



Re-siting Basquiat in the Canon of Art: A Proposition

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In attempting to evaluate and locate the oeuvre of Jean-Michel Basquiat in the canon of art during the decades since his death, a consensus narrative has emerged, in part placing him broadly in the context of late twentieth-century Neo-Expressionism. Related, overlapping narratives have also evolved, relying heavily on foundational aspects of his artistic practice: his street art, music, and performance, his attachment to words and their varied meanings, and the roots of these influences in his personal history.

These multi-faceted narratives have revealed the complexity and power of Basquiat’s work, offering insights into the signs, words, and symbols that permeate it. However, a more comprehensive understanding of Basquiat’s art is called for, in particular a more extensive analysis of the relationships among and between the formal elements of composition he used.

In the process of further research, it will become clearer that “placing” Basquiat in a category like “Neo-Expressionism” would be doing him an injustice. He is difficult to categorize; there are many aspects of his artistic practice that set him apart from the mainstream of contemporary art. This essay serves one narrow purpose: to propose that, when considered alongside recognised geniuses in art history, Jean-Michel is an equal; that he, like them, stands apart from the mainstream tradition. In doing so, he is removed from categorization; instead his work inhabits a unique place in art history, one that continues to inspire wonder and awe.

Re-siting Basquiat’s place in the canon of art can be realized through a nuanced approach to examining his use of the elements of composition, in his principal medium of choice as a painter. This is where the field of analysis allows for correspondences and parallels to emerge, when comparing his oeuvre to others working in the same medium, no matter the era. This author hopes to provoke further exploration and arguments to understand just how unique and important Basquiat’s contribution to art history has become.

The Constituents of Composition and Genius: A Comparative Approach

Recent literature on Basquiat has made a strong claim for the relationship between formal elements of composition—line, color, form, construction, medium, and materials—to the impact of the idea he wanted to communicate. Basquiat scholar Jordana Sagesse noted that “Basquiat made his compositions intentionally difficult, relying on viewers to recognise the unspoken links between them ... [he] subverted the relationship between artist, object and viewer by creating a nonlinear narrative of painting.”¹ This intent, to render a new way of communicating an idea through complex compositional means, is one of the key markers of a revolution in art. Those responsible have become recognised

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for their breakthroughs, and each accorded a special place, set aside from the traditional grand narratives in art history.

In Basquiat’s case, one element of composition has arguably become the most-researched and written-about mode of expression: words, and the ways in which he both figuratively and literally applies and manipulates them. Even though this lies at the heart of much of his practice, over-emphasizing this one compositional element without deeper consideration of the others, signals the need for further exploration of his painting and drawing practice.

Throughout art history, revolutionary breakthroughs in the use of line, color, form, construction, medium, and meaning have been recognized as a manifestation of the will and gift of true genius. To better qualify and comprehend Basquiat’s genius in his use of these elements of composition, it serves our purpose to seek correspondences with the giants in the canon of art, in the hopes of better understanding what factors contributed to their own “canonization.” In the process, we might perceive some parallels among them, and in doing so, better understand Basquiat’s contribution to art history. This can lead us to re-site Basquiat alongside other “saints” in the canon.

While there are a number of artists who could be considered, Caravaggio and van Gogh are well suited to the purpose, not least because there are several biographical common denominators with Basquiat. All three artists:

- emerged from modest, but relatively comfortable home circumstances, only to escape the strictures of a traditional family structure;
- were inspired at a young age by the practice of art, showing early promise;
- evolved their practices quickly and radically, through emergent phases;
- produced large bodies of work in short periods of time, working compulsively;
- harboured a deep sense of “self,” expressed in part through forms of incisive self-portraiture;
- had ambivalent personal connections to both the quotidian and the sacred, which were reflected in their artistic practices;
- were helped, at some point, by patron(s), allowing them to advance their practice without the traditional constrictions of everyday life;
- became deeply aware of the art movements of the day;
- were attuned to the vagaries and dynamics of the contemporary art market, regardless of their individual standing within it;
- were regarded by others as highly controversial, engendering deep feelings both for and against their work;
- led emotionally and psychologically turbulent, short lives, with tragic ends;
- were “canonized” by the contemporary art world shortly after their deaths, with legacies that have influenced generations.

