



# A Free Course on the History of Western Art

Dr Laurence Shafe [www.shafe.uk](http://www.shafe.uk)

This presentation uses AI tools: script drafted with Claude (Anthropic) and voice cloned with ElevenLabs. The art-historical content and editorial judgement remain my own.

- Welcome to my History of Western Art. As I am coming to the end of my talks I have started experimenting with AI in order to find a way of continuing to give the talks without my presence. In this talk, except for the first two slides and the penultimate slide I use a clone of my voice created by ElevenLabs.

#### GENERAL REFERENCES AND COPYRIGHT

- My talks and notes are produced with the assistance of AI systems such as Claude, Perplexity, ChatGPT, Google Gemini and Microsoft CoPilot.
- They are also based on information found on public websites such as Wikipedia, Tate, National Gallery, Louvre, The Met, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Khan Academy and the Art Story.
- If they use information from specific books, websites or articles these are referenced at the beginning of each talk and in the 'References' section of the relevant page. The talks that are inspired by an exhibition may use the booklets and books associated with the exhibition as a source of information.
- Where possible images and information are taken from Wikipedia under an [Attribution-Share Alike Creative Commons License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).
- If I have forgotten to reference your work then please let me know and I will add a reference or delete the information.

## 60-13 NEO-EXPRESSIONISM

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

WWW.SHAFE.UK

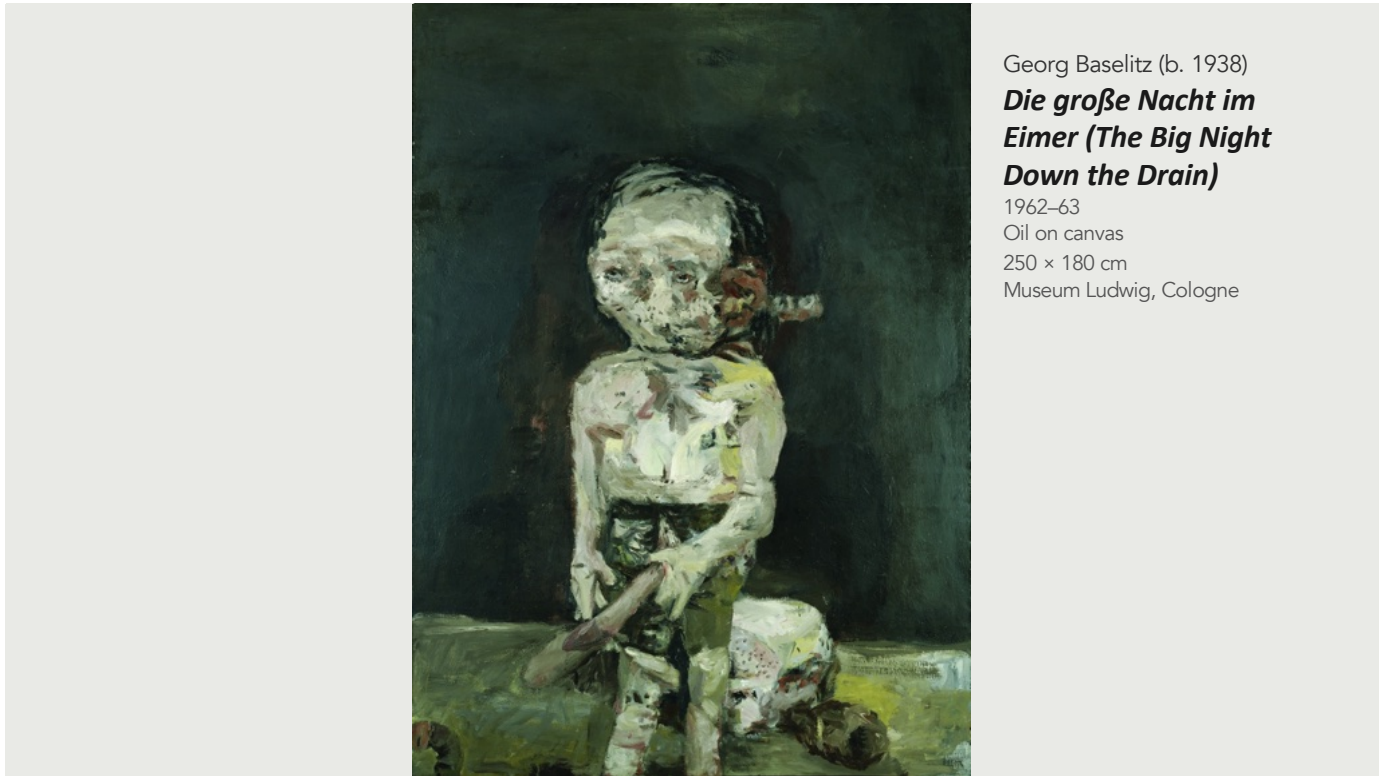


Georg Baselitz  
*Die große Nacht  
im Eimer (The Big  
Night Down the  
Drain)*  
1962–63



- This is Section 60 on recent art movements. and this talk is about **Neo-Expressionism**. It emerged in the late 1970s as a powerful reaction against the cold intellectualism of Conceptual art and Minimalism. It was intensely subjective and used the tactile power of the canvas with vivid colours and raw emotions. Artists went back to using the power of figurative painting, and they used thick, textured brushwork and unconventional materials. It was an international movement that captured the chaotic reality of the late twentieth century with its energetic, mythic, and deeply personal images.

### REFERENCES



Georg Baselitz (b. 1938)

***Die große Nacht im Eimer (The Big Night Down the Drain)***

1962–63

Oil on canvas

250 × 180 cm

Museum Ludwig, Cologne

Georg Baselitz (b. 1938), *Die große Nacht im Eimer (The Big Night Down the Drain)*, 1962–63, 250 × 180 cm, Museum Ludwig, Cologne

This painting detonated the birth of **Neo-Expressionism**. Shown at **Galerie Werner & Katz** in West Berlin in October 1963, it depicts a grotesquely distorted figure clutching an oversized phallus against a murky dark ground. The painting was seized by the public prosecutor for obscenity, along with a companion piece, *Der nackte Mann*. Criminal proceedings dragged on until 1965, when both works were returned. The scandal made Baselitz famous overnight.

Critics were divided. Some saw deliberate provocation; others recognised a serious confrontation with Germany's post-war trauma. The figure's **Hitler-youth shorts** and ambiguous haircut suggested a nation's psychosexual dysfunction. Baselitz himself described the erect organ as "**an aggressive act or shock.**" The art historian **Sabine Schütz** later wrote that the painting revealed "a morbid curiosity about feverful openings."

Born **Hans-Georg Kern** in Saxony, Baselitz had been expelled from East Berlin's art school in 1957 for "sociopolitical immaturity." He moved to West Berlin and adopted his hometown's name as his pseudonym. Alongside **Eugen Schönebeck**, he wrote the **Pandemonic Manifestos** (1960–62), raging against the sterility of post-war German art. Neo-Expressionism was, at its core, a return to the raw, figurative, emotionally violent painting that Minimalism and Conceptualism had banished.

