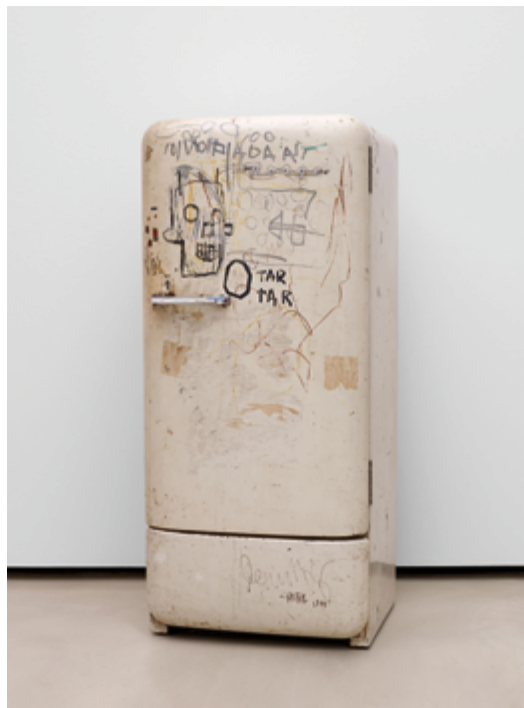


JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT
OVER THE BORDERS

In the course of his short life, Jean-Michel Basquiat achieved entry into the most important collector circles and museums, and also climbed the Olympus of the art market. With key works by the artist from the time between 1981 and 1988, the year of his death, the Nicola Erni Collection (NEC) incorporates works from all phases of his creation. Basquiat's oeuvre, comprising drawing, painting, sculpture, collage, and graffiti art, can be placed in the context of Afro-American as well as Western art and culture in terms of content and style.

Already early on, his art was characterized by its global language, in what is perhaps a pioneering way, throughout all of the constants of Dadaism, Graffiti, Art Brut, Action Painting, Abstract Expressionism, and Pop-Art.

Basquiat, of Haitian origin on his father's side and with Puerto Rican roots on his mother's side, was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1960. It was the fulminant 1960s in which a subculture was emerging from Brooklyn and the Bronx: hip hop, breakdance, rap, graffiti, and underground film were spreading quickly into the public realm as an opposition to social, political, and economic structures. Basquiat was at home in this environment, painting the walls along the streets of New York. His graffiti drawings were skeleton-like signs and sayings—print characters possessing an intelligent, poetic sense, which would draw increasing attention. Early on he developed his characteristic pseudonym SAMO©¹ and made music with his own band, Grey, which performed in bars such as CBGB, Mudd Club, and other hip spots.² He was broke and kept himself above water by selling things that did not seem at all suitable to paint on: T-shirts and postcards, everyday items and objects—everything around him, his entire environment was painted, and, vice-versa, was all integrated thematically into his images. In the process, elements from his street life, such as cars, buildings, police officers, and graffiti surface as pictograms in his works. He scribbled, unmasked, on his guests'³ helmets, doors, tables, windows, and refrigerators; as is the case with the refrigerator *Untitled (Refrigerator)* in the NEC.⁴ The free, empathetic composition, which made use of his direct mental as well as physical environments, inner as well as outer worlds as fields for association, shaped Basquiat's entire creative production. He portrayed himself in a mask-like way beginning in 1981, and continually presented his portrait as a skull. The skull is presented sketchily, although



Untitled (Refrigerator), 1981

prominently, on the cream-colored refrigerator; this would go on to become an obsessive and omnipresent icon in his oeuvre in diverse versions of crown, head, and grating for teeth standing upward in an open mouth, subtly expressing particular states of mind.⁵

