil stick and acrylic on canvas. (Detail)



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## About this Guide

This educator guide was created to engage middle- and high-school students in looking closely, making connections, and responding to selected works of art featured in the exhibition *Jean-Michel Basquiat: King Pleasure*.

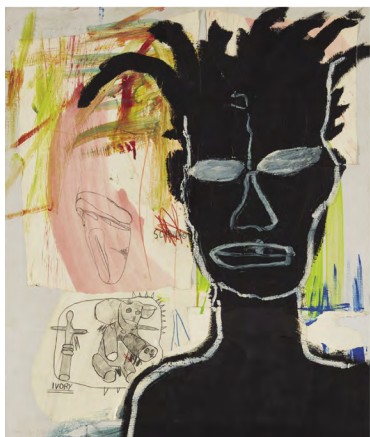
The guide includes questions and art-making activities related to three focus artworks. Educators are invited to pick and choose what is useful to them and to adapt the questions and activities to their students.



## About the Artist

Jean-Michel Basquiat was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. His mother's family was from Puerto Rico and his father was from Haiti. Growing up in a multilingual family, Jean-Michel Basquiat spoke English, Spanish, and French fluently. As a child, Basquiat loved to draw and look at art. His mother, Matilde, nurtured her son's love of art by taking him to museums and making art with him at home. Jean-Michel Basquiat said, "...my mother gave me all the primary things. The art came from her."

As a teenager, Basquiat gained notoriety as a graffiti poet and musician on the Lower East Side of New York. Using the tag SAMO© (for "same old"), he and his friend Al Díaz wrote cryptic, humorous graffiti that captured the attention of the city. By the time he was 20 years old, Basquiat had made the transition from writing graffiti to selling paintings in SoHo galleries. He quickly became one of the most accomplished artists of his generation. His work was recognized internationally for its originality, expressiveness, and formal qualities. Tragically, Basquiat died when he was just 27 years old. His work continues to be relevant and influential today.



*Untitled, 1984*

Jean-Michel outside Akira Ikeda Gallery,  
Tokyo, Japan, November 9, 1985.  
Photo: Yoshitaka Uchida, © Ikeda Gallery, Japan



## About the Exhibition

Organized and curated by the family of Jean-Michel Basquiat, this exhibition includes over 200 never-before-seen and rarely shown paintings, drawings, multimedia presentations, ephemera, and artifacts. Together, they tell the story of Basquiat from an intimate perspective, intertwining his artistic endeavors with his personal life, influences, and the times in which he lived.

Jean-Michel Basquiat's contributions to the history of art and his explorations of multifaceted cultural phenomena—including music, the Black experience, pop culture, Black American sports figures, literature, and other sources—are showcased through immersive environments that provide unique insight into the late artist's creative life and his singular voice that propelled a social and cultural narrative that continues to this day.



Jean-Michel's studio was located in the basement of Annina Nosei Gallery, 100 Prince Street, New York, 1982 © NAOKI OKAMOTO

