

Already as a child, Keith Haring was exposed to all kinds of cartoons, his father being, besides an engineer, an amateur cartoonist. He spent quite some time with his father creating sketches and drawings, often influenced by Walt Disney cartoons. In fact, he learned to draw Mickey Mouse from a Disney “how-to-draw” book he found at his grandmother’s house.¹

This fascination for cartoons went on throughout his childhood. In addition to Disney, he found inspiration in Dr. Seuss, Charles Schulz and *Looney Tunes*.² As a teenager, Haring seriously considered becoming a cartoonist. Not only had he already developed a passion for art and painting, but his fascination for the work realised by American cartoonists of the 1950s and 1960s remained alive and present during his entire career. Walt Disney was a man he admired and respected immensely, a personality he idolised. In fact, before deciding to study fine art, he very much aspired to work for Disney, saying: “I always wanted to work for Walt Disney when I was growing up, when I was a kid and in some ways, I think he is one of the three most important artists of the twentieth century along with Warhol and Picasso.”³

Haring’s passion not only for cartoons but also the visual arts brought to the fore his unique and widely appreciated style. Keith Haring became best known to the public as a graffiti artist. In the early 1980s subway stations were one of his preferred locations to work in, a place he used as an underground studio. There he could sketch freely. Rather than using a blank canvas, he produced mainly white chalk paintings on black disused advertisement backboards. As no companies wanted to pay for advertising on these boards located in run-down subway stations in unsafe neighbourhoods, Haring seized the opportunity, making use of this exhibition and presentation space seen as worthless and thus ignored by the brands of a free-market economy.⁴ The subway was a place where he could explore and produce his creativity. While working as a subway painter, he used symbols and images as tags to identify his work, and these in turn became iconic and widespread: a radiant baby, barking dogs, TVs, UFOs, hearts, crosses, dollar signs, and Disney characters such as Cruella de Vil and Mickey Mouse. This last is a recurring figure in Haring’s art. To him, Mickey is “ultimately a symbol of America more than anything else.”⁵ Through all these elements, proper to American society, the public could identify with and recognise themselves in Keith Haring’s work.

Inspired by Pop art and urban graffiti, Haring depicted Mickey not only in the subways and streets of New York, but also in various drawings and even on wood panels such as the 1982 diptych in the Nicola Erni Collection. The subtle white acrylic on the entire surface of both wooden boards with a touch of pink and blue colour underneath give this heavy and rough monumental work a feeling of light- and brightness. On the left panel, apart from a television screen with Mickey Mouse depicted inside, we find the image of a radiant baby stuck as if it were a light bulb on top of the television box. The radiant baby is one of Haring’s most important creations, a symbol of a crawling infant representing youthful innocence, purity and goodness.⁶ On the right board one of Keith Haring’s typical energetic figures is painted, his head stuck in a screen filled with further iconic symbols, characters often representing handymen such as carpenters and painters. The marks of hinges on the upper edge of the work are reminiscent of a previous mount that Keith Haring may well have once used. In this untitled diptych, the juxtaposition of the cartoon figure Mickey Mouse against some of Haring’s typical characters reflects the trajectory of the artist’s life. As a child he aspired to become a cartoonist, and he finally ended up being one of the most popular Pop and graffiti artists of the twentieth century.

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1 Mickey Mouse x Keith Haring, Uniqlo (website), <https://www.uniqlo.com/eu/en/content/IDkeith-haring3631.html> (accessed 30 June 2022).
 2 “Keith Haring”, Singulart (website), <https://www.singulart.com/en/collection/inspired-by-keith-haring-1391> (accessed 30 June 2022).
 3 “Disney Celebrates the History of Mickey Mouse and Iconic Pop Artist Keith Haring”, *Businesswire* (website), 16 December 2020, <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20201216005344/en/Disney-Celebrates-the-History-of-Mickey-Mouse-and-Iconic-Pop-Artist-Keith-Haring-with-New-Product-Collaborations-Highlighting-Some-of-the-Artist%E2%80%99s-Most-Renowned-Work> (accessed 30 June 2022).

4 Glenn O’Brien, “Basquiat and the New York Scene 1978–1982”, in *Basquiat*, ed. Dieter Buchhart and Sam Keller (exhib. cat., Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel), Ostfildern 2010, p. viii.
 5 Mickey Mouse x Keith Haring, Uniqlo (website), <https://www.uniqlo.com/eu/en/content/IDkeith-haring3631.html> (accessed 30 June 2022).
 6 Kitty Jackson, “The Symbolism of The Baby in Keith Haring’s Work”, *ArtDependence*, 13 December 2019, <https://www.artdependence.com/articles/the-symbolism-of-the-baby-in-keith-haring-s-work/> (accessed 30 June 2022).



Keith Haring

The Mickey Mouse of Graffiti Art

Keith Haring
Untitled, 1982
Acrylic on wood, diptych
310 x 212 cm each