

Large Print Labels

Kehinde Wiley: Saint Louis

October 19—February 10, 2019

Galleries 249 and 250, East Building

Kehinde Wiley's vibrant paintings actively engage with the traditions of European art. In his work, Wiley replaces historical depictions of white figures with images of contemporary African Americans, Africans, and people of the African diaspora. His work is widely recognized for calling attention to significant absences and erasures in Western art history, exposing the lack of representation of black individuals in figurative painting. Wiley based the paintings in this exhibition on eight works from the Museum's permanent collection and one print from a local private collection.

In 2017, Wiley came to St. Louis to cast individuals to pose for these portraits, visiting neighborhoods in north St. Louis and Ferguson. He began this practice, which he refers to as "street casting," in New York City in 2001 and has since expanded his approach to include people from all over the world.

The painted figures in Wiley's works are situated against a background mesh of ornament, florals, and textile patterns. These decorative elements break into the foreground as they curl and wind over and around the models. This struggle for primacy between figure and background, representation and abstraction, European painting and the international markets of textile production, exemplifies the global politics of cultural representation challenged by Wiley's art.

Kehinde Wiley American,
born 1977

Charles I, 2018
oil on linen

This painting is one of two in the exhibition based on the Museum's portrait of Charles I of England (reigned 1625–1649). Here the king's pose is assumed by a woman in a camouflage outfit, rather than a man with velvet robe and elaborate jewels. Wiley began painting women in his 2012 series *Economy of Grace*, which addressed, in the artist's words, "the history of how women had been seen in paintings...and how specifically a painting made in the 21st century [can] both acknowledge and respond and accept and protest all of those beautiful and terrible things from the past."

Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California
2018.124

Kehinde Wiley American,
born 1977

Charles I, 2018
oil on linen

In this painting a bearded man in shorts stands in front of a background of delicate patterns. Explaining his choice of decorative backgrounds for portraits of men, Wiley says, “There is something poetic to be able to see a black male American or African body juxtaposed with a field of vines and flowers. It’s almost as though the backgrounds were demanding to be represented as well. Their competition for the picture plane exists in direct relationship with my insistence upon the black body being in the forefront within a museum space, that sense that I deserve to be here, that constant fight for presence.”

Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California
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Kehinde Wiley, American, born 1977

Jacob de Graeff, 2018
oil on linen

A man stands in a confident posture, one hand on his hip and the other on a cane. He wears a tailored jacket with a stylish red pocket square and a black hat with the word Ferguson emblazoned on it in white letters. The individuals who posed for Wiley selected their own clothing. Wiley places great importance on the ability of his models to choose how they present themselves. Yet, their poses are often taken from European paintings, such as in this case, a 17th-century portrait of the Dutch businessman Jacob de Graeff by Gerard ter Borch.

Regarding his early love for European art, Wiley notes, “It was only later that I understood that a lot of destruction and domination had to occur in order for all of this grand reality to exist. So what happens next? What happens is that the artist grows up and tries to fashion a world that’s imperfect. Tries to say yes to the parts that he loves, and yes to the parts that he wants to see in the world, such as black and brown bodies— like my own—in the same vocabulary as that tradition that I had learned so many years before.”

Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California
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Kehinde Wiley
American, born 1977

Robert Hay Drummond, D.D., Archbishop of York and
Chancellor of the Order of the Garter, 2018
oil on linen

A woman dressed all in white is seated in front of a standing man who rests his hand on her shoulder. The woman's pose is based on the Museum's 1764 painting of a powerful figure in the Church of England, the Archbishop of York. Wiley maintains that his work is not just focused on art historical traditions, rather, "It's also about drawing attention to a very real, lived present, to people who are oftentimes ignored, people who are diminished into two-dimensional caricatures. I wanted to be able to treat them with the same loving hand, with the same attention to detail that was devoted to some of the most powerful people in European history."

Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California
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Kehinde Wiley
American, born 1977

Three Girls in a Wood, 2018
oil on linen

While in close proximity to each other, the three women depicted in this monumental painting gaze in different directions and do not seem to interact. This work is related to Otto Müller's *Three Girls in a Wood*, c.1920, a painting in the Museum's collection that features three female nudes seated in a peaceful forest. Here, Wiley presents his subjects in garments of their choosing, which convey their individual personalities and styles.

According to Wiley, "So much of my work has to do with this difference between the way that the outside world sees a black body and the way that you inhabit it yourself, that cognitive distance between two-dimensional stereotypes versus the flavor in my mouth, the feel in my skin, the way that someone looks at me, the shock or surprise or the welcome that appears in another human being's body."

Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California
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Kehinde Wiley
American, born 1977

Portrait of Mahogany Jones and Marcus Stokes, 2018
oil on linen

In this three-quarter-length view, Mahogany Jones and Marcus Stokes stand side by side. Though holding hands with one another, they face out toward the observer, self-consciously acknowledging the act of posing for a portrait. Wiley painted Jones and Stokes in their own jeans and logo-emblazoned T-shirts, emphasizing the significance of clothing in constructing identity. To Wiley, “The brands that people wear are a serious business...branding says a lot about luxury, and about exclusion.”

Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California
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Kehinde Wiley
American, born 1977

Portrait of a Florentine Nobleman, 2018
oil on linen

Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects,
Los Angeles, California 2018.128

Kehinde Wiley
American, born 1977

Major Moses Seymour, 2018
oil on linen

Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects,
Los Angeles, California 2018.129

Kehinde Wiley
American, born 1977

Madame Valmont, 2018
oil on linen

Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects,
Los Angeles, California 2018.130

Kehinde Wiley
American, born 1977

Tired Mercury, 2018
oil on linen

Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects,
Los Angeles, California 2018.126

Kehinde Wiley
American, born 1977

Saint Jerome Hearing the Trumpet of the Last
Judgment, 2018
oil on linen

Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects,
Los Angeles, California 2018.123