Numerous references to topoi such as graffiti, crown, Grey's Anatomy, money and reputation, Haiti, Africa, and Negro quickly developed to the immanent themes and vocabularies in Basquiat's oeuvre. Cited in this context are the large-format paintings, such as *The Dutch Settlers* (1982), *Toussaint l'Ouverture Versus Savonarola* (1983), and *Life Like Son of Barney Hill* (1983). Signs, symbols, and colors are found dispersed across their entire surfaces. They represent examples of Basquiat's fascinating, free combination of various layers, techniques, meanings, and themes. On several unusual picture carriers mounted next to one another, like wooden parts, the artist attached clothes and canvases and let an assemblage-like structure emerge from acrylics, oil crayons, charcoal, colored markers, as well as collaged prints. These three works anticipate the three-dimensional works and collages that he later developed, which are often compared with Robert Rauschenberg's *Combine Paintings*. In terms of content, they reveal Basquiat's profound grappling with his own black identity, as well as his interest in black personalities and historical events: portraits as homage to black heroes, jazz musicians, authors, basketball players, and boxers are present in his paintings, as are Voodoo themes, totems, and allusions to the history of slavery in America. On a width of 5.50 meters, Basquiat referred in *The Dutch Settlers* to the racism that continues to remain dominant in the U.S., particularly in the South. On one of the nine panels, the word TOBACCO can be read between a black figure and a crown: A theme that he would take up again in 1984 in his work *Slaveships (Tobacco)*. In both cases, he is alluding to the slave ships and the tobacco planted in the U.S. by slaves; and in doing so, includes himself in this group of unjustly treated people by repeatedly using his copyright across the entire image, which stands representatively for "that is me".

In this context, Basquiat took on the fundamental question of how greatly the depictions of black actors, musicians, and athletes were occupied by negative connotations in U.S. media.⁶ The crown that floats over TOBACCO, lends the black figure the honor of a king, as it were, and thus stands symbolically for many black heroes, such as Basquiat himself.⁷

1 SAMO© is the abbreviation for "same old shit", which in Afro-American slang stands for the persistent racism in the U.S.; see Sischy, Ingrid and Braithwaite: Jean-Michel Basquiat as told by Fred Braithwaite a.k.a. Fab 5 Freddy, in, *Interview Magazin*, New York, October 1992, pp. 119–123.

2 The band was named for Henry Grey, who published Grey's Anatomy in 1985, which contained 827 illustrations for medical students. Basquiat was given the book at the age of six from his mother during his visit to the hospital to distract him from the pain, he was enthralled by it for the rest of his life. He thereby developed complex references from it: anatomical quotes, such as skeleton-like figures, which were to be continually repeated in endless combinations as a characteristic vocabulary.

3 He did not have any permanent residence of his own, but instead, lived with friends, moving abruptly at times.

4 Emmerling, Leonhard, *Jean-Michel Basquiat: 1969–1988*, Cologne 2003, pp. 25.

5 The skull represents a symbol of fleetingness in art history and thereby for all coming and going. Basquiat's preference for skulls is an expression of his permanent confrontation with his own origins, as well as with the generally known theories that connect the anatomy with specific (good/bad) character traits of people; see Reichling, Susanne, *Jean-Michel Basquiat. Der afro-amerikanische Kontext seines Werkes*, Diss. University of Hamburg 1998, pp. 161.

6 Rodrigues, Laurie A., "SAMO© as an Escape Clause: Jean-Michel Basquiat's Engagement with a Commodified American Africanism", in *Journal of American Studies*, Cambridge, February 2014, p. 8.

7 The crown is a typical graffiti symbol and Basquiat used it for his own specific need of being elevated to king, just like his copyright sign, as an alter ego.

By putting the crown on his own head in his graffiti, he identifies himself as a king, and thereby as belonging to the recognized body of artists.⁸ The crown became his quintessential trademark.⁹

Toussaint l'Ouverture Versus Savonarola, similar to many of his other paintings, ranks among Basquiat's racist, colonialist, and capitalist burdened subjects.¹⁰ It deals with the Caribbean slave who sparked the Haitian revolution at the end of the eighteenth century as General François Dominique Toussaint Louverture, known as the "black Napoleon". In the painting, he is depicted at the far right with a large Napoleon hat and raised sword. His death as a martyr resulted in the abolition of slavery and the founding of the Republic of Haiti—the only successful slave revolt in history, which would enduringly change the lives of the Africans.¹¹ Savonarola, the great preacher of repentance, who—as captured in the painting—mounted a profound critique of the nobility and clerics in Italy from 1442 to 1498, reigned over Florence until his murder, and likewise accepted a violent death for the improvement of conditions and renewal of the existing system. The image allows for various possible interpretations,¹² but it most clearly thematizes the struggle of minorities, racism, and "versus" as a symbol of the revolt against repression.¹³