A few of these common denominators play into the antiquated Romantic conception of the “tortured” artist. At first an archetype, this notion has since become a stereotype; all three artists have fallen prey to it, in historical terms. But there is an underlying kernel of truth: that the greatest art has often been the product of genius in combination with a tortured “soul,” whose owner is compelled to produce art as a means of exorcising demons, or of releasing some pent-up inner energy, eventually erupting onto a canvas. It is in the creation of something deeply unsettling or overpowering that the

viewer witnesses a glimpse of the affliction. It manifests itself in our inability to remove the uncertainty we confront in the object, mesmerized by the challenges it presents.

For Caravaggio historian Troy Thomas: “His pictures undermine clear readings and generate contradictory meanings; the ambiguous gestures and demeanours of his figures make it difficult to determine their roles and actions ... one of his strategies may have been to establish a ‘resistance to didactic clarity’”²

For van Gogh author Carol Zemel: “The complexities of van Gogh’s practice—their internal shifts and turns and the dynamics of their development [lead to] a discursive space, in which contradictions and complexities are not resolved or synthesized, but remain in vital tension”³

For Basquiat scholar Eleanor Nairne: “Basquiat’s work enacts the epistemological anxieties of his age: the certainty of the Grand Enlightenment Narratives becoming redundant and giving way to a new era of relativism, pluralism and irony.”⁴

Each of these artists created a new, complex visual language; the interplay of compositional elements yields a persistent ambiguity in their works. Thus, the challenge of ‘reading’ their pictures becomes almost insurmountable, in the face of the uncertainties bound up in their creation. So the mystery deepens—the explorers of ideas among us are drawn even more to seek out what is contained in the paint, canvas, line and form—visible to all, but hard to see.

To consider only one element of composition, for example, where Caravaggio developed a mastery of chiaroscuro as a means of encrypting messages, and van Gogh punctured the boundaries of color to upend norms of expression, Basquiat violated the traditional picture plane through his radical constructions. For Basquiat, visual references were not anchored to any stable “ground” on the canvas; instead, his constructions released the image and the word from its finite, enclosed space, to which, paradoxically, they were materially bound.

The common threads that bind these three artists together become more apparent; revolutionary artistic practice is borne of a creative agency that breaks boundaries, of an object that operates within and between physical and ethereal dimensions, inspiring new questions, ideas, and interpretations, decades and centuries later. A new way of creating: Caravaggio, van Gogh, and Basquiat each used the elements of composition in original ways, breaking through the boundaries of tradition that held many, if not most, of their contemporaries, in check.

Caravaggio’s Genius

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio’s revolution, encompassing a wide range of compositional elements, has been carefully analyzed and well documented over the generations.

Just to cite a few: dark, obscured backgrounds in place of traditional motifs, light sources that appear to be magical or all-too-natural, models from everyday life rendered with unsettling emotional impact, thrusting movements of the subjects breaking the picture plane, brushstrokes so small and invisible, figures and objects imbued with such realism that one could discern the traces of influence all the way from the Dutch still-life masters onwards toward the photo-realists of the 1960s.

Caravaggio's painterly innovations were intimately tied to his revolutionary notions of presentation, his unique way of communicating ideas in and through his art. Without them, physical innovation using materials of art could be considered merely a new technique, a technical invention that lacks the synergistic power of a true artistic breakthrough. This point is lost all too often in the art world—the idea without the execution, or the execution without the idea, condemns most artistic production to the realm of the copyist, imitator, appropriator, or technician. The more powerful the synergy of the idea with the construction, the more likely the work could be considered the result of artistic genius.

Bernard Berenson, in his book on Caravaggio, employed a detailed study of construction and aesthetics of the image as a principal breakthrough, making the following observation about Caravaggio's own revolt against tradition: "We can assert, with perhaps more conviction, that he deliberately turned his back on what he saw was being painted in Rome. He struck out for himself, partly because he could not help it, because it suited his gifts and his formation, because it was his way, in short; but also perhaps to display his indifference to what was being done in Rome ... he ignored the vocabulary and the phrasing ... that were then current ... he enjoyed introducing incongruities, as an offset perhaps to the *style nobile*, to the graceful, to the pretty, the sentimental, the sugary, that were in vogue at the time."⁵

Berenson's conclusion can serve as a conduit between Caravaggio's actions to those of van Gogh and Basquiat; each in their time responded in a similar way to the art world around them. Basquiat's revolt was not a classic rejection of tradition; he had intuitively absorbed the lessons of past masters. His chosen *subjects* of appropriation had some antecedents among them, however his *methods* of appropriation became part of his existential breakthrough. The manner and style of his constructions had no identifiable precedent; this was one key trait he shared with Caravaggio and van Gogh.