The movement would explode internationally across the late 1970s and 1980s, known as **Neue Wilden** in Germany, **Transavanguardia** in Italy, and **Figuration Libre** in France. It dominated galleries and auction rooms, became synonymous with Reagan-era excess, and

sparked furious debate about whether painting was redemption or commodity. This is the story of that wild ride.

### **Pronunciation Guide**

Georg Baselitz – GAY-org BAH-zuh-litz

Die große Nacht im Eimer – dee GROH-suh NAKHT im EYE-mer

Neue Wilden – NOY-uh VIL-den

Transavanguardia – trans-ah-van-GWAR-dee-ah

Figuration Libre – fee-goo-rah-SYON LEE-bruh

### **References**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die\\_gro%C3%9Fe\\_Nacht\\_im\\_Eimer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_gro%C3%9Fe_Nacht_im_Eimer)

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-expressionism>

<https://www.theartstory.org/movement/neo-expressionism/>

<https://gagosian.com/artists/georg-baselitz/>

<https://postwar.hausderkunst.de/artworks-artists/artworks/grosse-nacht-im-eimer>



Philip Guston (1913–1980)  
***Painting, Smoking, Eating***  
1973  
Oil on canvas  
196.8 × 203.2 cm  
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

Philip Guston (1913–1980), *Painting, Smoking, Eating*, 1973, Oil on canvas, 196.8 × 203.2 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

**Philip Guston** is the godfather nobody expected. A star of Abstract Expressionism, he stunned the art world in 1970 by abandoning abstraction for crude, cartoonish figurative painting. *Painting, Smoking, Eating* is the manifesto of that betrayal. A bloated, one-eyed head lies in bed, smoking, with a plate of chips balanced on its chest. Shoes pile up. A bare light bulb glows. Everything is rendered in Guston's signature palette of queasy pinks, reds, and dirty whites.

When Guston showed his new figurative work at **Marlborough Gallery** in 1970, the response was savage. His old friend **Hilton Kramer** of *The New York Times* called it "a mandarin pretending to be a stumblebum." Guston was devastated but defiant. He told friends: "**I got sick and tired of all that purity. I wanted to tell stories.**"

This painting crystallises the artist's late-life obsession with the ordinary, even squalid, rituals of daily existence. Guston had been haunted by the **Vietnam War** and the **Ku Klux Klan** (whose hooded figures recur obsessively in his late work). Born **Phillip Goldstein** to Jewish-Ukrainian immigrants in Montreal, he changed his name to escape anti-Semitism. His father had hanged himself when Guston was ten. Trauma ran deep.

Guston's return to figuration was prophetic. Within a decade, a generation of younger painters—**Schnabel, Basquiat, Baselitz**—would storm the galleries with raw, messy, emotionally charged painting. Guston died of a heart attack in 1980, just as Neo-Expressionism was exploding. He never saw his vindication, but every Neo-Expressionist owes him a debt. The National Gallery of Art's 2020 retrospective finally confirmed his

status as one of the century's most influential painters.

### **Pronunciation Guide**

Philip Guston – FIL-ip GUS-ton

Stedelijk – STAY-duh-lick

### **References**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip\\_Guston](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Guston)

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/philip-guston-1222>

<https://www.moma.org/artists/2430>

<https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2023/philip-guston-now.html>

<https://thewhitepube.co.uk/texts/2024/philip-guston/>



A.R. Penck (1939–2017)

***Standart***

1971

Synthetic resin on canvas

290 × 290 cm

Museum Ludwig, Cologne

A.R. Penck (1939–2017), *Standart*, 1971, Synthetic resin on canvas, 290 × 290 cm, Museum Ludwig, Cologne

**A.R. Penck** invented his own visual language. His *Standart* paintings—the word fuses "standard" and "art"—reduce the human figure to stick-like pictographs that recall cave paintings, traffic signs, and binary code. This monumental canvas teems with black figures against a vivid ground, locked in gestures of confrontation, communication, and struggle. It looks ancient and futuristic simultaneously.

Born **Ralf Winkler** in Dresden, Penck worked in secret behind the **Iron Curtain**. East German authorities confiscated his paintings and rejected his applications to join the official artists' union. He adopted his pseudonym—after the geologist **Albrecht Penck**—to dodge the Stasi. His friend **Georg Baselitz** helped smuggle canvases to Cologne, where dealer **Michael Werner** gave him his first Western exhibition in 1968.

Penck's art drew on **cybernetics**, **information theory**, and a childhood love of science fiction. His stick figures were not primitive decorations but attempts to create a universal pictorial system—a visual Esperanto that could communicate across ideological divides. Art historian **Jürgen Schweinebraden** described his world as "populated by magical elements, animal symbols, mythical creatures with evocative gestures."

In 1980, Penck was forcibly expelled from East Germany. He settled in Cologne, then London, eventually becoming professor of painting at **Düsseldorf Academy**. He appeared in the landmark exhibitions *Zeitgeist* (Berlin, 1982) and *New Art* (Tate, 1983) that cemented Neo-Expressionism's international reach. He was also a committed jazz drummer—his paintings share jazz's improvised rhythmic energy.

## **Pronunciation Guide**

A.R. Penck – AH-ER PENK

Ralf Winkler – RALF VINK-ler

Standart – SHTAN-dart

Zeitgeist – TSYTE-guyst

## **References**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A.\\_R.\\_Penck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._R._Penck)

<https://www.artnet.com/artists/ar-penck/>

<https://www.michaelwerner.com/artists/a-r-penck/biography>

<https://albertinum.skd.museum/en/exhibitions/ar-penck/>

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/n/neo-expressionism>



Jörg Immendorff (1945–2007)

***Café Deutschland I***

1978

Acrylic on canvas

282 × 330 cm

Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin

Jörg Immendorff (1945–2007), *Café Deutschland I*, 1978, Acrylic on canvas, 282 × 330 cm, Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin

*Café Deutschland I* is history painting for the Cold War. **Jörg Immendorff** set his epic drama inside a fictitious nightclub—part cabaret, part political theatre—loosely based on Düsseldorf's underground **Ratinger Hof** discotheque. Inside this seething space, figures from East and West Germany collide: politicians, artists, ideologues, and Immendorff himself, all tangled in the impossible geometry of a divided nation.

The painting was directly triggered by two events. First, Immendorff saw **Renato Guttuso's** monumental *Caffè Greco* at the 1976 Venice Biennale. Second, he met East German painter **A.R. Penck** and the two forged a bond across the Berlin Wall. Their solidarity—and the absurdity of their situation—became the series' engine. Critic **Siegfried Gohr** called it "the most ambitious cycle of political painting since Picasso's *Guernica*."

