

28 Greats

A Celebration of African-American Art and Artists



Kehinde Wiley. Photograph by Micaiah Carter.

Kehinde Wiley (b. 1977, left), arguably the best-known contemporary portraitist, has transformed that genre of painting through his visually opulent references to art history's often less-than-inclusive canon. His instantly-recognizable works combine realistic portraits of young African-Americans with luxuriously decorative patterns that evoke Renaissance, Baroque, English Arts and Crafts, or Art Nouveau designs (such as *The Sisters Zénaïde and Charlotte Bonaparte*, right, modeled after poses in an 1821 portrait by the French painter Jacques-Louis David).

His recastings of so-called Old Master portraits were accomplished through direct engagement with his sitters, whom he approached ("street cast") on the streets of Harlem or in his home city of Los Angeles. Asking them to choose and recreate the poses of historical portraits--many which were originally painted to promote and perpetuate positions of wealth and power--Wiley then photographs them, in their contemporary street clothes, using the photos later in the studio as a reference. By employing the language of formal court portraiture to glorify its subjects, Wiley is able to elevate his sitters to a mode of representation once reserved only for those in the power structure ordained by the divine right of kings and the aristocracy. Other portraits reference religious figures (such as *Anthony of Padua*, right center), suggesting the spiritual nature of the subject, in this case a faith in the cause of justice. Retaining the original titles of the source paintings, rather than titling them the names of his sitters, Wiley reflects both a revolutionary recasting and a acknowledgement of how African names were changed and forgotten to time under colonization and slavery.

Wiley and artist Amy Sherald (previously featured in *28 Greats*) made headlines and history in 2017 when they were chosen as the first African-American artists to paint, respectively, the official presidential portraits of Barack and Michelle Obama (lower right). His more recent work has taken him around the globe in search of new stories to tell. In 2019 he traveled to Tahiti to paint members of the Māhū community, who live as a third gender; the groundbreaking series takes on the history of French colonization, as well as the notorious history of artist Paul Gauguin's travels there in the 1890s.



Kehinde Wiley, *Rumors of War*, 2019. Bronze, 27 x 16 feet. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.

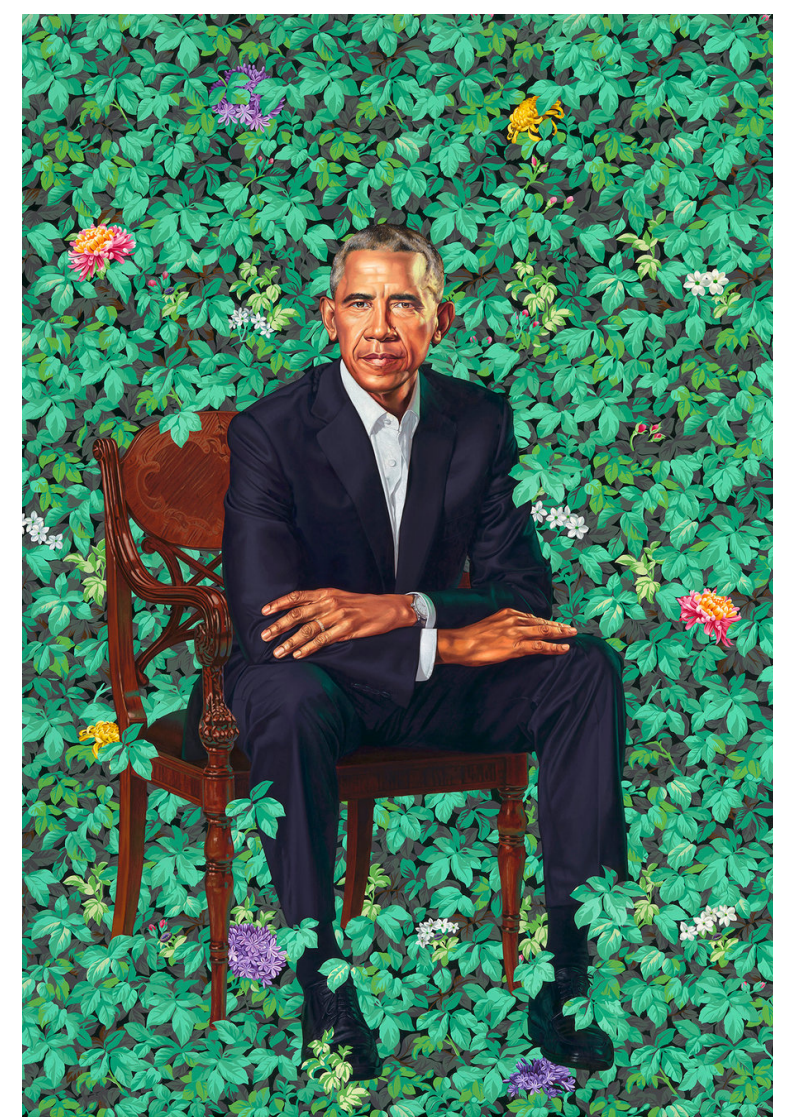
In addition to his empowering portraits, Kehinde Wiley has also created powerful sculptures, most notably *Rumors of War* (2019), a bronze equestrian monument designed in response to the controversy over Confederate monuments (left). Wiley's dreadlocked hero, clad in jeans and Nikes, is engaged in a new battle for the soul of the nation. On view in Times Square for several months, the monument was installed in December 2019 on the grounds of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, who commissioned the work.



Kehinde Wiley, *The Sisters Zénaïde and Charlotte Bonaparte*, 2014. 83 1/2 x 63 inches. Private Coll.



Kehinde Wiley, *Anthony of Padua*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. Seattle Art Museum.



Kehinde Wiley, *President Barack Obama*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 84 x 58 inches. National Portrait Gallery.