Jean-Michel Basquiat was the superstar of the New York art scene in the mid-80s. In only eight years he created a vast oeuvre of around 900 oil paintings and over 1,000 drawings. He felt the urge to paint and draw all the time and on everything around him: on napkins, tables, cloth, fridges, walls and in acrylic or oil paint stick, as in Helmut from 1981, shown here. Whatever was on his mind, he depicted or wrote down. Helmut carries the word AARON and is crowned by Basquiat's typical trident symbol. In 1981, he started to replace his earlier street-art-name SAMO© with AARON—for Henry Aaron—one of the best, black, American baseball players. He was one of Basquiat's heroes, worthy of being crowned. In keeping with Basquiat's own statement, kings, heroes, and the street were themes which interested him and were freely integrated in his artworks.

Basquiat's integration of consciousness and imponderables, a mutation of his direct surroundings into a free field of association, may derive from two very personal sources: firstly, Basquiat's art was influenced by the compositional techniques used by the pioneer of the post-war avant-garde, John Cage; secondly, and perhaps more strongly, looking at the work shown here, Untitled (Willy Arron) of 1981, his roots are in street art. Untitled (Willy Arron) is painted on an apartment wall, and typical for his mural paintings, executed in graffiti spray, aerosol, and crayon paint, combined here already with material used in academies such as acrylic, crumpled paint, or pencil. His use of signs, which is to become a typical feature of his repertoire, such as airplanes, a blue car, a crown and a face, not only gives the work a narrative, but also marks the development of his iconic painting language while still creating graffiti art on walls. Untitled (Willy Arron) he also blends happenings and images straight from the urban street scenario into his paintings, even incorporating acoustic associations. The letters in the title "Arron" seem to capture the booming noise of the metropolis. In this work, he elaborates his own statement, kings, heroes, and the street were themes which interested him and were freely integrated in his artworks.

Basquiat's ability to convey his biography and individual artistic message in his artworks is evident in the three paintings Toussaint l'Ouverture Versus Savonarola, Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta, and Life Like Son of Barney Hill, discussed later in this essay.

Basquiat’s ability to convey his biography and individual artistic message in his artworks is evident in the three paintings Toussaint l’Ouverture Versus Savonarola, Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta, and Life Like Son of Barney Hill. All were executed in 1983; all extend over several panels and as a result have an exceptional format of up to six meters in length; all are intensely compelling as a result of their impromptus brushwork and multiple layers; and all show a specific contextual correlation by combining text, image, and color.

Basquiat developed his iconographic repertoire in his artworks through the recurring use of crowns, skulls, texts, money-related signs, and negroid symbols—a pictorial world revealing what deeply affected him: Afro-American history and racial discrimination. In this context, two of these works focus on racism and colonization: Toussaint l’Ouverture Versus Savonarola and Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta. Both have a powerful narrative contextualising slavery and revolt and relate to Basquiat’s own biography and his half-Haitian, half Puerto Rican roots. He did not belong to either cultural or ethnic group, but as a colored person living in New York who achieved world fame, he fought social discrimination and felt a strong desire to improve awareness. He elevated his black heroes, mainly from the worlds of boxing and jazz, to ideals and kings. Basquiat also saw himself as a genuine belonging to the genealogy of heroes. In the painting Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta he manifests this affiliation, not only indicated in the title but also through adding "Fig 23" in the upper left-hand corner, like a label close to the head of an Afro-American man. This work was executed in the year he turned twenty three.

Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta is a prime example of Basquiat’s personal interest to highlight the ignorance and incorrectness of stereotyping people because of their race. The stimulus came from personal experience when he traveled to New Orleans and saw the rich black history of the South. The protagonists in Mark Twain’s novel The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, referred to here—Huck and Jim—travel along the Mississippi River and team up, despite their uncertainty about the legality or morality of their actions, to help slaves. The novel is regarded as one of the great American tales illustrating the atrocities of slavery, written with satire, irony, and sarcasm. From the central axis of the story, the two protagonists, Huckleberry Finn and Jim, run away from Master Bill Norf’s farm to either cultural or ethnic group, but as a colored person living in New York who achieved world fame, he fought social discrimination and felt a strong desire to improve awareness. He elevated his black heroes, mainly from the worlds of boxing and jazz, to ideals and kings. Basquiat also saw himself as a genuine belonging to the genealogy of heroes. In the painting Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta he manifests this affiliation, not only indicated in the title but also through adding "Fig 23" in the upper left-hand corner, like a label close to the head of an Afro-American man. This work was executed in the year he turned twenty three.

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"PER LB. 49 ¢" relating to slaves, bought and sold cheaply, humanity treated like meat—could well be variant in its association or rather its assimilation.

The second work in this unique group, entitled Toussaint L'Ouverture circa 1983, also has an autobiographical context and addresses Basquiat's role as a black artist, similar to the Haitian freedom fighter Toussaint L'Ouverture, a Caribbean slave who led the Haitian Revolution in 1804. Basquiat span consciously embeds himself in the painting by repeatedly using "his" copyright sign and throughout the composition he portrays the African-American man and his hat on the far right. Both signs stand for him as a person in a heretical dispute on current art entities. This work is all about finding and defining his role as a black artist within modern American art history. In this context, one could assume—looking closely at the panels—that the work is a homage to reference to Robert Rauschenberg's mixed style of "Combines" and experimental use of texture to capture subtleties of sarcasm. And maybe it also refers to Franz Kline's highly inspiring, powerful brushstrokes, enlarged lines abstracted from a figurative language, and his repeated overpainting. A common feature of works by Kline and Basquiat is that neither of the artists' works were accidental by nature.

The last of the three works discussed here is Life Like Son of Barney Hill. This deals with the highly sensational story in the media of Betty and Barney Hill, who were allegedly kidnapped by aliens for a short time and held in a UFO. The couple became famous as a result of the story, and the image can be read not only from left to right but also from top to bottom. Formally speaking, this relates Basquiat's works to Minimal Art, which used grids and serial forms to evoke an ideal, geometric precision. In this sense, Sell Grit is a unique composition within Basquiat's oeuvre. A further characteristic is the structural three-part division: the far left is overpainted completely in black; the center section is a collage on paper of nervous sketchings, scraps of conversation, and pictograms, partly pasting over the right-hand side, which shows a portrait of a man drawn on a blue background.

The male figure with a hat and moustache may be a reference to the Haitian novelist Jacques Stephen Alexis, a communist writer, who, like many other disenfranchised citizens, was killed under the Haitian dictator François Duvalier. Given Basquiat's Haitian heritage, it is an artistic device that, despite the collage overlapping the edge of the blue area, the name Duvalier can still be read—once crossed out with a single line, twice thickly, and finally underlined to ensure its lasting effect once more and that the deleted words are read. The importance of this recurring figure with a hat becomes even more evident as it reappears in all three multiple-panel paintings of 1983 discussed here, and as such acts as a connecting element between these four paintings in the Nicola Erni Collection.

Basquiat's central cultural legacy addressing the 21st century and bridging ethnics is just as relevant today. Artistically, his success is not only to be found in his combination of graffiti-like elements and fine art, but also in his ability to create a pictorial autobiography, subtly emitting pointed messages in an artistic language which addresses more than one sense. Art historically, Basquiat's work traces an arc from a Picasso-like interest in "primitives" art to references mainly to Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, elevating graffiti to become institutionalized, while integrating Afro-American culture and issues at the same time—a vast spectrum which reflects the theme "His story is very big."
Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta, 1983