

Jean-Michel Basquiat

Versus Medici



- Jean-Michel Basquiat
- Versus Medici
- 1982
- Acrylic, oil stick and paper collage on three joined canvases
- 214 cm x 137.8 cm (84 1/4" x 54 1/4")
- Signed, titled and dated OCT. 1982 on the reverse

### Provenance

- Larry Gagosian Gallery, New York
- Stéphane Janssen (acquired from the above in October 1982)
- Acquired by the present owner from the above in 1990

### Literature

- Richard D. Marshall and Jean-Louis Prat, Jean-Michel Basquiat, 2nd Ed., Vol. 2, Paris 1996, pp. 92-93, illustrated in colour
- Richard D. Marshall and Jean-Louis Prat, Jean-Michel Basquiat, 3rd Ed., Vol. I, Paris 2000, p. 149, illustrated in colour
- Exh. Cat., Monaco, Grimaldi Forum, New York New York: Fifty Years of Architecture, Cinema, Performance, Photography and Video, 2006, p. 452, illustrated in colour, and p. 536 (text)
- Jordana Moore Saggese, Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art, Berkeley 2014, p. 35 (text)

### Exhibition History

- Paris, Fondation Dina Vierny-Musée Maillol, Jean-Michel Basquiat: Histoire d'une oeuvre (The Work of a Lifetime), June - October 2003, pp. 48-49, illustrated in colour
- Museo d'Arte Moderna della Città di Lugano, Jean-Michel Basquiat, March - June 2005, p. 25, no. 6, illustrated in colour, and p. 155, illustrated
- Milan, Fondazione La Triennale di Milano, The Jean-Michel Basquiat Show, September 2006 - January 2007, p. 243, no. 111, illustrated in colour
- Bonn, Art and Exhibition Hall, Ménage à trois: Warhol, Basquiat, Clemente, February - May 2012, p. 187, no. 6, illustrated in colour, and p. 249 (text)
- Venice, Palazzo Fortuny, Intuition, May - November 2017, p. 369, illustrated
- Tokyo, Mori Arts Center Gallery, Jean-Michel Basquiat: Made in Japan, September - November 2019, p. 59, illustrated in colour

### Brief Essay

*“Versus Medici’ is Basquiat’s ultimate reckoning with art history – an extraordinary work executed when Basquiat was only 22 years old in defiance against the artistic establishment.”*

An extraordinary work executed in 1982, when the artist was just 22 years old, Jean-Michel Basquiat’s *Versus Medici* will star in the Contemporary Art Evening Auction in New York on 12 May, where it will be offered with an estimate of \$35–50 million. *Versus Medici* is among Basquiat’s most forceful visual challenges to the Western art establishment, in which the young artist boldly crowns himself successor to the artistic throne as established by the masters of the Italian Renaissance.

The artwork has remained in the same distinguished private collection since 1990; it was previously in the collection of Stephane Janssen, an early champion of Basquiat who acquired it from Larry Gagosian on a visit to Basquiat's studio in 1982. *Versus Medici* is an early, prime masterwork from the artist. Basquiat completed the work in 1982, the same year as the record-breaking *Untitled*, which sold at Sotheby's in 2018 for \$110.5 million, and shortly after his breakthrough inclusions in the Times Square Show in 1980 and New York New Wave at PS1 in 1981.

Featuring the artist's signature visual language, *Versus Medici* confronts a key cornerstone of Western art history, the Italian Renaissance, a movement associated with achievement and enlightenment, as defined by the works of Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Botticelli and others. Although painted at the inception of Basquiat's career, the artist ambitiously wages war with the history of art and not only asserts his own place within this history, but also crowns himself a successor to these Renaissance masters.

Basquiat was well-versed across art history, and a range of influences can be seen throughout the work – namely the anatomical complexity of early Leonardo drawings and the triptych format of the painting's construction. Executed on three joined canvases, even the structure of *Versus Medici* draws upon Basquiat's extraordinary familiarity with centuries of tradition by echoing the time-honored format of the tripartite altarpiece, and references the religious and political power that were associated with them. In *Versus Medici*, Basquiat takes command of the Western art narrative, and crowns himself, the son of immigrants from Haiti and Puerto Rico, as artistic royalty, taking on the old masters and positioning himself as the almighty successor to centuries of artistic genius.