Immendorff had studied under **Joseph Beuys** at the Düsseldorf Academy from 1964. Beuys's belief that art must actively engage with politics transformed the young painter. In 1966, Immendorff created a canvas declaring that artists should "**stop painting**"—then spent the next decade on political actions and protest art. The *Café Deutschland* series marked his spectacular return to the canvas, armed with a new political urgency.

The series eventually ran to hundreds of paintings spanning nearly a decade. Each is densely packed with symbols: the Brandenburg Gate, eagles, hammers, ice, fire. Immendorff was diagnosed with **ALS** in 1998 and continued painting with assistants strapping brushes to his wrists. He was awarded the **Order of Merit of the Federal**

**Republic of Germany** the same year. He died in Düsseldorf in 2007, leaving the most politically committed body of work in the Neo-Expressionist canon.

### **Pronunciation Guide**

Jörg Immendorff – YERG IM-en-dorf

Café Deutschland – kah-FAY DOYTCH-lahnt

Ratinger Hof – RAH-ting-er HOHF

Renato Guttuso – reh-NAH-toh goo-TOO-zoh

Joseph Beuys – YOH-zef BOYSS

### **References**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%B6rg\\_Immendorff](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%B6rg_Immendorff)

<https://www.michaelwerner.com/exhibitions/jorg-immendorff6>

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/96239>

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/484490>

<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/glossary-terms/neo-expressionism>



Sandro Chia (b. 1946)

***Water Bearer***

1981

Oil and pastel on canvas

206.5 × 170 cm

Tate, London

Sandro Chia (b. 1946), *Water Bearer*, 1981, Oil and pastel on canvas, 206.5 × 170 cm, Tate, London

Enter the **Italian Transavanguardia**. **Sandro Chia's** *Water Bearer* shows a massive, muscular figure striding forward carrying an enormous fish—red-tailed, vivid, absurd. The man is a pilgrim of painting itself, caught mid-journey on some unidentified mission. Chia's palette is rich and saturated, his brushwork deliberately rough, his figures loaded with classical grandeur and ironic excess.

The Italian critic **Achille Bonito Oliva** coined the term **Transavanguardia** in 1979 to describe five Italian painters—Chia, **Francesco Clemente**, **Enzo Cucchi**, **Nicola De Maria**, and **Mimmo Paladino**—who were rejecting the austerity of **Arte Povera** and returning to expressionist figuration. Oliva described the movement as "a nomadic traversal through all the territories of art."

Chia studied at the **Accademia di Belle Arti** in Florence, graduating in 1969. After travelling to India and Turkey, he settled in Rome. The *Water Bearer* originated from his chance sighting of a classical sculpture of the same subject. As **Anne Seymour** wrote, his male figures "are searching for something—perhaps they are pilgrims of a sort, bound on some unidentified mission." Since the fish lives in water, the man is, by Chia's whimsical logic, a water bearer.

The Transavanguardia gained international attention at the **1980 Venice Biennale**, where Italian Neo-Expressionist works drew enormous crowds. Chia exhibited at the **Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1983)**, the **Metropolitan Museum, New York (1984)**, and the **National Gallery, Berlin (1984)**. The Tate purchased *Water Bearer* in 1982—an early

institutional endorsement of the new movement.

### **Pronunciation Guide**

Sandro Chia – SAN-droh KEE-ah

Transavanguardia – trans-ah-van-GWAR-dee-ah

Achille Bonito Oliva – ah-KEEL-leh bo-NEE-toh oh-LEE-vah

Arte Povera – AR-teh POH-veh-rah

Enzo Cucchi – EN-tsoh KOO-kee

### **References**

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/chia-water-bearer-t03469>

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/sandro-chia-899>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-expressionism>

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/art-movements/neo-expressionism>

<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/water-bearer-198181>



Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945)  
**Margarethe**  
1981  
Oil and straw on canvas  
280 × 380 cm  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945), *Margarethe*, 1981, Oil and straw on canvas, 280 × 380 cm, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Tendrils of golden straw erupt from a grey, scorched landscape. This is **Anselm Kiefer's** *Margarethe*—one of the most powerful confrontations with the Holocaust in post-war art. The straw represents the "golden hair" of **Margarethe**, the Aryan ideal invoked in **Paul Celan's** devastating 1948 poem *Todesfuge* (Death Fugue). Its companion piece, *Sulamith*, depicts the "ashen hair" of the Jewish beloved. Together they form a diptych about perpetrators and victims.

Kiefer was born in **Donaueschingen** in the final weeks of the Second World War. He studied law before turning to art, eventually working under **Joseph Beuys** in Düsseldorf. In 1969, he provoked outrage with photographic works showing himself performing the **Nazi salute** at various European locations—a deliberate provocation that forced Germany to confront its suppressed past. He was selected with Baselitz for the **1980 Venice Biennale's** West German Pavilion, sparking international controversy.

Celan's poem had been considered so sacred that many felt it should not be illustrated. Kiefer's daring was to make it physical—embedding actual straw into paint, creating surfaces that burn, rot, and decay. Critic **Mark Rosenthal** wrote that Kiefer's work "asks whether art can exist after Auschwitz—and answers with a defiant yes." The philosopher **Theodor Adorno** had declared writing poetry after Auschwitz "barbaric"—but later retracted after reading Celan.

Kiefer's unconventional materials—**straw, lead, ash, concrete, shellac, photographs**—give his work an almost geological weight. His canvases are landscapes of memory,

scarred and layered. In 1993, he moved to **Barjac** in southern France, building a vast studio-estate. In 2020, President **Emmanuel Macron** commissioned a permanent installation for the **Panthéon** in Paris—the first living artist so honoured.

### **Pronunciation Guide**

Anselm Kiefer – AHN-zelm KEE-fer

Margarethe – mar-gah-REH-tuh

Todesfuge – TOH-des-FOO-guh

Paul Celan – powl tseh-LAHN

Sulamith – ZOO-lah-mit

Donaueschingen – DOH-now-ESH-ing-en

### **References**

<https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/FC.595/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anselm\\_Kiefer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anselm_Kiefer)

[https://www.hallartfoundation.org/exhibition/anselm-kiefer\\_3/information](https://www.hallartfoundation.org/exhibition/anselm-kiefer_3/information)

<https://www.guggenheim-venice.it/en/art/works/thy-golden-hair-margarethe/>

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/n/neo-expressionism>



Julian Schnabel (b. 1951)

***The Patients and the Doctors***

1978

Oil, plates, and Bondo on wood  
243.8 × 274.3 × 30.5 cm

Collection of the Artist

Julian Schnabel (b. 1951), *The Patients and the Doctors*, 1978, Oil, plates, and Bondo on wood, 243.8 × 274.3 × 30.5 cm, Collection of the Artist

This is where American Neo-Expressionism began: with a box of smashed crockery. In 1978, **Julian Schnabel** travelled to Barcelona and was electrified by **Antoni Gaudí's** mosaic-encrusted architecture. Back in New York, he bought plates from the Salvation Army, shattered them on the floor, and glued the shards to wooden panels with **Bondo** (a car-body filler). He then painted over this fractured, three-dimensional surface. The result was revolutionary.

