

Jean-Michel Basquiat

Untitled (Reptile with Claws and a Crown / Monster King)

1982

Matte acrylic, wax crayon, paint stick, marker
and incisions in the paint, on corrugated cardboard
Basquiat Venice Collection Group

This image of the demon/dragon/lizard creature has been referred to as the "King of Creatures." The central figure's arms are raised with interesting attention paid to the joint areas. The arms terminate in clawed "hands" depicted in red crayon and outlined in red marker. The snarling Monster bares its razor teeth in such a way that the viewer can look through its mouth to see the teeth on the other side. The depiction of the teeth this way may be unique to this image by Basquiat. We see many bared teeth in other works of the Mumford Collection, but none like this. Atop the Monster's head sits a significant three-pointed crown worked in gold and purple crayon...the colors of royalty.

There is an orange phallus-like appendage that also may serve as an arm, but the reference is unmistakable. That shape may also have a basis in Hobo Code (meaning "easy mark"), which Basquiat would have known only too well from living on the street for a period of time. Along the bottom are markings and colorings in predominantly orange, with red marker and a purple grid shape, which in Hobo Code refers to "jail." Hobo Code was a cryptic signage used by transient and vagabond communities to communicate and was used as early as the 1870s until the 1940s. A key for the coded language was included in Henry Dreyfuss' *Symbol Sourcebook*. Published in 1972, it was a practical guide of international graphic symbols and a notable reference source for Basquiat. Many symbols found in Dreyfuss' compendium can be seen in Basquiat's work throughout his oeuvre, including several paintings in this collection.

As in all of Basquiat's works, there are various words and references such as the word "Bat" several times as well as a magenta and blue depiction of a bat along with the words "Eat Bat" and "Feed Me, Fry Me" seemingly emanating from the creature's mouth. Bats are a recurring motif in Basquiat's works and are sometimes a reference to the superhero Batman.

This piece was chosen to be the signature image of the *Heroes & Monsters* exhibition because it encapsulates the story of Basquiat as the Hero, autobiographically seen in the form of the crown (his "signature"), and the Monster is Life, rough and savage. The streets are a hard life with everything against you... poverty, homelessness, racism, drugs, scams, prostitution, vampires and vultures (of the art world, in Basquiat's case), and the new terror on the streets of New York beginning in 1980...AIDS.