With great intensity and visual force, and acutely aware of the exclusion of artists based on race from institutional and critical consideration, Basquiat used his position at the periphery of the art establishment to forge a new and highly referential visual language. Having voraciously visited the Brooklyn Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Basquiat recognized a glaring absence of Black representation within the art historical canon. In the present work, Basquiat positions himself as the heroic opponent to European history's greatest dynasty of patronage and influence, confronting the canon they helped to shape by presenting his own potent masterwork. In its incendiary title, *Versus Medici* testifies to Basquiat's ultimate aim of establishing a place for himself within the canon – and in doing so, he boldly declares his arrival as a brilliant, young artist into a new canon that would be forever transformed by his paintings.

Ever the iconographic alchemist, here Basquiat absorbs the legacy of Western art history and reshapes it to his own purposes. Through this painting, the Medici become a stand-in for the power systems of the art world at large, as figureheads within for a powerful system of art patronage that was echoed in the power structures of Basquiat's own art world in 1980s New York. Recognizing that for centuries, every art historical movement was legitimated by systems of exclusion, *Versus Medici* presents a searing and heroic figure to oppose that narrative – while simultaneously aligning the young Basquiat as radical successor in the new pantheon of art history.

This powerful stance is eloquently captured in Basquiat's use of the Greek term "Aopkehks," which could refer to the Hellenization of the Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep, a prominent and idealized king, or to the practice of apotheosis, the elevation of the human to the realms of the divine. In either interpretation, Basquiat positions his ferocious figure as a vessel of divine will. Read alongside the symbol of the three-pointed crown – one of Basquiat's defining and most recognizable motifs – there is little doubt the figure in the painting is depicted as an avenging hero of art history.



### Notes

Urgent, arresting, and replete with potent symbolism, *Versus Medici* is a magnificent crystallization of the tremendous graphic force and intricate iconography that have come to define Jean-Michel Basquiat's revolutionary career. Executed in the crucial year of 1982, when Basquiat was only 22 years old, the present work is among Basquiat's most emphatic visual challenges to the hegemony of the Western canon.

Within the searing figure of the present work, the young artist boldly crowns himself as both successor to and worthy adversary of the artistic legacy of the masters of the Italian Renaissance. Having remained in the same distinguished private collection for over 30 years, *Versus Medici* is an exceptional and rare example of the artist's most celebrated motif: the single, warrior-like figure. Pulsing with the energy of his unique and coveted pictorial lexicon, *Versus Medici* is positioned in the top tier of Basquiat's immensely impactful cycle of grand-scale male figures from 1981 and 1982, and is undoubtedly one of the most striking and dramatic works of that period.

Through a radical approach to figuration borne of his fascination with anatomy, Basquiat breaks down the dichotomy between the external and internal, revealing the cacophonous innermost aspects of psychic life with breathtaking vitality. Befitting its importance, the work has been included in several major exhibitions worldwide, including *Intuition* at the Palazzo Fortuny during the 2017 Venice Biennale, and most recently, *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Made in Japan*, the artist's first comprehensive survey exhibition in Japan. Spectacularly forged in an array of oilstick, acrylic, and paper collage, this painting brings the haptic

urgency of Basquiat's art to life. It is challenging, dissonant, and alluring, as explosive in its execution as it is erudite in its conception.

Though maintaining the spontaneity of graffiti in its paroxysmal execution, by the time this work was created in 1982, Basquiat's had fully transitioned from street to studio. Completed shortly after his breakthrough exhibition at PS1 in 1981, New York New Wave, this work was executed once Basquiat had attained the crucial support of Annina Nosei and was able to focus his efforts on monumental canvas painting.

Testifying to the significance of the present work, *Versus Medici* was previously in the collection of esteemed Belgian collector Stéphane Janssen, who was an early champion of Basquiat and acquired it following a visit to Basquiat's studio shortly after it was painted. Originally one of several monumental standing Black figure paintings that formed the core of Janssen's storied collection, *Versus Medici* stands out as one of Basquiat's most assured early masterworks, and was acquired by the present owners in 1990, where it has remained ever since.