Major paintings such as these made a great impact. Also impressive was that Basquiat's fast thinking was reflected in the breath taking speed with which he applied figures, masks, pictograms, and words in several, overlapping layers onto the painting surface,¹⁴ at times selling his works even before they were finished. It was the time of the *roaring 1980s*, Wall Street was booming, money was flowing, cocaine was served at parties, and life was fiercer and faster. It was during this period that Basquiat's friends were concerned about his excessive drug use, while at the same time, in 1983, he was on the cover of key magazines, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Vogue* and participated in the highly acclaimed Whitney Biennale. Basquiat experienced the rapid rise to respected artist with amazement and described this in one of his largest paintings *Life Like Son of Barney Hill*. The son of the Hills, a couple who had become famous through their sensational story, well-received by the media, likewise became a star, quasi overnight, in their slipstream.¹⁵ Twenty-five years later, Basquiat felt an alliance with the son who like himself, had achieved fame within a very short time through no fault of his own. Basquiat earned a great deal of money during this time. In this painting, he linked his new experiences

and thoughts on the supernatural and money with the theme of death, omnipresent in his work: death was referred to on the second panel with the repeated words "Lux Lucet in Tenebris" (light in darkness) and Egyptian mythology with "Anubis", the jackal-headed god.¹⁶ Although he went to great efforts in the attempt to grasp his situation, the monetary power structure behind it nonetheless confined him: far right in the image a head is stuck in a coin, rather than finding liberty in it. A glorious path to escape seems possible only with the help of the supernatural¹⁷ creation, Superman.

Toussaint l'Ouverture Versus Savonarola and *Life Like Son of Barney Hill* pursue the principle of sampling, which was common in hip hop, the upcoming music of the time. A complicated pictorial structure, dominated by opposites, such as gestural and figurative elements, painting, drawing, and comic-strip-like sketches, vehemence and refrain, color applied across entire surfaces, and empty or white spaces. This type of self-confident combining of elements from Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art was certainly unique and suggests Basquiat's acute observation of the New York scene and his artist colleagues Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol.

The international breakthrough in Basquiat's career came in 1982, the year that he and Andy Warhol met.¹⁸ A new chapter in the artist's life began with this friendship, his move into the studio that he rented from Warhol on Great Jones Street in mid-1983, and the works they did together. Although both artists were very different, they nonetheless complemented and mutually influenced one another.¹⁹ The two works created in 1983 *Tuxedo* and *Untitled* are made in the rather rare silk screening technique that was inspired by Warhol. The crown floats powerfully on the very top of the portrait-format painting filled with white texts and images on a blackboard-like base, on which irrevocable content is established:²⁰ *Tuxedo* as a synonym for Basquiat's heros, such as the Jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker. Together, the many symbols form a complex system that depicts the outline of the black musician's tuxedo jacket.²¹ This painting, as well as *Untitled* (1983), *Riddle Me This*, *Batman*, and *Eroica I and II* at the NEC exemplarily show the way that Basquiat combined diagrams, texts, and symbols and constructed "internal" relations, in terms of the graphics and content: A cosmogram of coding, which must be seen in conjunction with the Caribbean-African pictorial world, and which is typical of Basquiat's

8 Basquiat himself wanted to be taken seriously by the critics, and to be placed in the series of "great masters" of American and European art history, as can be gleaned from the following interview: Johnston, Becky and Davis, Tamara, "I Have to Have Some Source Material Around Me", Interview with Basquiat, California 1985, in *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, ex cat. Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, May 9–September 5, 2010, Ostfildern 2010, pp. 38.

9 Emmerling, Leonhard, *Jean-Michel Basquiat: 1969–1988*, Cologne 2003, p. 37.

10 *Slave Auction (1982)*, *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta (1983)*, and *Toussaint l'Ouverture v. Savonarola (1983)*.

11 Basquiat's father's family came from Haiti, which is why he was certainly aware of this event.

12 Marenzi is of the opinion that *L'Ouverture* is a portrait of Basquiat himself, see Marenzi, Luca, "Pay for Soup/Build a Fort/Set that on Fire" in *Basquiat*, ed. Bruno Bischofberger, ex. cat. Civico Museo Revoltella, Trieste, May 15–September 15, 1999, Milan 1999, p. XXVI.