*The Patients and the Doctors* is a strange triptych: two side panels flanking a projecting centre, offset to the left so there is no focal centre. The viewer's eye slows down, forced to navigate the craggy surface of broken ceramic. Schnabel's first solo show at **Mary Boone Gallery** in 1979 caused a sensation. Critic **Robert Hughes** was withering: "Schnabel's work is to painting what Stallone's is to acting: a lurching display of oily pectorals."

Schnabel was born in Brooklyn and raised in **Brownsville, Texas**. He completed his BFA at the University of Houston in 1973, then entered the **Whitney Museum Independent Study Program**. He was brash, ambitious, and unapologetic. He wore pyjamas to gallery openings. He built a palazzo in the West Village. He became the poster boy for 1980s art-world excess—and he didn't care who knew it.

The plate paintings were not a gimmick. Schnabel continued making them for nearly five decades, up to 2025. The fractured ceramic creates a surface that shifts with light, making the paintings part sculpture, part mosaic, part ruin. The British critic **Brian Sewell**

accused him of stealing from Gaudí. Schnabel openly acknowledged the influence—and then transcended it. In 1984, he shocked the art world again by leaving **Mary Boone** for **Pace Gallery**. He later became an acclaimed film director, earning a **Cannes Best Director** award for *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (2007).

### **Pronunciation Guide**

Julian Schnabel – JOO-lee-un SHNAH-bel

Antoni Gaudí – an-TOH-nee gow-DEE

Bondo – BON-doh

### **References**

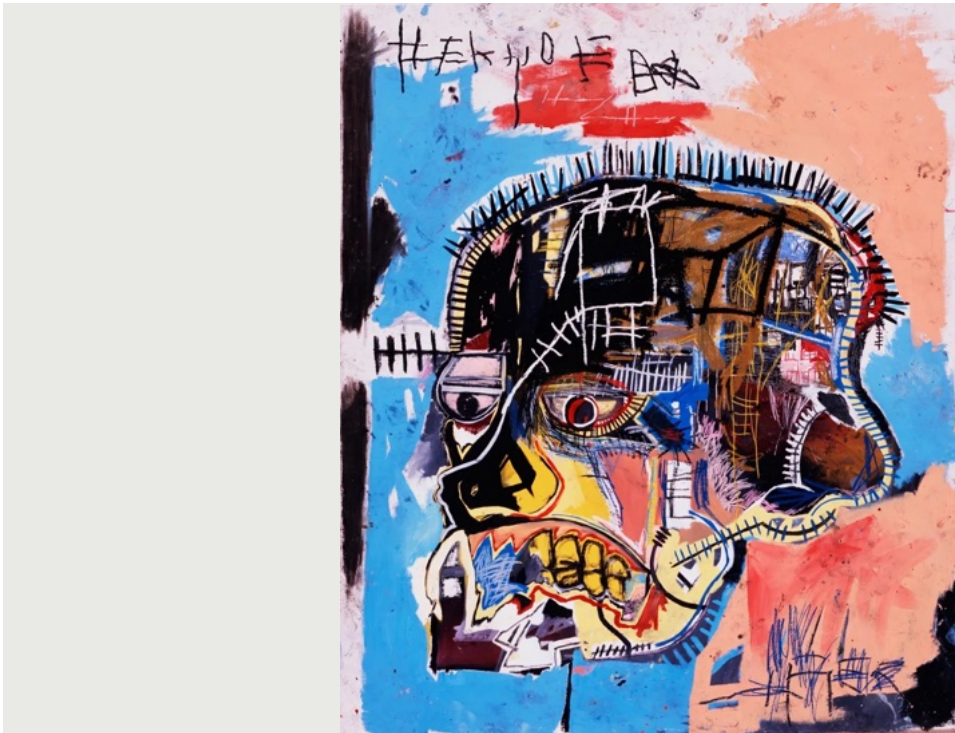
<https://www.julianschnabel.com/paintings/plate-paintings-items/the-patients-and-the-doctors/1000>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian\\_Schnabel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_Schnabel)

<https://www.mnuchingallery.com/exhibitions/julian-schnabel-plate-paintings-1978-2025>

<https://brooklynrail.org/2025/12/artseen/julian-schnabel-plate-paintings-1978-2025/>

<https://www.britannica.com/art/Neo-Expressionism>



Jean-Michel Basquiat  
(1960–1988)

**Untitled (Skull)**

1981

Acrylic and oil stick on canvas

205.7 × 175.9 cm

The Broad, Los Angeles

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988), *Untitled (Skull)*, 1981, Acrylic and oil stick on canvas, 205.7 × 175.9 cm, The Broad, Los Angeles

A skull that exists somewhere between life and death. The eyes are listless, the face sunken, the head lobotomised—yet wild colours and spirited marks suggest a surfeit of internal activity. **Jean-Michel Basquiat's** *Untitled (Skull)* is part self-portrait, part memento mori, part declaration of war. The 21-year-old artist laboured over this canvas for months—unusual for someone who typically finished paintings in frantic bursts of energy.

Basquiat emerged from New York's downtown scene as the graffiti artist **SAMO** ("Same Old Shit"), spraying cryptic aphorisms on the walls of SoHo and the East Village. His transition from street to gallery was meteoric. **Rene Ricard's** landmark 1981 *Artforum* essay "**The Radiant Child**" compared his work to "a hybrid of Cy Twombly's finesse and Jean Dubuffet's rawness raised on urban grit." Basquiat was crowned before he had barely begun.

Born in Brooklyn to a **Haitian father** and **Puerto Rican mother**, Basquiat was precociously gifted. At age seven, hit by a car, he spent weeks in hospital studying **Gray's Anatomy**—a gift from his mother that became a lifelong obsession with the body's interior. His skull motifs reference African masks, voodoo iconography, and the anatomical illustrations of his childhood. He once said: "**I want to make paintings that look as if they were made by a child.**"

This painting was shown at Basquiat's debut solo exhibition at **Annina Nosei Gallery** in March 1982—where he famously painted in the gallery's basement. It was acquired by collectors **Eli and Edythe Broad** in December 1982. A different 1982 skull painting by

Basquiat sold for a staggering **\$110.5 million** at Sotheby's in 2017—the highest price ever paid at auction for an American artist's work at that time. Basquiat died of a heroin overdose at 27.