Caravaggio integrated new compositional elements in his "response" to what was then in vogue. One key innovation was his use of light and darkness, his *chiaroscuro*. Instead of a world enveloped in daylight, as was the traditional trope of the time, "Caravaggio proposed a startling new approach in which near total blackness is the unnatural but normal condition; relieved by a piercing, mysterious light that seems to be of simultaneously natural and divine origin ... [his] light must struggle against the darkness so that its very presence seems miraculous"⁶

The complexity of his ideas, writ large on canvas, was expressed in part through his transformations of biblical stories and characters from the high church into a quotidian context, recasting the church's icons as real people. He used these elements of composition to devise new and uncertain narratives in his pictures, producing a synergistic result of construction (physical elements) and meaning (intangible elements). This complicated and clouded the messages encoded in the religious works he created, especially when considered alongside the "profane" works created early in his career.⁷ This was shocking to

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the audience at the time, leading to intense interest in, and debate about his work among contemporary Romans of a certain social rank.

Thomas re-sited Caravaggio's work as effectively proto-modern, paving the way for formal comparisons to contemporary artists, including Basquiat. Thomas summarised: "Caravaggio used a visual language different from the norm of his time, so much so that his pictures are characterized by an effective multi-level atterity, originality and unconventionality where he transgressed the standards of the rules-based artistic system Caravaggio's unconventionality involved an ironic subversion of the previous norms of decorum and artistic expression that had lost their orientating power and failed any longer to provide a sense of novelty or astonishment."⁸

Thomas's analytical construct opens up the field: if we use his approach to the artist's ideas as one way to identify revolutionary artistic practice, do we see any fundamental difference between what Caravaggio accomplished and what Basquiat achieved, each in their own time, each with their own choice of the elements of composition? For each of them, the visual field was composed of unconventional arrangements which denied viewers ready access to meaning. For Basquiat, while some could try to trace the use of particular elements, such as graffiti tags, perceived "automatic" writing, use of positive and negative space, and overpainting (among others), as appropriated techniques, it was his original recombination that contributed to his transgressive juxtapositions on canvas. Just as in Caravaggio's time, his work astonished a jaded, art-consuming public. They were held in thrall by something inexplicable, even though constructed using materials and references they thought they could grasp; instead, meaning slips through their hands.

Van Gogh's Genius

Putting aside the deification of Vincent van Gogh in the popular imagination, one must return to the principles and elements of composition, to really be able to peer into the brilliance of his work: the obvious place to start is color, of course. Meyer Schapiro highlights his revolutionary approach: "His first aim was intensity, a firm clear, advancing image exalted by daring color; the objects are now felt in their permanence and inner force ... light is no longer a power external to things, which subdues them and dissolves them, but an emanation from the flattened shadowless objects, the inherent luminosity of their intense local color, which identifies them unmistakably as their form. It is a kind of vitalism, an art of unbounded joy in life"⁹ In van Gogh's painting, the materiality of color is transmuted into an extension of the emotions, an ethereal element that transcends the physicality of the work.

As van Gogh's art evolved, it took an even more radical turn in form; his use of irregular lines and contrasting patterns, realised in the physicality of the impastoed result, was another breakthrough. Schapiro identifies one essential element of van Gogh's composition

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which finds its origin in his own troubled psyche: the patterns and clashes of lines and shapes which inhabit his drawings and paintings. Quoting van Gogh: “... more tangled and fantastic than a thorn hedge, so confused that one finds no rest for the eye and gets giddy, is forced by the whirling of colors and lines to look first here, then there, without it being possible to distinguish one thing from another ...” Meyer comments: “The unstable forms were a world of conflict and stress—the typical patterns of self in its entanglements and wild impulsiveness.”¹⁰ This revolution in color and form, taken together on their own, speak to a significant compositional breakthrough. But it goes much deeper than that, because his identity, his “self,” was expressed through the use of these elements of composition; the nature of artistic identity is inseparable from the result on the canvas. And the result on the canvas reflects the intuition of genius in the rarest of cases.