13 "Versus" as sign of fundamental opposition, see Fretz, Eric: *Jean-Michel Basquiat: a biography*, Santa Barbara, Calif. 2010, p. 111.

14 Haenlein also grounded the almost manic compulsion to produce also from the changed spirit, which demanded things to be ever faster, more, and more creative; see Haenlein, Carl, "Archetypographie", in *Jean-Michel Basquiat: das zeichnerische Werk*, ed. Carl-Albrecht Haenlein, ex. cat. Kestner-Gesellschaft Hannover, September 15–October 22, 1989, Hannover 1989, p. 4.

15 This deals with the highly sensational story in the media of the married couple Betty and Barney Hill, who were meant to have been kidnapped by aliens for a short time and held in a UFO.

16 Compare his drawing *Dog Leg Study* from 1982/83 as the reversal of DOG to GOD and the meaning of the jackal god of death for Basquiat in Reichling, Susanne, *Jean-Michel Basquiat, Der afro-amerikanische Kontext seines Werkes*, Diss. University of Hamburg 1998, p. 90.

17 Superman is surrounded by an aureole.

18 In 1982, at the age of 21, Basquiat was the youngest participant in the Documenta 7 in Kassel. His works were shown there alongside the art of Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter, Cy Twombly, and Andy Warhol. Artforum published the essay *The Radiant Child* by René Ricards, which stirred international attention.

19 A drawing by his contemporary, Keith Haring, and a wonderful homage to the friendship between Warhol and Basquiat: Haring, Keith, "Bilder des Dritten Bewusstseins", in *Collaborations Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat*, ex. cat. of the Mayor Gallery, London 1988.

20 Reichling described *Tuxedo* together with other similar works by Basquiat as "blackboard series", which through the writing with a (white) oil crayon on a black base and through phrases, such as "Notary Education", thematized learning; see Reichling, Susanne, *Jean-Michel Basquiat, Der afro-amerikanische Kontext seines Werkes*, Diss. University of Hamburg 1998, p. 61.

21 The word "Tuxedo" in this context is the name for a dinner jacket, which got its name from Tuxedo Park, a private country club of wealthy New Yorkers. Tuxedos have also always been associated with Jazz.

text-image works.²² Although it may seem incredibly intellectually stimulating to combine words, collages, and references with one another, it nonetheless remains difficult to decode Basquiat's work. Inherent in all of the works is a mysticism, which leads back to the origins of his inspiration: on the one hand, slogans, scraps of words, comic figures, and scribbling from the subculture of his hometown of Brooklyn, and on the other hand, the cultural symbiosis of U.S.-American and Black African ancestry. Basquiat's merit is found in the fact that he was able to transfer complex linguistic systems to panel painting, and thereby change how they were valued, and that he ultimately dissociated himself from graffiti art, and made it socially acceptable.²³

Basquiat did, in fact, react with increasing sensitivity when he was associated with simple and primordial art.²⁴ In the reworking of his painting *The Lake* from 1983, Basquiat discarded motifs and themes and radically erased them, he painted over layer after layer—what picture actually lies under the lake? Is it a concealing of his identity or an eradication of it? Is he the black figure to the right in the picture, which will soon be flooded over with blue paint and who yields to the situation with hands raised high, to free his path and thoughts for something new? A turn within his oeuvre, which leads the way via a vacuum as an expression of a pause. Through deletions, applications of paint on large areas, and strongly expressive moments, his paintings take up elements from abstract painting. Comparisons with great masters, such as Cy Twombly, for example, suggest themselves when the artist blurs scribbling or applies abstract-figurative elements.²⁵ Not only Basquiat, but also the art world increasingly pressed for a re-evaluation of his art by creating connections to renowned American and European schools of painting, almost as though some sort of justification were being sought. Through the derivation of his art from role models such as Jean Dubuffet, Jackson Pollock, Robert Rauschenberg, Franz Kline, Cy Twombly, and Andy Warhol it was possible to negate all connection to the subculture's street art and reinterpret Basquiat's work as the further artistic development of *Art Brut*, for example, that of Jean Dubuffet.²⁶ At the same time, the works from 1983 and the following years reflect the desire that was predominant for him, and his great enthusiasm for a liberated, pure painting.