### **Pronunciation Guide**

Jean-Michel Basquiat – zhon-mee-SHELL bask-ee-AH

SAMO – SAY-moh

Annina Nosei – ah-NEE-nah NOH-zay

### **References**

<https://www.thebroad.org/art/jean-michel-basquiat/untitled>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untitled\\_\(Skull\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untitled_(Skull))

<https://www.theartstory.org/movement/neo-expressionism/>

<https://www.moma.org/artists/370>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untitled\\_\(1982\\_Basquiat\\_skull\\_painting\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Untitled_(1982_Basquiat_skull_painting))



Georg Baselitz (b. 1938)  
**Adieu**  
1982  
Oil on canvas  
250 × 300 cm  
Tate, London

Georg Baselitz (b. 1938), *Adieu*, 1982, Oil on canvas, 250 × 300 cm, Tate, London

Two inverted figures drift apart against a bright yellow checkered background. **Georg Baselitz's** *Adieu* is a farewell painting—literally. The title means "goodbye" and the figures seem suspended in a horrifying limbo, falling through space with no ground beneath them. Baselitz had begun painting his subjects upside down in 1969, a radical strategy to force viewers to see the painting as a painting rather than an illustration.

The inverted figure was Baselitz's signature provocation. He insisted it was purely formal: "**The idea of looking toward the future is nonsense. Simply going backwards is better.**" Yet critics read emotional and political content everywhere. The figures here are sites of violence—ferocious brushwork tears into their organic, vulnerable bodies. The abstract geometry of the background contrasts coldly with their humanity.

By 1982, Baselitz was at the peak of his fame. He had represented West Germany at the **1980 Venice Biennale** alongside Kiefer. He appeared in the landmark *A New Spirit in Painting* exhibition at the **Royal Academy, London (1981)** and the *Zeitgeist* show in Berlin (1982). These exhibitions were watershed moments: curated by **Christos Joachimides** and **Norman Rosenthal**, they declared that painting was back from the dead.

The Tate acquired *Adieu* through the **Patrons of New Art** in 1983. Baselitz's raw, confrontational style—his canvases often measuring three metres or more—challenged British taste. The art historian **Richard Calvocoressi** noted that the inverted figures "have no point of origin and exist in a sort of horrifying limbo." That suspended state perfectly captures Germany's unresolved relationship with its past—a theme that runs through all of Neo-Expressionism like an open wound.

## **Pronunciation Guide**

Adieu – ah-DYUH

Christos Joachimides – KRIS-tos yoh-ah-KIM-ih-des

Norman Rosenthal – NOR-man ROH-zen-tahl

## **References**

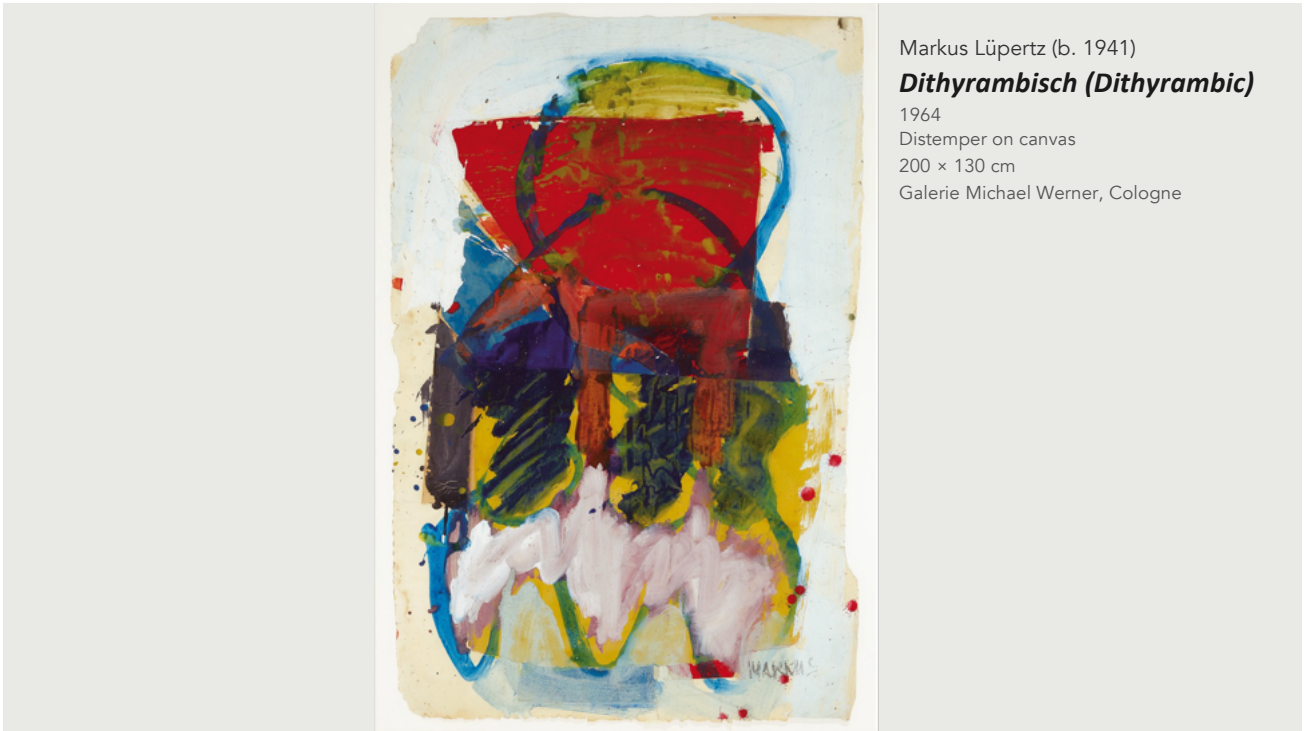
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/baselitz-adieu-t03781>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg\\_Baselitz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg_Baselitz)

<https://gagosian.com/artists/georg-baselitz/>

<https://www.theartstory.org/movement/neo-expressionism/>

<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/glossary-terms/neo-expressionism>



Markus Lüpertz (b. 1941)  
***Dithyrambisch (Dithyrambic)***  
1964  
Distemper on canvas  
200 × 130 cm  
Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne

Markus Lüpertz (b. 1941), *Dithyrambisch (Dithyrambic)*, 1964, Distemper on canvas, 200 × 130 cm, Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne

**Markus Lüpertz** was the dandy of German Neo-Expressionism—a man who wore three-piece suits to paint, carried a walking stick, and declared himself a genius with cheerful regularity. His **Dithyramb** paintings of the 1960s were wild, abstract compositions named after the ecstatic hymns sung in honour of Dionysus in ancient Greece. They combined tightly controlled formal structures with anarchic painterly energy—disciplined frenzy.

Lüpertz wrote his own "**Dithyrambic Manifesto**" in 1966, proclaiming the return of painting's primal power. He declared: "**Art that has no danger in it, no risk in making or looking, is nothing.**" The manifesto positioned him alongside Baselitz and **Eugen Schönebeck** as the founding generation of what would become German Neo-Expressionism. While less internationally famous than Baselitz or Kiefer, Lüpertz was equally influential within Germany.