## A Closer Look

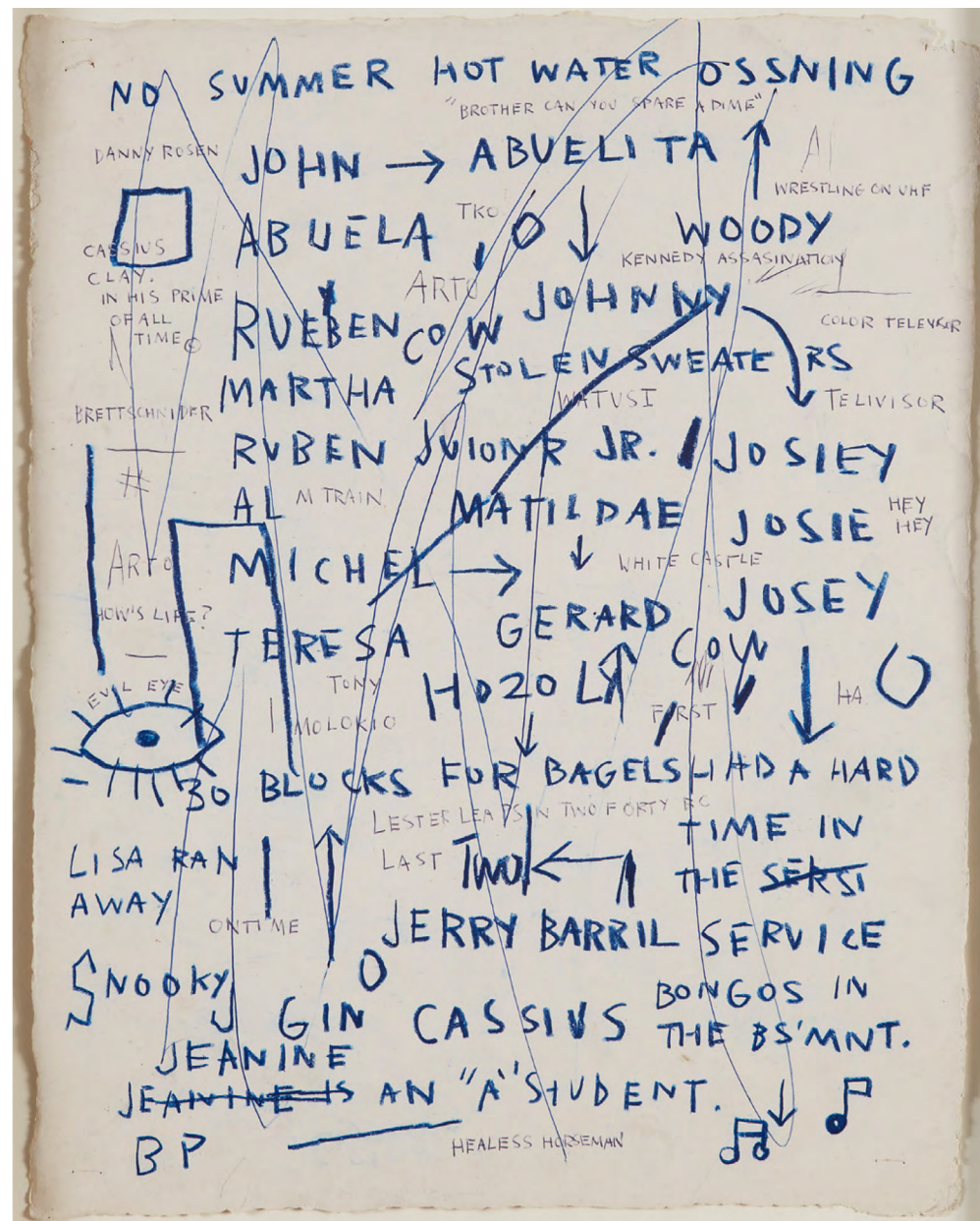
### No Summer Hot Water Ossining

#### Questions for Looking

- What's surprising to you about this work of art?
- This drawing is made almost entirely of words. What are some ways that Basquiat varies the text in this drawing?
- In this drawing, Basquiat depicted some of his family relationships and history. What are some names that stand out to you? How does Basquiat show connections between people?
- Use the Drawing Key (see *About the Artwork*) to decode some of the elements of the drawing. *Note to teachers: You may choose to share the entire key and give students time to read and make connections to the drawing, or you could provide each student with one or two bullets from the key and invite them to share out with the class.*
- What other words and phrases stand out to you?
- What clues can you find in this drawing about Basquiat's family and how he felt about them?
- What questions are you left with after looking closely at this drawing?

#### About the Artwork

Family relationships and history were very important to Jean-Michel Basquiat. This drawing references many of Basquiat's family members and alludes to people, places, and stories from his childhood, as well as cultural references from the 1960s, the decade in which he grew up.



No Summer Hot Water Ossining. Ballpoint pen and crayon on paper.



## Drawing Key

- Woody (Worthy) was a friend of Basquiat's father who lived in Ossining, a suburb of New York City.
- Abuela means grandmother in Spanish, as does abuelita ("little grandma"), a term of endearment. Basquiat was multilingual; he spoke English, Spanish, and French.
- Matilde and Gerard are the names of Basquiat's parents.
- Basquiat had two younger sisters, Lisane and Jeanine. "Snooky" is a reference to Lisane. "Jeanine is an A student" refers to Jeanine.
- "Bongos in the basement" refers to Basquiat's maternal grandfather, who was Puerto Rican, and his friends who would have jam sessions in the basement. Basquiat and his sisters would hang out at the top of the stairs and listen to them play music.
- Josie was Basquiat's maternal uncle, who served in the Army and "had a hard time in the service." Johnny, another maternal uncle, served in the Navy, and abuelo, his grandfather, was a Merchant Marine.
- "Kennedy Assassination" refers to the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, in 1963 when Jean-Michel was 3 years old.
- Watusi is a dance craze from the 1960s.
- "Cassius Clay, in his prime of all time" refers to the boxer and activist Muhammad Ali (born Cassius Clay).

## Art-Making Activity: Create a Relationship Map

In this artwork, Jean-Michel Basquiat creates a map of some of his important relationships, including names, memories, and stories.