This observation is more directly comparable to Basquiat’s artistic practice: van Gogh’s lines and irregular patterns were integrated into the overall construction of the picture—they were resolved when taken as part of the whole. When on close observation these lines and patterns emerge, they challenge the form of the composition of which they are a part. For Basquiat, the use of lines and irregular patterns, boxes, grids, and other devices have for many been a marker of automatism (read: Pollock’s use of drip technique); it may be a mistake to make such a direct association. A more nuanced analysis could reveal that he frequently used these elements as a means of encoding his messages; they can signify a direction, point to a symbol, or form separate visual structures on canvas that ultimately become integral to the whole.

Van Gogh elaborated on his wildly impulsive approach in a letter to Emile Bernard: “I follow no system of brushwork at all, I hit the canvas with irregular strokes which I leave as they are, impastos, uncovered spots of canvas—corners here and there left inevitably unfinished—reworkings, roughnesses; well, I’m inclined to think that the result is sufficiently worrying and annoying not to please people with preconceived ideas about technique.”¹¹ Considering the wide gulf of time and changes in artistic practice that separate him from Basquiat, this one thought brings them closer together. Couldn’t Basquiat have said virtually the same about his own work? He, of course, was working in the artistic language of the late twentieth century; the areas of unfinished canvas, the “re-workings” and “roughnesses” took completely different forms and shapes—but the impact on the viewer was similar. The dislocation experienced in seeing something completely new that challenged comprehension is based on a “reading” of the composition: the viewer must look carefully to attempt to untangle an apparent jumble of line, color, form, word. In doing so, a more fundamental question emerges: what was he thinking?

That there is an idea, an implicit or explicit strategy for the creation (and often obfuscation) of meaning in the work’s execution, presents the viewer with greater difficulty in deciphering it. For van Gogh, as much as Caravaggio or Basquiat, a resistance to revealing any specific meaning was quite literally built into the picture. Research on van Gogh’s oeuvre highlights connections to the quotidian (Holland and Arles), utopian desire and modernity (Auvers), sexuality (portraits of women), and perceptions of the self (auto portraits), among other themes. In each case, the fraught, deeply felt nature of each connected idea resonates within the picture.

Albert Aurier wrote the first critical published notice of van Gogh’s work. He quickly captures the interplay between the composition and the idea, and calls out its importance in defining van Gogh’s revolutionary, modern art form. His analysis starts with the tangible, and ends

with the intangible: “He is highly conscious of the importance and beauty of matter, but in addition, he most often considers matter, however enchanting, as merely a sort of fantastic language designed for the translation of the Idea Within this most material matter, there lies, for the mind able to perceive it, a thought, an Idea, and this Idea the essential core of the work, is at one and the same time its efficient and final cause (He) is a great painter driven by his art, by color and by nature, but also a dreamer, a fervent believer, devouring utopias, feeding off the beauty of ideas and dreams.”¹²

Identifying the individual aspects of composition that set van Gogh apart from the rest of the canon, helps to explain the impact of some of his breakthroughs. It is only when all of those individual aspects are taken together, that one can perceive the synchronistic effect of idea and medium, and its actualization on a physical surface. Aurier’s statement is readily applicable to Basquiat—it’s clear that he fed “off the beauty of ideas and dreams” in his work. His compositional devices, made of “matter,” embodied that beauty. Whether it was bright contrasts of color in wild gestural figures, the dense solidity of negative space expressed in a color field, or crossing out and covering over words as a way of heightening (instead of obscuring) their meaning, Basquiat created new synchronistic relationships in construction.

Paul Serusier, a contemporary of van Gogh’s, noted that the “immutable principles” of art consist of the “impeccable harmony of line and colour ... these principles, forgotten little by little, have been rediscovered wholly or in part by extraordinary geniuses ... Given a certain quantity of lines and colours forming a harmony, there is an infinite number of ways of arranging them.”¹³ His implication: it takes a genius to find a new way of doing so.

Seeking Expressions of Genius

As a conceptual construct, “genius” occupies a contested space; by definition it becomes a relativistic measure that will always be subject to challenges of meaning; the same can be said for “revolutionary.” This essay does not seek to address these issues in relation to Caravaggio, van Gogh or Basquiat. Instead, it intends to inspire readers to confront the complexities of their oeuvres, to find correspondences in their accomplishments, and to recognize the qualities that set each of them so far apart from the rest of humanity. If so inspired, one can’t help but be drawn closer to each of them.