Born in **Liberec** (then Bohemia, now Czech Republic), Lüpertz's family fled to the Rhineland after the war. He studied at the **Werkkunstschule Krefeld** and the **Kunstakademie Düsseldorf**. In 1970, he began painting what he called "**German Motifs**"—steel helmets, palettes, ears of wheat, railway tracks—ordinary objects freighted with the weight of German history and myth.

Lüpertz served as director of the Düsseldorf Academy from 1988 to 2009, shaping a new generation of painters. His personal style was legendary: he composed jazz, wrote poetry, and sculpted monumental bronzes for public spaces across Germany. Critics accused him of bombast. **Robert Hughes** dismissed the German Neo-Expressionists collectively as

purveyors of "emotional tourism." Lüpertz was unbothered. He continued painting with flamboyant conviction, insisting that the role of the painter was to be, above all, magnificently unreasonable.

### **Pronunciation Guide**

Markus Lüpertz – MAR-koos LÜ-perts

Dithyrambisch – dih-tih-RAM-bish

Werkkunstschule Krefeld – VERK-kunst-shoo-luh KRAY-felt

Kunstakademie Düsseldorf – KUNST-ah-kah-day-mee DÜS-sel-dorf

### **References**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Markus\\_L%C3%BCpertz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Markus_L%C3%BCpertz)

<https://www.michaelwerner.com/artists/markus-lupertz>

<https://www.theartstory.org/movement/neo-expressionism/>

<https://www.britannica.com/art/Neo-Expressionism>

<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/glossary-terms/neo-expressionism>



Enzo Cucchi (b. 1949),  
***Paesaggio Barbaro***  
***(Barbaric Landscape)***,  
1983,  
Oil on canvas,  
298 × 398 cm,  
Christies

Enzo Cucchi (b. 1949), *Paesaggio Barbaro (Barbaric Landscape)*, 1983, Oil on canvas, 129.5 × 159.4 cm, Christies

- The title yokes two places that changed art forever. Vitebsk is the Belarusian birthplace of Kazimir Malevich, father of abstraction. Harar is the Ethiopian town where Arthur Rimbaud abandoned poetry for gun-running. Enzo Cucchi links these two visionaries who walked away from their gifts, creating a dark, panoramic meditation on creative self-destruction. The painting hangs above a massive iron shelf — part altar, part archaeological relic — giving the work a sculptural, almost architectural presence.
- The New York Times described Cucchi as "an artist who waves his paintbrush like a magician's wand." Critic Diane Waldman, who curated his 1986 Guggenheim retrospective — he was just 36, and it spanned the entire rotunda — called his imagery "visions from a world not entirely our own."
- Born in Morro d'Alba, a farming village in the Marche, Cucchi was self-taught. He began as a poet before turning to painting in the late 1970s, befriending Clemente and Chia in Rome. His materials — earth, burnt wood, neon, iron — root his art in physical reality. He once said: "You have to feel the weight, the substance of the material, which comes from such a distant place." MoMA acquired this work as a gift from UBS, confirming Cucchi's place in the international canon.

### **Pronunciation Guide**

Enzo Cucchi – EN-tsoh KOO-kee

Vitebsk-Harar – VEE-tepsk hah-RAR

Kazimir Malevich – KAZ-ih-meer mal-AY-vitch

Morro d'Alba – MOR-roh DAL-bah

## **References**

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79252>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enzo\\_Cucchi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enzo_Cucchi)

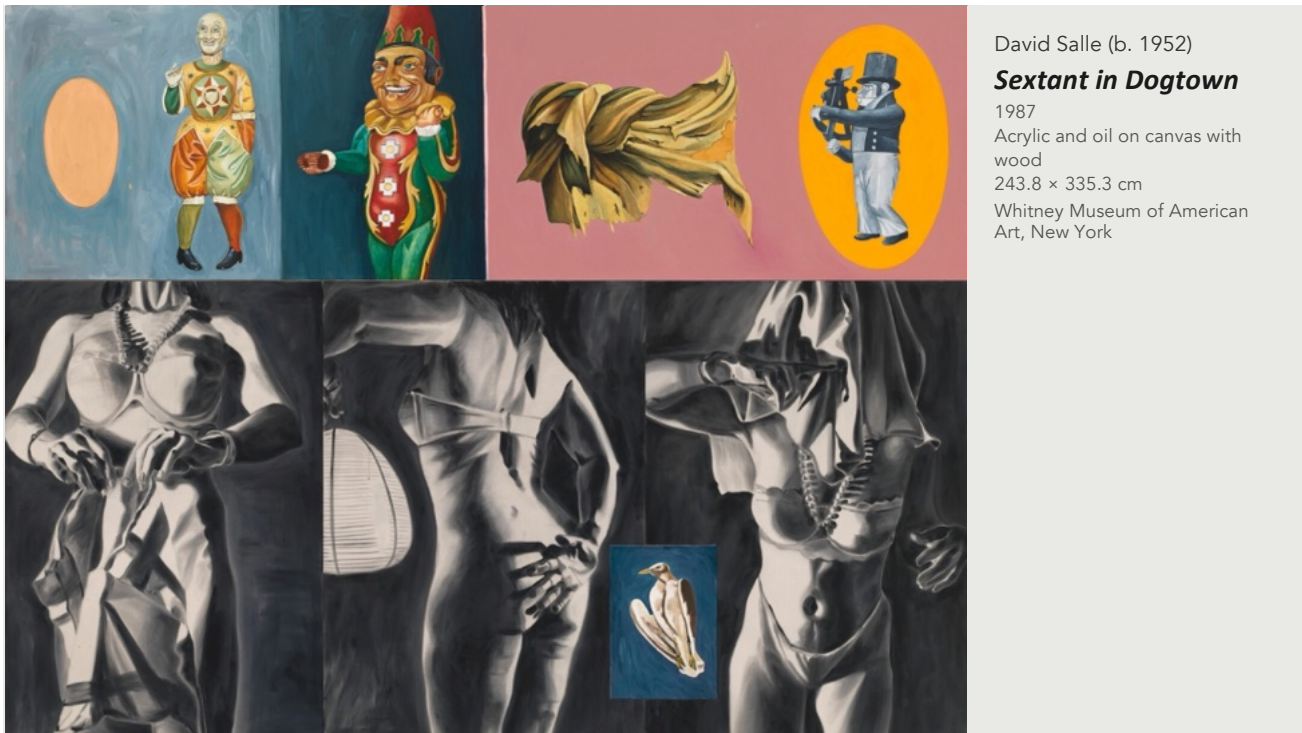
<https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/the-collection/artists/enzo-cucchi>

<https://www.artsy.net/artist/enzo-cucchi>

<https://www.casatestori.it/en/2021/11/18/enzo-cucchi-omaggio-a-testori/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enzo\\_Cucchi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enzo_Cucchi)

<https://walkerart.org/collections/artworks/vitebsk-harar>



David Salle (b. 1952)

***Sextant in Dogtown***

1987

Acrylic and oil on canvas with wood

243.8 × 335.3 cm

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

David Salle (b. 1952), *Sextant in Dogtown*, 1987, Acrylic and oil on canvas with wood, 243.8 × 335.3 cm, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

**David Salle** was Neo-Expressionism's most cerebral provocateur. His signature technique layers incongruous images from high and low culture across the same canvas—fragments of Old Master paintings, advertising imagery, pornography, and abstract gestures colliding in what looks like a visual channel-surf frozen mid-flip. *Sextant in Dogtown* is a characteristic multi-panel work where disparate images coexist without resolution, forcing the viewer to make connections the artist refuses to supply.

