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Head START

Denmark's most-popular contemporary gallery goes inside the mind of Jean-Michel Basquiat, the artist who brought graffiti to the art world

Words: MAÏA MORGENSZTERN

One of the most revered artists of the 20th century, Jean-Michel Basquiat created a large body of work that offers an electrifying fusion of graffiti and street energy. His practice is also filled with raw symbolism and social commentary that have been the subject of many debates over the past decades. In 1982, when prompted to describe how he would start a work, the 22-year-old replied: 'I suppose I would start with a head.' This motif is the focus of a new exhibition at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, just north of Copenhagen.



Above: A major solo presentation of paper works by artist Jean-Michel Basquiat comes to Copenhagen

Set on Denmark's northeastern coast, Louisiana has a reputation for showing lesser-known sides to contemporary artists, including championing David Hockney's iPad sketches 15 years ago. While you might have grown used to seeing Basquiat's unique aesthetic in the public sphere — from mugs and tea towels to collaborations on Nike footwear and Uniqlo T-shirts — the 45 works on paper exhibited here do not fit his usual language. Created between 1981 and 1983, the heads seem to be floating on their own, devoid of identity. The written words and other symbols Basquiat would often use to reference power, jazz and African American

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culture are also notably absent. So how do they fit into his practice?

'These "visions" seem to be containers of emotions,' says Anders Kold, the curator of the Basquiat exhibition. 'They show a lesser-known side of Basquiat's practice, while highlighting the scope of his oeuvre. Ultimately, the show is about asking questions rather than giving answers.'

It is often said that Andy Warhol acted as a springboard for young artists, including Basquiat, who would get their 15 minutes of fame while partying hard at the Factory. But when Basquiat began collaborating with the master of Pop Art in 1984, he was already a star. Without their recognisable symbols, the works on display force us to look beyond the brand to revisit his legacy. 'Visitors might come for the icon and leave with a deeper understanding of the artist,' Kold says.

Headstrong – Basquiat on Paper is at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art from 30 January – 17 May 2026, louisiana.dk