### For this activity, you will need:

- Paper
- A drawing tool such as pencil, pen, colored pencil, or marker

### Create a relationship map of your family or friend group.

- Who will you include?
- What events, people, music, food, or places remind you of these relationships?
- Will you show your relationships with words, pictures, or both?
- What other ideas will you include?

*Note: this activity can come before or after viewing the work.*

## A Closer Look

### Tuxedo

#### Questions for Looking

Look closely at this artwork, starting from the bottom.

*Note: students can look together in pairs or small groups. They can be assigned a part of the painting—lower, middle, or upper—to look at closely and report out to the whole group.*

- What do you notice about the lower part of this painting?  
What do you notice in the center of the painting?  
What do you notice about the top of the painting?
- What do you notice about the colors in this painting?
- How would you describe the lines and shapes in the painting?
- What words and phrases stand out to you? What do they make you think of?
- What images stand out to you? Why?
- How do you think Basquiat began this work? What do you think he did last? What evidence can you find of his process?  
*Note: Share information about his process from the About the Artwork section.*
- The title of this work is *Tuxedo*. What associations do you have with the word tuxedo? Have you ever worn a tuxedo or seen someone wear one? What color was it? Why do you think Basquiat titled this artwork *Tuxedo*?
- Basquiat made the decision to reverse his drawings from black words written on a white background to white words written on a black background. What possible meanings can you make from this choice?



*Tuxedo*, n.d. Acrylic, oil stick, photocopy, and ink on canvas.

## About the Artwork

In the early 1980s, Basquiat began taking his drawings to a silkscreen studio, where they were transferred onto screens and printed onto canvas. When Basquiat first presented these images to galleries, the reaction was not as he hoped. One art dealer rejected a silkscreen that Basquiat submitted for an important show because it was not a painting. And one of his biggest collectors, who had planned to purchase one of the works, changed his mind when he learned that the work was one of an edition of ten. Most collectors prefer a unique piece, rather than a print, as it is considered more valuable.

In response, Basquiat took the work back to his studio. With the silkscreened image as his base, he painted, drew, and added more silkscreened images to create a complex surface of images and brushwork. He used this process to create *Tuxedo*.

In *Tuxedo*, Basquiat reversed his original artwork from black images and text on a white background to white images and text on a black background. This was achieved photographically, turning the original artwork into one large silkscreen print. The following quote is by Fred Hoffman, an artist who assisted Basquiat with his silk-screening process:

“His decision to turn everything black in the work into white and everything white into black was not merely a look he desired to achieve. Basquiat’s aesthetic decisions were his means of questioning certain social and cultural assumptions, with identity most important among them.”

The paintings from this series relate to the surfaces Basquiat encountered on the streets of New York City: walls layered with graffiti, posters, paint, and grime. They also relate to works by Cubist artists such as Picasso, Braque, and Gris, who incorporated everyday found materials into their collages.

## Art-Making Activity: Experiment with Mixed Media and Process

To create *Tuxedo*, Basquiat used several different materials and techniques.

### For this activity, you will need:

- Paper (at least two sheets)
- Drawing materials (any)
- Glue
- Access to a copy machine
- Tempera or acrylic paint or oil pastels
- Scissors (optional)

Step 1: Create a drawing

Step 2: Make photocopies of your drawing

Step 3: Create a collage by cutting, tearing, arranging, and gluing pieces of your photocopied drawings to a background paper

Step 4: Add to your collage with color and line. Play with layering and repetition

When your work is complete, spend a moment looking at your finished piece.

- How did it change from the original drawing to the completed work?
- What did you enjoy about that process?



## A Closer Look

### Nu Nile



*Nu Nile*, 1985. Oil stick and acrylic on canvas.

#### Questions for Looking

*Note: this is a large painting (8.5 feet tall x 41 feet long).*

- What stands out to you in this painting?
- What do you notice about the figures in this painting?  
What words would you use to describe them?

Basquiat was inspired by music, and he always had music playing while he painted. He made this painting, *Nu Nile*, for the Palladium, a nightclub where he loved to go dancing. The title, *Nu Nile*, comes from a brand of hair pomade.

While looking closely at the painting, listen to some of the music Basquiat liked: [Listen Like Basquiat: Nightlife](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DWW8uXW312312)  
[open.spotify.com](https://open.spotify.com)

- Choose one song from the playlist and listen to it twice. As you listen, look at the painting and make connections between what you see and what you hear.

The same way musicians create rhythm by repeating a beat, visual artists create visual rhythm by repeating lines, colors, and shapes. While rhythm in music moves our bodies, rhythm in visual art moves our eyes through a painting.