Salle studied at the **California Institute of the Arts** under **John Baldessari**, absorbing Conceptualism's rigour before turning it inside out. His paintings were embraced by the New York gallery scene in the early 1980s—shown by **Mary Boone** alongside Schnabel, they became emblems of the decade's art-market frenzy. Critic **Peter Schjeldahl** called Salle "the most convincing painter of this generation."

Not everyone agreed. Feminist critics attacked Salle's frequent use of **female nude imagery** sourced from soft pornography. Artist **David Wojnarowicz** accused him of reducing women to decorative objects. Salle's defence was that all his imagery was equally depersonalised—a symptom of a media-saturated culture in which nothing retained its original meaning. His work anticipated the appropriation strategies that would dominate art in the 1990s.

Salle represents the postmodern wing of Neo-Expressionism: less interested in emotional catharsis than in the collapse of meaning. While Baselitz and Kiefer plumbed national trauma and Basquiat channelled street energy, Salle coolly dissected the image-

overloaded culture of **Reagan-era America**. His layered canvases prefigured the internet's visual cacophony. He later directed the feature film *Search and Destroy* (1995) and designed productions for the **American Ballet Theatre**.

### **Pronunciation Guide**

David Salle – dah-VEED sal-AY

Peter Schjeldahl – PEE-ter SHEL-dahl

Mary Boone – MARE-ee BOON

### **References**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_Salle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Salle)

<https://whitney.org/collection/works/52011>

<https://www.theartstory.org/movement/neo-expressionism/>

<https://www.britannica.com/art/Neo-Expressionism>

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/art-movements/neo-expressionism>



Francesco Clemente (b. 1952)

**Semen**

1987

Etching, aquatint, and soft ground  
on Fabriano Rosaspina paper  
137.2 × 229.9 cm

Tate, London

Francesco Clemente (b. 1952), *Semen*, 1987, Etching, aquatint, and soft ground on Fabriano Rosaspina paper, 137.2 × 229.9 cm, Tate, London

A naked figure—the artist himself—floats towards the viewer, suspended in an expanse of fluid. The composition is framed by a striking cobalt-blue border. **Francesco Clemente's** *Semen* is one of his most ambitious and provocative prints. The body is rendered with soft, painterly lines—yellow and rose filling the figure, lips tinted red. It is simultaneously erotic, contemplative, and strangely vulnerable. The artist positions his own body as both creator and created.

Clemente was the most cosmopolitan of the Neo-Expressionists. Born in **Naples**, he studied architecture briefly at the **University of Rome** before devoting himself to art. He divided his life between **Rome, Madras (Chennai), and New York**, absorbing Indian miniature painting, Tantric art, and Western traditions in equal measure. He once said: "**Fluidity is the source of the work. Fluidity is the goal of the work.**"

Through **Andy Warhol**, Clemente befriended **Jean-Michel Basquiat** and the three collaborated on a celebrated series of paintings in 1984. But unlike Basquiat's frantic energy or Schnabel's bombast, Clemente's art was introspective and deliberately slow. Critics were divided. The **Guggenheim Museum** gave him a major retrospective, but some objected that his focus on bodily functions and private experience was solipsistic compared to the political engagement of the German Neo-Expressionists.

Clemente never fitted neatly into any category. He worked across painting, fresco, mosaic, and printmaking. His influences ranged from **William Blake** to Hindu temple sculpture. He rejected the label of Neo-Expressionist, telling interviewers he did not

"tamper with reality" but simply depicted the world as it existed. His output remains vast and restlessly experimental—one of the few Transavanguardia artists to sustain critical and commercial relevance over four decades.

### **Pronunciation Guide**

Francesco Clemente – fran-CHESS-koh kleh-MEN-teh

Fabrizio Rosaspina – fab-ree-AH-noh roh-sah-SPEE-nah

Transavanguardia – trans-ah-van-GWAR-dee-ah

### **References**

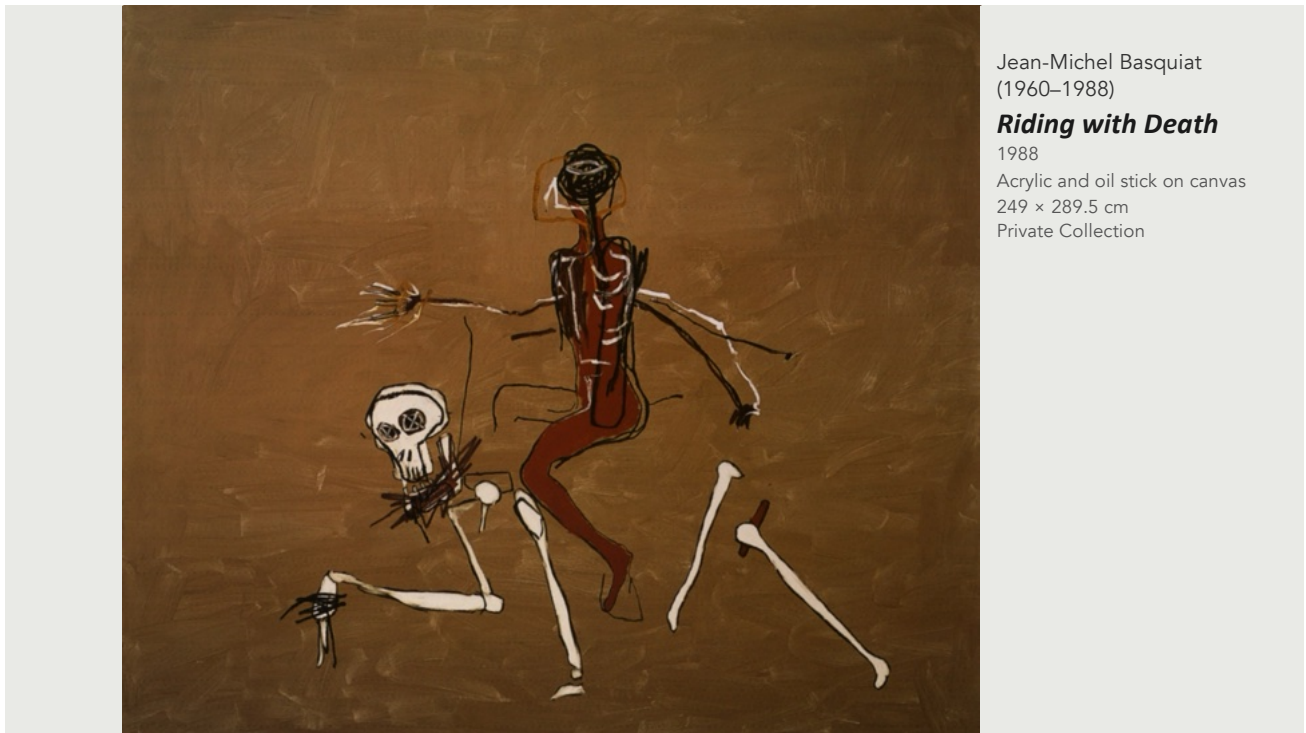
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/clemente-semen-p11276>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francesco\\_Clemente](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francesco_Clemente)