Maybe there is more to the common denominators traced through the lives and work of these three artists. Maybe these parallels point to recognition of something beyond coincidental in their unique blendings of composition and idea. Maybe these three artists do share a common bond in the greater pantheon of art history. The connection of the artist’s inspiration to the elements of composition exponentially magnifies the power of the work, when executed by the hands of a genius. Aurier links the notion of the idea to genius in artistic practice: “The normal and final end of painting, as well as of the other arts, can never be the direct representation of objects. Its aim is to express Ideas, by translating them into a special language. Indeed, in the eyes of the artist—that is, the one who must be the *Expresser*

of Absolute Beings—objects are only relative beings, which are nothing but a translation proportionate to the relativity of our intellects, of Ideas, of absolute and essential beings. Objects cannot have more value than objects as such. They can appear to him only as *signs*. They are the letters of an enormous alphabet which only the man of genius knows how to spell.”¹⁴

When we consider the works of Caravaggio and van Gogh in relation to Basquiat, Aurier’s artist as an “expresser of absolute beings” allows us to identify that genius with more certainty. This “enormous alphabet” to which Aurier refers—the interwoven combination of the elements of composition with the elements of meaning, of the idea—can only be mastered by a genius. Coming up with a single notion doesn’t count—one might see a new way of arranging the “letters” once. But a single moment of genius is not the same as a wellspring of genius, gushing with a torrent of ideas, ceaselessly without end, until the wellspring has used up its power; its force diminished, it ceases to exist. It is this notion of genius, the creation of a particularly powerful idea expressed through a unique combination of the elements of composition that can cause true wonder, a rapture of both emotional and intellectual senses. Caravaggio’s presentation of uncertain narratives upended the way in which people interpreted the narratives of the Bible; van Gogh’s radical practice changed how people perceived form and colour on canvas. Basquiat’s innovative use of signifiers to complicate the signified, through his unique modes of composition, mirrors their achievements. These are the standards by which the greatest artists should be measured.

Berenson remarked that “what counts most in visual art ... is not the manifest combination and arrangement of shapes and colours, but their power to stimulate us vitally, life-enhancingly, systematically from top to toe, not more mentally than sensuously, yet taking place in the realm of ideated sensations.”¹⁵ This is the impact of a masterpiece, created by a genius. The art of Caravaggio, van Gogh, and Basquiat all share this trait.

The uniqueness, the true originality, the rare genius, are all there in Basquiat’s pictures. These traits set him apart from a spot in a timeline of art history; his work resists compartmentalization in a progression of cultural change. Re-siting Jean-Michel Basquiat in the canon of art is a tall order. There are discoveries still to be made about his work; there is a lot we don’t know, and a lot we don’t yet see. Placing him among the most important artists of all time is not something accomplished in one essay, in one book, or in one exhibition. But, only by expanding the field of understanding can this re-siting take place. We have to start somewhere. So let’s start here.

1 Jordana Moore Sagesse, *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art*, University of California Press, 2014, p. 8

2 Troy Thomas, *Caravaggio and the Creation of Modernity*, Reaktion, 2016, p. 97

3 Carol Zemel, *Van Gogh's Progress: Utopia, Modernity, and 19th Century Art*, University of California Press, 1997, p. 6

4 Eleanor Nairne, “The Performance of Jean-Michel Basquiat” in: *Boom for Real*, Barbican Centre, 2017, p. 24

5 Bernard Berenson, *Caravaggio: His Incongruity and His Fame*, Chapman & Hall, 1953, pp. 55–56

6 Thomas (see note 2), p. 77

7 Suggested by Thomas, pp. 16, 88, 114

8 Ibid., p.97

9 Meyer Schapiro, *van Gogh*, Abrams, 2003, pp. 10–11

10 Ibid., p. 27

11 Vincent van Gogh, *The Letters*, Thames & Hudson, 2009, letter 596, vol. 4, p. 52

12 Albert Aurier, “The Isolated: Vincent van Gogh,” reproduced in *Art in Theory: 1815-1900*, Blackwell, 1998, pp. 951–52

13 Paul Serusier “Letter to Maurice Denis,” reproduced in *Art in Theory: 1815-1900*, Blackwell, 1998, p. 1021

14 Albert Aurier, “Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin,” reproduced in *Art in Theory: 1815-1900*, Blackwell, 1998, p. 1026

15 Berenson (see note 5), p. 100