- How does your eye move through this painting?
- What lines, colors, and shapes do you see repeated?

Basquiat was funny, and he liked to use humor in his work

- What do you see here that looks humorous to you, and why?

## About the Artwork

In 1985, the Palladium, one of New York City's most prominent nightclubs at the time, asked Jean-Michel Basquiat to create two paintings for their VIP area. *Nu Nile* is one of those paintings. Basquiat, along with Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, and many other famous artists and musicians loved to party at the Palladium. When the club was torn down in the 1990s to create housing for NYU students, the murals were returned to Basquiat's family.



*Nu Nile*, 1985. Oil stick and acrylic on canvas. (Detail)

## Art-Making Activity: *Visual Rhythm*

Jean-Michel Basquiat often returned to the same motifs in his work, repeating them multiple times in the same painting to create a visual rhythm. Some of the motifs that Basquiat used throughout his work are the human body, text, musicians and athletes, crowns, and food. These motifs reflect things and people that fascinated, inspired, and troubled him.

### For this activity, you will need:

- Paper
- A drawing tool such as a pencil, pen, colored pencil, or marker

Sketch three motifs that you see repeated in this painting.

- Where do you see the motifs repeated?
- What do you think the motifs might represent?

Option 1: What motifs reflect your interests? Choose three of your own motifs and create a composition with visual rhythm by repeating those motifs in different ways. Try making them smaller or larger, changing their color and value, varying their placement, or overlapping and combining them.

Option 2: Listen to a song you like. Sketch images and words that come to mind as you listen. Choose three of those images and/or words and three colors to create a composition with visual rhythm using some of the same techniques that Basquiat used.

## Resources

### [Jean-Michel Basquiat: King Pleasure](#)

Exhibition website: [kingpleasure.basquiat.com](http://kingpleasure.basquiat.com)

### [Basquiat \(2005\). Brooklyn Museum of Art](#)

[brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/614](http://brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/614)

Web page from the Brooklyn Museum's Basquiat retrospective in 2005; includes an in-depth analysis of Basquiat's work and life

### [Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks. Brooklyn Museum of Art](#)

Teacher resource from the exhibition, *Basquiat: The Unknown Notebooks*, at the Brooklyn Museum

[brooklynmuseum.org/search](http://brooklynmuseum.org/search)

Spotify® playlists inspired by *Basquiat: King Pleasure*

[open.spotify.com](https://open.spotify.com)

### [Listen Like Basquiat: Childhood](#)

### [Listen Like Basquiat: Studio](#)

### [Listen Like Basquiat: Nightlife](#)

### [Listen Like Basquiat: Legacy](#)

## Books

*Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Javaka Steptoe. New York: Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2016.

*Life Doesn't Frighten Me*, Maya Angelou

Poems by Maya Angelou, paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Edited by Sara Jane Boyers. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1993.

*Jean-Michel Basquiat*, Essays by Dick Hebdige, Klaus Kertess, Rene Ricard, Greg Tate, and Robert Farris Tompson.

Biographical Chronology by Franklin Sirmans.

New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992.

## Films

### [Basquiat: Rage To Riches - BBC Studios](#)

[bbcstudios.com/case-studies/basquiat-rage-to-riches](http://bbcstudios.com/case-studies/basquiat-rage-to-riches)

*Basquiat: Rage To Riches* is a BBC Studios Documentary Unit production for BBC Two and PBS in association with Thirteen Productions that aired in October 2017, produced and directed by David Shulman with Executive Producer Janet Lee. It won the BAFTA Television Award for Best Specialist Factual program.

### [The Radiant Child - Trailer](#)

[youtube.com/watch?v=9Om2d2CxaQw](https://youtube.com/watch?v=9Om2d2CxaQw)

A documentary about Basquiat's life and the 1980s New York art scene. Directed by Tamra Davis. Written by Eric Martin and Lois Vossen. 88 minutes. Released 2010

## Vocabulary

**Motif:** a recurring image, theme, or pattern that appears in a work of art.

**Silkscreen:** a printing technique where a mesh is used to transfer ink onto a surface, except in areas made impermeable to the ink by a blocking stencil. A blade or squeegee is moved across the screen to fill the open mesh spaces with ink. One color is printed at a time, so several screens can be used to produce a multi-colored image.

**Visual rhythm:** a principle of design that suggests movement or action. Rhythm is usually achieved through repetition of lines, shapes, and colors. It creates a visual tempo in artworks and provides a path for the viewer's eye to follow.



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**[KingPleasure.Basquiat.com](http://KingPleasure.Basquiat.com)**

**[Studioinaschool.org](http://Studioinaschool.org)**

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