



Jean-Michel Basquiat's paintings of boxers are among his most personally and politically charged subjects. In the figure of the Black boxer, Basquiat found an alluring icon of self-made power, a hero for the modern era, an athletic champion who manages to triumph in a world where the odds were firmly stacked against him in the form of deep-seated racial prejudices. This was a heroic figure that Basquiat deeply identified with, as a young man possessed of powerful artistic talent, of Haitian and Puerto Rican heritage, going up against the predominantly white world of the art establishment.

As Basquiat famously declared in a 1983 interview, he defined the subject of his art as "Royalty, heroism and the streets" (quoted in H. Geldzahler, "Art: From the Subways to Soho, Jean-Michel Basquiat," Interview, January 1983). The human figure quickly emerged as the central theme in Basquiat's work, which he would use as a vehicle for melding autobiography with references to popular culture and Black history.

<https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/jean-michel-basquiat-1960-1988-untitled-boxer-5147473-details.aspx>

JOE LOUIS BARROW (1914-1981)



St. Joe Louis Surrounded by Snakes, 1981



Joe Louis Barrow was an American professional boxer who competed from 1934 to 1951. He reigned as the world heavyweight champion from 1937 to 1949, and is considered to be one of the greatest heavyweight boxers of all time.

Louis' cultural impact was felt well outside the ring. He is widely regarded as the first person of African American descent to achieve the status of a nationwide hero within the United States, and was also a focal point of anti-Nazi sentiment leading up to and during World War II.

"Might be a lot wrong with America but nothing Hitler can fix," he said, as he fought exhibition matches to raise money for the Armed Services and boost morale for the troops. Historian Jeffrey Sammons says, "Joe Louis set a stunning example through his acts of patriotism, and even the South responded appreciatively."

SUGAR RAY ROBINSON (1921-1989)



Untitled (Sugar Ray Robinson), 1982

Sugar Ray Robinson was an American professional boxer who competed from 1940 to 1965. He is considered by many to have been the best fighter in history and a man whose every move in and out of the ring showed what Black pride and power meant.

In 1943, Robinson was inducted to the United States Army, where he served with Joe Louis. The pair went on tours where they performed exhibition bouts in front of US Army troops.

Describe what you see in Basquiat's paintings *St. Joe Louis Surrounded by Snakes* and *Untitled (Sugar Ray Robinson)*.

What story does each painting tell?

How does Basquiat's use of a halo and a crown play a role in your interpretation of these paintings?

BEFORE YOU BEGIN...

- Use the template below to make a list of people who you admire and write down a few reasons why these people are important to you.
- What are some ways in which Basquiat may have identified with the figures he chose to paint? Do you identify with the people on your list? Why or why not?
- What words and/or symbols could be used to express the accomplishments of the people you wrote down?

People I admire:

Why I admire them:

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ACTIVITY

Create your own painting or drawing that represents a person that you look up to. Think about what you would like your artwork to communicate and why that message is important to you. Incorporate different forms, symbols, and words that embody your subject and tell their story, as Basquiat used crowns and halos in his depictions of people who he thought of as heroes.