At once intensely autobiographical and yet deeply rooted in a wider knowledge and appreciation of the past, Basquiat's work was shaped by his insatiable curiosity and determination to command his own space within the art historical canon. Born to a Haitian father and Puerto Rican mother, the artist was acutely aware of the exclusion of artists based on race from institutional and critical consideration, and often expressed feelings of racialized otherness in a white-dominated art world. With *Versus Medici*, Basquiat confronts a key cornerstone of Western art history: the Italian Renaissance, a period characterized by great achievements in painting, architecture, philosophy, and culture, nowhere more centralized than in Florence under the patronage and rule of the House of Medici.

The movement represents a bastion of art history that through its inherent power structure is exclusionary of the Black body and Black creator; it is an archetypally white and Eurocentric ideal of visual culture which still serves as a model for the visual arts. Ever the iconographic alchemist, here Basquiat absorbs the legacy of Western art history and reshapes it to his own purposes. Within the present work, the Medici become a stand-in for the power systems of the art world at large, as figureheads for a powerful system of art patronage that was echoed in the power structures of Basquiat's own art world in 1980s New York. *Versus Medici* presents a searing and heroic figure to oppose that narrative: a monumental Black figure, seven feet in height, stands triumphant as warrior, champion, and king, ordained with the famous three-pointed crown. The anatomical detail of the figure and the intricacy of the body echo the work of Italian virtuosos like Leonardo and Michelangelo, while the radical reimagining clearly stages a battle against the power of their influence.

Executed on three joined canvases, the very structure of *Versus Medici* draws upon Basquiat's extraordinary familiarity with centuries of tradition by echoing the time-honored format of the tripartite altarpiece, and references the religious and political powers that were associated with them. This gladiator, Basquiat asserts the strength of his African American culture and identity, ambitiously demanding a reckoning with the history of art, and not only claims his own place within this history, but crowns himself as almighty successor to the Renaissance masters.

Emblematic of this struggle between the Black artist and the dominant white-centric power structure, Basquiat utilizes iconography borrowed from the boxing ring. Having recognized from an early age the absence of Blackness from many realms including the arts, he sought heroes in the world of athletics, where he saw Black figures could be successful and celebrated. Boxing became one of his favorite arenas, and stars like Cassius Clay, Jack Johnson, and Joe Lewis feature in numerous paintings, with gloves abstracted into blunt roundels and arms thrust triumphantly in the air. Indeed, even the defiant posture of the raised fist as seen in *Versus Medici* had huge significance in this context.

It is wholly redolent of the Black Power salute, first made famous in the sporting arena by Juan Carlos and Tommie Smith, who protested racial oppression at the Mexico City Olympic Games by raising their fists in defiance of the U.S. National Anthem. In the present work, Basquiat employs the language of the fight – “versus” – and the victorious raised fist to convey the war against repression and racism, his central figure conquering the invisible oppressor within the space of the painting. In the lower register of the painting, the subject’s body is rendered in an abstracted V-shaped formation, alluding to the way in which mummified Pharaonic kings are typically depicted.

This powerful stance is eloquently captured in Basquiat’s repeated calligraphic scrawl of the word “Aopkehsks,” which could refer to the Hellenization of the Egyptian pharaoh Akenhaten, a prominent and idealized king, or to apotheosis, the elevation of the human to the realms of the divine which was widely represented in Renaissance painting. As art historian Robert Farris Thompson has described, “Jean-Michel was turning into art notes taken during a massive and ongoing self-education, not unlike the famous ‘homemade education’ Malcolm X pursued... Basquiat thrilled to the pleasures of the world, and thrilled to the pleasures of the image, and he built a brilliant career upon the two.” (Robert Farris Thomson, “Three Works By Basquiat,” in: *Exh. Cat., New Orleans, Ogden Museum of Southern Art, Basquiat and the Bayou*, 2014, pp. 31-32).

However the viewer chooses to interpret these signs and symbols, Basquiat positions his ferocious figure as a vessel of divine will. Read alongside the symbol of the three-pointed crown – one of Basquiat’s defining and most recognizable motifs – there is little doubt the figure in the painting is depicted as an avenging hero of art history. With these myriad references to ancient depictions of power, Basquiat again aligns himself with almighty royalty, standing defiant against a system that would marginalize him. Further underlining Basquiat’s view of his own position as an outsider in the dominant art world is his revolutionary redefining of figuration.