In the final years of his life, 1987 and 1988, Basquiat had already reached the peak of his fame, yet his search for more flowed through his mind and body like a destructive force. New York in the late 1980s also seemed to be ailing; Andy Warhol had died, and Keith Haring was ill. Basquiat was greatly afflicted, mentally, by the increasing negative criticism; he embarked on a search for his roots, which opened new horizons for him at the age of twenty-five: Africa. However, disappointed by what he saw

there, he fell into depression, became isolated, and lonely: the other side of the coin of his hypomanic creativity. First cocaine, then heroine became his new sources of inspiration. He stopped sleeping and simply painted at times succumbing to anxiety. The constantly repeated scraps of words in his paintings can, once again be read biographically, as they can be directly connected with his life: “*Nothing to be gained here*”, is placed as a meaningful symbol below a round sphere in the painting *Riddle Me This, Batman* from 1987.²⁷ This work, similar to *Eroica I* and *II*, which are all found in the NEC, was created shortly before Basquiat's death at the age of twenty-seven from a drug overdose, and seems to deal precisely with that. Shown is the moment that the alcohol and drug addiction has altered the face of the hobo, the American vagabond, and a bandage over his eyes helps close them to the world (*Riddle Me This, Batman*), as, after all, there is “*Nothing to be gained here*”. The paintings *Eroica I* and *II* are saturated by a great number of dying people (*Man Dies*) and when one reads this countless times, it is as though one can hear Basquiat thinking out loud.²⁸ By positioning *Eroica II* to the left and directly to the right next to it, *Eroica I*, the form of a blue shaded pistol—slightly overlapping—arises, whose barrel in *Eroica I* is aimed at the multiple signs, “15 EROICA”, one below the other, as though the disappointment and disillusion were expressed here, as his eternal battle for the equal rights of the black minority now practically, symphonically seemed lost.²⁹

Basquiat was a genius, also in the eyes of the collectors Nicola and Marcel Erni, and he achieved an artistic accomplishment that cannot yet be fully appreciated. His creativity, his unbelievable skills, his highly complex intellectual references, as well as his evocative, emotional courage, testify today, as before, to great timeliness, and stand for an ambitious, modern thought. Despite his short lifetime, Basquiat was able to establish through his free thinking and unusual abilities far removed from all conventions, an universal canon, a world language within art—alongside his artistic oeuvre, this is certainly a much greater legacy left to posterity.

Florentine Rosemeyer

22 Clark, Lisa, “Jean-Michel Basquiat, The African Cosmogram as a Blueprint for Modern Art”, in the blog *Ancient Charts and Modern Art*, Blog 2013: <http://lisakyleclark.wordpress.com/2013/04/08/modern-art-and-ancient-charts-the-african-cosmogram-as-a-blueprint-for-the-works-of-jean-michel-basquiat/>

23 With the statement, “I am not part of graffiti art”, he consciously removed himself from the environment of the graffiti artists, which was seen as primitive, and instead saw himself as a “writer”, see Basquiat in an interview with O'Grady, in *Artforum* 11, quoted by Reichling, Susanne, *Jean-Michel Basquiat, Der afro-amerikanische Kontext seines Werkes*, Diss. University of Hamburg 1998, p. 54.

24 Fretz, Eric, *Jean-Michel Basquiat: A biography*, Santa Barbara, Calif. 2010, p. 122.

25 Although Twombly writes and uses script in an entirely different way than with Basquiat.

26 Reichling, Susanne, *Jean-Michel Basquiat, Der afro-amerikanische Kontext seines Werkes*, Diss. University of Hamburg 1998, p. 8.

27 This combination of symbol and word are part of the “Hobo Signs”, that Basquiat took from the catalogue by Henry Dreyfuss, *Symbol Sourcebook: An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols*, New York 1972.

28 Buchhart, Dieter, *Basquiat*, exhibition from May 9 to September 5, 2010, Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Hall text 18, p. 12

29 *Eroica*, the title of Ludwig van Beethoven's 3rd symphony, expresses the composer's disappointment at the crowning of Napoleon as emperor, as he now saw his thus betrayed revolutionary ideals, “freedom, equality, fraternity”, as lost. Basquiat probably arrived at Beethoven via the new black music of hip hop, see in Reichling, Susanne, *Jean-Michel Basquiat, Der afro-amerikanische Kontext seines Werkes*, Diss. University of Hamburg 1998, p. 21.



