

# Young Portrait Explorers:

## Jean-Michel Basquiat



**Learning Objective:** Learn about symbols in art and explore the symbolism in Jean-Michel Basquiat's work.

### **Portrait Discussion:**

Let your eyes slowly wander from the top of the photograph to the bottom.

**Pose:** Jean-Michel Basquiat is seated with one foot touching the ground and the other foot propped up, with his arms resting on his knees and fingers intertwined. He tilts his head to one side and looks right at us. Can you try sitting like him? Basquiat was under a lot of pressure to look a certain way as both a professional artist and a young Black man. When he grew frustrated with everyone's opinions, he decided to play it cool. What does a "cool" pose look like to you?

**Clothing:** What stands out to you about Basquiat's clothing? The artist famously wore expensive suits, even when he painted. What do you wear for messy activities, like painting, cooking, or playing outside? Why do you think Basquiat wears a suit? Who else might wear a suit? Why might the artist have gone barefoot? He had experienced homelessness as a teen but as an adult gained fame and fortune with his art. His style shows that even when he could afford fancy clothing, he still considered himself the same scrappy young man.

**Symbols:** A **symbol** is an icon or mark that represents something else. Symbols are all around us. Jean-Michel Basquiat repeated the same **autobiographical** (relating to his own life) symbols in his art, such as a skull, a car, words, and (most famously) a three-point crown. He first became famous for his **street art** (public art like graffiti, stickers, or posters), which relied on easily recognizable symbols to tell stories. Do you see any symbols behind Basquiat? The skull might symbolize his fascination with the human body and death. The word "MISSISSIPPI" might be a reference to the historical violence against African Americans in the South.

**Objects:** Notice the white paint. Professional painters often use a palette to hold their paint, while street artists often use a bucket or spray paint. What does Basquiat's bucket say about his style? He sits atop a shoe shine stand, similar to the ones seen on the streets of his hometown, New York City. He painted and crossed out "BRAIN ©," personalizing the stand and making it an art object. Do you think anything can be art?

**Historical Context:** *Jean-Michel Basquiat began his artistic career as a young street artist in New York City. He quickly rose to fame with his **expressive** (meaning full of emotion) artwork that included drawings, paintings, and sculptures. He said, "I wanted to make very direct paintings that most people would feel the emotion behind when they saw them."*

### **Related Children's Books:**

*Radiant Child: The Story of Young Artist Jean-Michel Basquiat* by Javaka Steptoe

*Life Doesn't Frighten Me: Poem* by Maya Angelou, *Paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat* ed. by Sara Jane Boyers

### **Activity: Symbolic Self-Portrait**

#### **Materials:**

Paper

Coloring tools like crayons, markers, or paint

#### **Instructions:**

Think about Basquiat's symbols, like the crown.

Consider what words or objects symbolize you.

- What do you do for fun?
- What interests you or makes you happy?
- How do you see yourself? Athletic? Funny?

Combine your words and symbols in a symbolic self-portrait that represents your uniqueness.



*Jean-Michel Basquiat* by Dmitri Kasterine, gelatin silver print, 1986. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; acquired through the generosity of Norman and Beverly Cox in honor of their daughter Cara. © Dmitri Kasterine

Find the portrait on our website, here: [https://npg.si.edu/object/npg\\_NPG.2011.24](https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.2011.24)