The son of immigrants and the African diaspora, he spent his tragically short career wrestling with a way to convey his own ancestry and the space of Black Atlantic modernity, which was subjected and subjugated by a Western Eurocentric discourse. It is in works like *Versus Medici* that he is most successful; his remarkable absorption and appropriation of references from history, pop culture, religion, science, folk art and more produce an iconographic language that moves beyond the pictorial values of Western representation. Scholar Marc Mayer explains: “Basquiat speaks articulately while dodging the full impact of clarity like a matador...[his] relationship to the meaning of his references and quotations is less to the point than is his understanding of the pictorial use value of that meaning.” (Marc

Mayer, "Basquiat In History," in: Exh. Cat., New York, Brooklyn Museum (and traveling), Jean-Michel Basquiat, 2005, p. 50).

While some external features are described, such as the insinuation of dreaded hair, in other places the form is viewed as if through X-ray, with outlines of internal organs or sinews evoking a favored tome from the artist's childhood, Gray's Anatomy. These simultaneous views of external body and internal makeup offer a potent metaphor for the Black experience, eliding the distinction between how a body is perceived and the reality of the individual inhabiting it.

By presenting his figure in this way, Basquiat is boldly claiming a new space for the Black body within the white Western artistic tradition. Versus Medici exemplifies the artist's magnificently heroic presentation of the isolated human form, and in this vein can be seen to advance a venerable tradition epitomized by Pablo Picasso's famed portraits and Willem de Kooning's corporeally provocative series of Women. Working with an almost vertiginous speed, the tactile qualities of his paintwork – at times scrawled, at others dripped, smudged, or seemingly sprayed – retain and exalt the vital immediacy of graffiti art. Exemplifying the artist's singular talent as a master colorist, the surface is ignited in a blaze of undiluted yellow, red, pink and blue, which clash and effervesce with the bravura of a firework display.

Considering Basquiat's heady palette, curator Marc Mayer notes, "With direct and theatrically ham-fisted brushwork, he uses unmixed color structurally, like a seasoned abstractionist, but in the service of a figurative and narrative agenda. Basquiat deployed his color architecturally, at times like so much tinted mortar to bind a composition, at other times like opaque plaster to embody it. Color holds his pictures together, and through it they command a room" (Marc Mayer, *ibid.*, p. 46). Basquiat's paintings are rich in art historical allusion, and the combustive colors and expressive style employed in the present work are greatly indebted to de Kooning's revolutionary use of color and abstracted facture.

Further, the figure's face, mask-like in its construction, reveals emaciated, scarified eyes and clenched jaw, hinting at the artist's Haitian heritage and a spiritual, Shaman-like figure. Unequivocally inspired by the Cubism of his great hero Picasso, the figure also looks back to the Spanish master's own inspiration drawn from African art, itself a validation of Basquiat's own cultural heritage. In particular, Basquiat's figure, with the haptic emphasis on the eyes and teeth, bears striking similarities to African tribal sculptures.

For Picasso, primitivism was an antidote to the conservatism of the academies; similarly, Basquiat finds in his own recourse to primitivism a corrective to the chaste intellectual coolness of late modernism and a powerful mode of expressing overtly contemporary angst. With references to these two modern masters, Basquiat again underlines his own position as rightful heir to their artistic throne. By absorbing and deploying a multitude of references to the greatest creative geniuses of the past—from Leonardo to Picasso, Michelangelo to de Kooning—Basquiat declares himself the ultimate successor not only to the legacy of the Renaissance, but to all of art history. And yet, by appropriating the hallmarks of those masters into his own unique language and style, he maintains his stance in opposition to the exclusionary systems and demands of that same tradition.

He engages without ever ceding to the demands of the institution; as described by scholar Robert Farris Thompson, “There was a kind of deliberate roughness to his paintings, as if to say: I remain a warrior of the streets; behold the world as seen through vernacular eyes.” (Robert Farris Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32) To issue such a challenge to centuries of historic tradition – at only 22 years old—is extraordinary, yet the passionate and assertive spirit of *Versus Medici* stands as irrefutable testament to his triumphant success. Nearly 40 years later, there can be no doubt that Basquiat stands amongst the ultimate modern masters: a Leonardo da Vinci for the contemporary age. Standing before *Versus Medici*, curator and critic Glenn O’Brien’s succinct summation of Basquiat’s unique brilliance is more potent than ever: “He was the once-in-a-lifetime real deal: artist as prophet.” (Glenn O’Brien, “Greatest Hits,” in: *Exh. Cat.*, Art Gallery of Ontario, *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now’s The Time*, 2015, p. 18).