The Dutch Settlers, 1982



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The Lake, 1983







Life Like Son of Barney Hill, 1983



Tuxedo, 1983

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 VERSUS GEORGE III AND LORD NORTH



THE TEMPLE OF AMY SEMPLE IN CHIFFERSON

THE OBSERVATORY FROM THE JAMES DEAN MOVIE

HOLLYWOOD



CRITICISM, STAFF BUSINESS VENTURES
 SOURCES OF CRISIS

ANT SOLAR FLARE
 IN SCHESSING
 HUMAN CANNON BALL
 HUMAN CANNON BALL
 NATIVE BANG BOYS
 WHITE ON SAFARI
 IN ONE FINAL
 GORILLA TELEPATHY



LOUIS XVI - 1774-92
 TIERS ETAT
 THE PRIEST
 THE SOLDIER
 THE PEASANT
 THE LAWYER

THE FINELY CHASED FLINT LOCK PISTOL



"THINK MYLCKYSTERS"
 HARDWARE
 SEVEN YEARS WAR
 BETTER
 EIGHT-30
 SEXY HIGH HEELS
 WEST INDIES (COACH)
 BATTLE OF SAINTS
 12. CRISPUS
 14. ATTACKS
 16. HIGH
 12. SHODL
 2. BEEFY



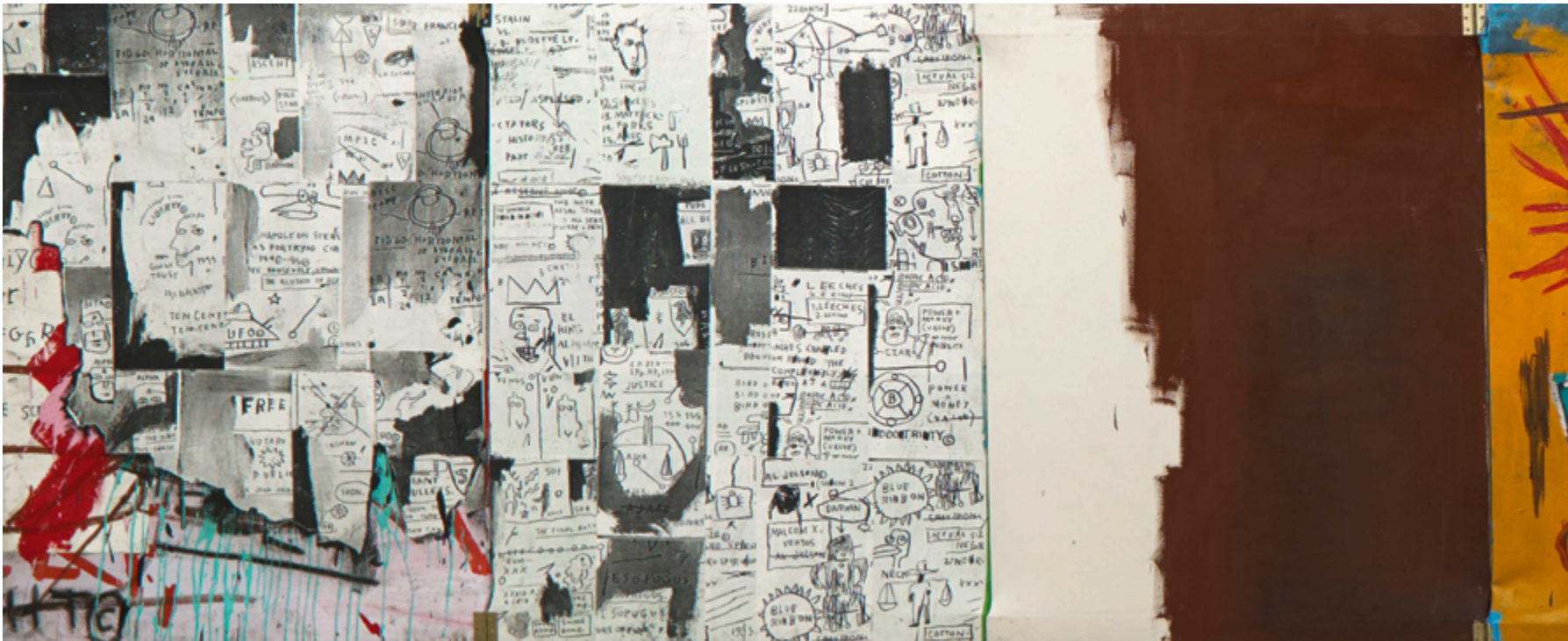
ROBESPIERRE

THE ROYAL FAMILY FLED FROM PARIS IN JUNE 1791

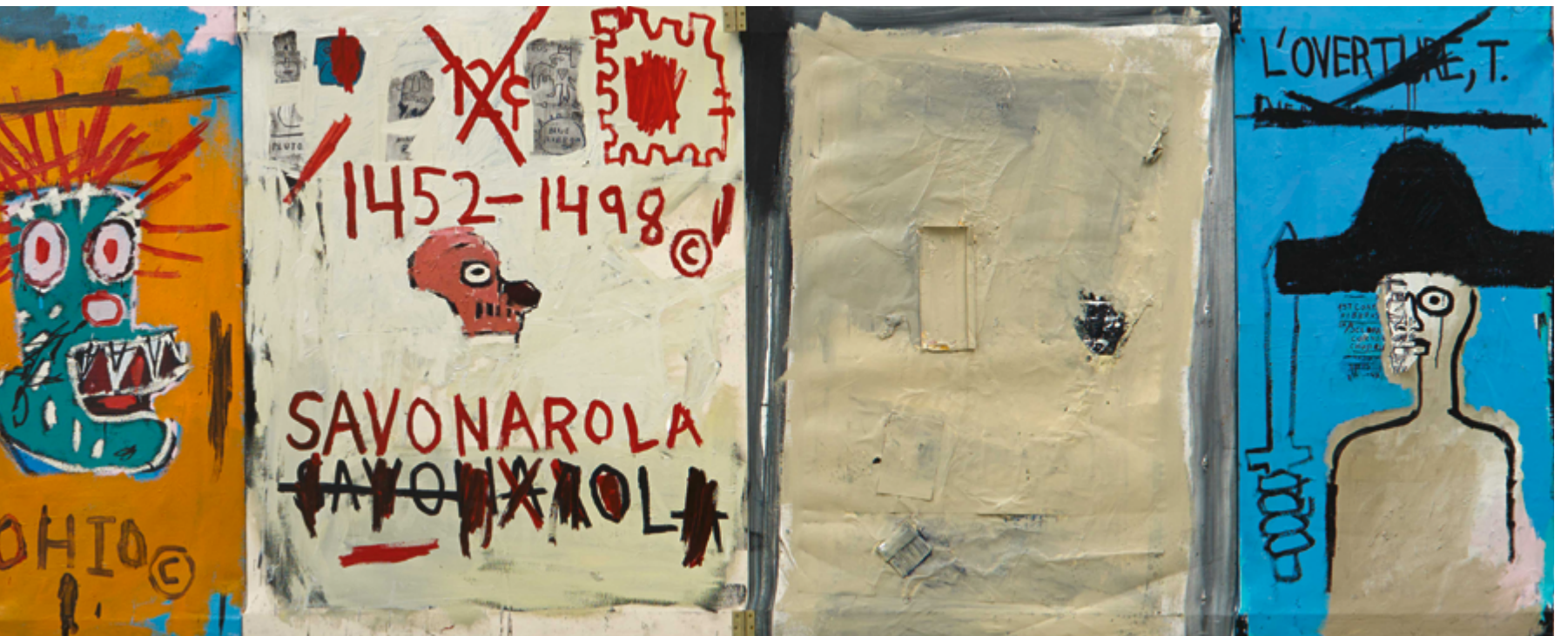
MARK ANTOINETTE
 DEWEY DECIMAL SYSTM.
 LOUIS XVI
 GEORGE
 GEORGE MASON
 MASON
 VERSAILLES
 ARTICLE ONE



THE FRENCH COMMANDER AT ROCHAMBEAU AND WASHINGTON PREPARE THE ATTACK ON WE POL YORTKTOWN.



Toussaint l'Ouverture Versus Savonarola, 1983



Riddle Me This, Batman, 1987





Eroica I, 1988