<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O178271/semen-print-francesco-clemente/>

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/art-movements/neo-expressionism>

<https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/movement/neo-expressionism>



Jean-Michel Basquiat  
(1960–1988)

***Riding with Death***

1988

Acrylic and oil stick on canvas

249 × 289.5 cm

Private Collection

Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988), *Riding with Death*, 1988, Acrylic and oil stick on canvas, 249 × 289.5 cm, Private Collection

A dark-skinned figure rides a skeleton across a bare, sand-coloured ground. Nothing else. No text, no symbols, no crowns. *Riding with Death* is Basquiat stripped to the bone—literally. Painted in the final months of his life, it possesses a stark, almost classical simplicity that shocked those who knew his densely layered earlier work. The composition recalls Renaissance paintings of **Death and the Maiden** and ancient images of horsemen riding skeletal mounts.

By 1988, Basquiat was in crisis. His close friend and collaborator **Andy Warhol** had died unexpectedly in February 1987, devastating Basquiat. The art market was cooling. Critics who had celebrated him now questioned whether his prodigious output was being maintained at the expense of quality. His heroin addiction had intensified. Biographer **Phoebe Hoban** wrote of a culture where "quantity matters more than quality, aggressive dealers push prices through the roof, and the media magnifies the entire circus."

Basquiat died of a heroin overdose on **12 August 1988**, aged 27. *Riding with Death* reads like a premonition. The figure's grip on the skeleton is precarious; the rider and his mount are heading somewhere inevitable. The painting is both a farewell and an accusation—an indictment of the art world that had consumed him. His dealer **Larry Gagosian** later said: "He was a shooting star, and we couldn't look away."

Basquiat's death in many ways marked the end of Neo-Expressionism's explosive first phase. The movement's association with the 1980s art-market bubble—where young painters became millionaire celebrities overnight—began to feel toxic. The crash of 1987

had already cooled the overheated market. *Riding with Death* now hangs as a monument to the human cost of that frenzy. It is considered by many to be Basquiat's final masterpiece—a painting of heartbreaking clarity from an artist who had, until then, thrived on complexity.

### **Pronunciation Guide**

Jean-Michel Basquiat – zhon-mee-SHELL bask-ee-AH

### **References**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Michel\\_Basquiat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean-Michel_Basquiat)

<https://www.theartstory.org/movement/neo-expressionism/>

<https://www.moma.org/artists/370>

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/art-movements/neo-expressionism>

<https://maddoxgallery.com/news/451-what-is-neo-expressionism-art-6-artists-like-basquiat/>

<https://www.singulart.com/blog/en/2020/02/12/riding-with-death-1988-one-of-jean-michel-basquiats-last-paintings/>



Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945)

**Alkahest**

2011

Oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac,  
chalk, and lead on canvas  
380 × 570 cm

Private Collection

Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945), *Alkahest*, 2011, Oil, emulsion, acrylic, shellac, chalk, and lead on canvas, 380 × 570 cm, Private Collection

An immense landscape of decay and transformation. *Alkahest* takes its name from the "**universal solvent**" of medieval alchemy—a mythical substance that could dissolve anything. Kiefer's canvas is encrusted with lead, chalk, and shellac, its surface cracked and scarred like ancient earth. This is Neo-Expressionism's future: monumental, layered, philosophical, and undiminished. Decades after the movement's supposed death, Kiefer continues to produce work of staggering ambition.

Neo-Expressionism was declared dead by critics almost as soon as it peaked. The **1987 stock market crash** punctured the art-market bubble. Basquiat's death in 1988 symbolised the movement's burnout. A new generation—**Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, the YBAs**—arrived with conceptual cool and ironic detachment. The critic **Michael Brenson** wrote that Neo-Expressionism represented a shift from "art that could only refer to itself to art that could refer to everything."

Yet the movement's impact proved permanent. It restored **figuration** to the centre of contemporary art. It bridged Modernism and Postmodernism by embracing historical and mythological imagery that Clement Greenberg's formalism had banished. It made painting exciting again. Artists as diverse as **Jenny Saville, Peter Doig, Cecily Brown, and Daniel Richter** are inconceivable without Neo-Expressionism's example.

Kiefer himself remains the movement's greatest survivor. From his vast compound near Paris, he produces encyclopedic installations exploring alchemy, Kabbalah, quantum physics, and the ruins of civilisation. His 2020 **Panthéon commission** in Paris confirmed

his status as perhaps the most important living painter. In the auction rooms, Basquiat's skulls sell for nine-figure sums. Schnabel directs Oscar-nominated films. Baselitz paints in his castle near Lake Ammersee.

### **Pronunciation Guide**

Alkahest – AL-kah-hest

Anselm Kiefer – AHN-zelm KEE-fer

Kabbalah – kah-BAH-lah

Panthéon – pan-tay-ON

### **References**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anselm\\_Kiefer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anselm_Kiefer)

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-expressionism>

<https://www.theartstory.org/movement/neo-expressionism/>

<https://www.sothebys.com/en/art-movements/neo-expressionism>

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/n/neo-expressionism>



## 60-13 NEO-EXPRESSIONISM

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

WWW.SHAFE.UK



Jean-Michel Basquiat,  
*Untitled (Skull)*, 1981

- In summary, **Neo-Expressionism** shattered the former dominance of abstraction and successfully revived figurative painting. Its explosive global popularity transformed the 1980s art market and transformed painters into international celebrities.
- By validating raw emotion, historical myth, and cultural identity, the movement paved the way for postmodern diversity. Today, its legacy lives on through contemporary artists who use expressive, textured brushwork to confront intense personal narratives and complex social commentary. Neo-Expressionism's raw energy, emotional honesty, and faith in painting's redemptive power endure as one of the late twentieth century's most vital artistic legacies.
- Thank you for your time and attention.



# A Free Course on the History of Western Art

Dr Laurence Shafe [www.shafe.uk](http://www.shafe.uk)

