

# VOGUE

## CULTURE

ART

### Learn About a Couple that Collected Jean-Michel Basquiat—and Became His Friend, Too

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Photo: Courtesy of Acquavella Gallery

A very special show of **Jean-Michel Basquiat**'s work opened this month at Acquavella Galleries. On view are 22 spectacular drawings from the artist, plus two of his earlier paintings—all from the collection of the wonderful **Herbert** and **Lenore Schorr**. As a couple living in Westchester County in the early eighties, the Schorrs were passionate about art. They had already begun collecting—Herbert Schorr earned a living as a scientist—an impressive cache of Abstract Expressionist art from the seventies. But like any good collector, the couple was searching for more. After reading an article about Basquiat in Art Forum, they visited the city to see his work for themselves. They met for the first time that day—Basquiat had just begun to catch the eye of the art establishment and was living in the basement of **Annina Nosei**'s gallery, which he had turned into his studio. Over time, the Schorrs and Basquiat became close friends. Their love for his art is still evident, as is a touching sense of paternal awe and respect for a kind of brilliance that left this world all too soon. Vogue.com talked to the Schorrs about their collection and about the increasingly hyperbolic landscape of the art world today.

### **What do you like about collecting drawings?**

**Herbert:** I think it came from our history of buying Abstract Expressionist art from the seventies. It comes from our love and passion of **Willem de Kooning**, **Arshile Gorky**, Franz Kline, and Robert Rauschenberg, too. We have works on paper by all of them. Also paintings—but works on paper were very important to us.

**Lenore:** We valued them. Some of their greatest work is on paper; their ideas are very clearly expressed there. Many people would stop us and ask: “How did you get to him?” I almost became scared. How can it be easy to buy a brilliant young artist like Basquiat? What do I know? But he painted magnificently. He was a magnificent colorist, a rare genius.

### **What do you think about **Oscar Murillo**, who has been called by some the “21st-century Basquiat”?**

**Lenore:** I think Oscar is very talented. But he is himself—it's not a good thing to compare artists in general, it's not very fair. We have some work by him. Not as much as Basquiat. These times are different. Basquiat never sold a painting for more than \$20,000, and now you have—not just Murillo . . .

**Herbert:** You have the activity at auctions. Interest in artists has expanded enormously.

### **It's true, I want to start buying art—but it's a huge commitment!**

**Lenore:** You should be able to. Young people should be buying more.

**Herbert:** We had no inherited money; we lived on our salary. I don't know if you know who the Vogels are—they were civil servants who were able to buy art. The intellectual class can't buy art. They were shut out.

**Lenore:** Well, we should say you're a scientist. But it was all part of the intellectual community. I know young professionals, and they love art and they can't afford it.

### **How did you start?**

**Lenore:** We started with prints, and there still is that.

**Herbert:** I still love to look at young art and young galleries. But it is very time-consuming from when we were doing it. We had another luxury, which these times don't allow. I worked, and she raised the children, but she had time to go into Manhattan. Nowadays, no one has the time to spare. And our parents would babysit for us. We raised our family in Westchester County—it was a slower pace—and you could take your time, you could learn about the art. We started by collecting Picasso and Miró and great modernist prints. It was a learning process for us. Now everything is so sped up. By the time you're interested in someone, there's probably too much competition.

### **Let's go back to your friendship with Basquiat—what was he like?**

**Lenore:** We met him very early on. We bonded. He understood how much we appreciated him, and there was a mutual feeling of respect. I think he understood that we cared about him and not just the art. I was thinking recently how people tried to take advantage of him: he was young; he was dealing with sophisticated people very much older than himself. He understood that we valued him and his friendship. We respected him as a person. He was brilliant. We really respected his sensitivity and intelligence.

**Herbert:** We met him the first time we bought a painting. We spent several hours looking at paintings. We were looking at a young artist, and someone else came in with an advisor and looked at the paintings and left. And we figured they rejected it. I'm not that smart; I like to look a long time at art. Even with the new artists—if I don't know who they are, I need to absorb it, feel it.

**Lenore:** The famous story is that he was painting in the basement of the gallery.

**Herbert:** And after looking at paintings, we settled on one. He came upstairs and talked about it. There was a snake on the bottom left corner, and he loved it. So our friendship developed over time. I began to drive him around. I learned a little about the difficulty black people have—it was hard for him to get cabs, and since we came in from the suburbs we had a car—I would drive him to pick up musical instruments, and at one point, he was going to get me a little black driver's cap.

**Lenore:** He always behaved perfectly. You could see his reactions to events around him. He was hard to describe. But maybe this story will help: He was asked to give a lecture at Vassar, and we went up and met him there. He was lecturing to this large room of students, and I'm sorry we didn't have a tape recorder because it was really quite entertaining. Some of the students treated him like a rock star, but some of the students were resentful. And they said, "How do you think we feel? We are going to school to be an artist, and you didn't go to school." But he was very charming. He just shrugged, and it was the perfect response. He knew how to respond to people, he knew how to read people. He had good taste in people, many of them I've gotten to know since.

### **I love that he was so sensitive to people.**

**Lenore:** He was good—he met us on the street, we were with some crazy person, but we didn't know it yet. And the next time he saw us, he asked, "Why are you spending time with that person?"

**Herbert:** He was right. It was just ten minutes, and he had read the person. It was a person of questionable character.

**Lenore:** He always liked interesting people.

**Herbert:** I think where you saw the real genius was his art. It happened very quickly, he didn't have formal lessons, but he went to museums. He understood what he was seeing. I was told he went to some dealer's library and scoured through the books. Visually, he was a genius. Dylan was the analog version of that—you'd hear about how all Dylan needed to do was hear a piece of music once, or twice at most, and then he didn't need it anymore. Basquiat was just like that—visually he could see it and absorb it instantly. He was extremely smart. A lot of people tried to write him off as a junkie who was streetwise. But he was very, very smart.

**And your love for art came from where?**

**Lenore:** That's easy. My husband fell in love with Jackson Pollock when he was a teenager.

**Herbert:** Not a teenager, I was twelve.

**Lenore:** That's right, he was twelve. He saw Life magazine had a spread on Pollock and—

**Herbert:** I thought it was terrific. That was it. I did draw a little bit myself, and now I have some people who want to see my drawings. I haven't done them for a long time! Maybe I'll take it up in my old age.

**Lenore:** I used to go the Museum of Modern Art. I was in love with [Van Gogh](#).

**Herbert:** Her grandmother was into decorative arts. I think there must be something visual in the family. That's how we started looking. Once we could afford to buy in the early seventies, we bought paintings before we bought furniture.

**That's incredible. Were you aware that your art would be worth so much today?**

**Herbert:** I'm a collector by nature. I collected stamps as a child. I think there's a collecting gene. I was not rich enough to just throw away money. It was a lot of money for me, but I like looking at a painting better than a stock.

**Lenore:** He thought it would hold a lot of value, and it gave him a lot of pleasure. We weren't so money-focused. We did sense it would hold value. No one could predict what we are seeing now.