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Henderson, Jane. "Kehinde Wiley, artist who painted Obama, unveils 'power portraits' of St. Louisans," St. Louis Post-Dispatch, October 19, 2018.



Artist Kehinde Wiley poses in front of his exhibit on Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2018, at the Kehinde Wiley art exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum, where Wiley was seeing the paintings hung for the first time. He was pleased with the way the exhibit looked. Photo by J.B. Forbes, jforbes@post-dispatch.com

Ashley Cooper thought the artist might be pulling a prank.

At a Little Caesars pizzeria in north St. Louis, an entourage with lights and a camera asked to take her photo. She would be paid.

"I was like, 'Is this a joke?'"

Cooper, 31, and her sister, Shontay Haynes, 28, went to the St. Louis Art Museum last year for an official photo shoot. They were two of several people Kehinde Wiley found here for his latest art exhibit. "Street casting," he calls it.

Cooper was a little nervous early this week about how the artwork — a huge oil painting based on those photos — turned out. But the Wellston resident was eager for the exhibit's opening: "I just want to see how beautiful I look."

Last year, Cooper had never heard of Wiley. But several months after his summer trip here, Wiley received international attention when his official portrait of former President Barack Obama was unveiled. The painting hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

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Figure 1 Former President Barack Obama and former first lady Michelle Obama stand on stage as their official portraits are unveiled at a ceremony at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, Monday, Feb. 12, 2018, in Washington. Barack Obama's portrait was painted by artist Kehinde Wiley, and Michelle Obama's portrait was painted by artist Amy Sherald. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

The St. Louis exhibit with its 11 large artworks is Wiley's first since the Obama portrait was revealed and may appeal to an even broader audience than he's had before.

"There's been a whole new level of interest after the Obama portrait," says Simon Kelly, the museum's curator of modern and contemporary art. "Wiley is an important figure within portraiture and in contemporary African-American art."

Although made particularly for the St. Louis Art Museum, the paintings follow Wiley's famous, signature style: realistic images of African-Americans, many posed like historic images of kings and gentry.

In them, gold and silver jewelry seems to reference the adornments of the wealthy sitters from hundreds of years earlier. The backgrounds, like the one in the Obama portrait, show repeating patterns of colorful ivy, vines and flowers. In St. Louis, the backgrounds look like vibrant William Morris wallpapers fighting for control: Vines and flowers push in front of the humans, wrapping legs possessively. But the people in the black frames hold their confident and regal poses.

Wiley saw the work framed and mounted on the museum walls Wednesday. He had arrived that afternoon from New York to celebrate the exhibit, which runs through Feb. 10.

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As he looked at the largest oil painting, a commanding 9-by-11-foot canvas of three women, Wiley was pleased:

“This is pretty badass.”

He surveys all 11 works’ placement, assessing whether the choices he made “feel good.”

The paintings ask “who are these people, what are their narratives?” he says. But they also question whether art can really reveal a person.

“My work lives somewhere in the gap between what is possible and what is actual.”

Three years ago

St. Louis “is a perfect example of America’s cities,” cities that give rise to our stories, our inheritance, Wiley says.

The art museum’s planning for the exhibit goes back to 2015, Kelly says. Wiley then came here last summer and spent hours walking through the museum to look at the historical paintings for inspiration.

“It was like a treasure hunt for him,” says Hannah Klemm, assistant curator of modern and contemporary art.

The range of objects he chose were broader than Klemm and Kelly expected. One is a relatively modern piece, “Three Girls in a Wood” by German painter Otto Müller (1920). That primitivist painting has been described as portraying “three non-Western nude figures in a studio-contrived scene of nature.” The artist was influenced by Gauguin and did the painting on burlap.

“Wiley hasn’t chosen anything before that was that abstract,” Klemm says.

“Three Girls in a Wood” was the inspiration for the “badass” 9-by-11 painting. Its seated women are Lynora Foote, Nakia Taylor and Lynette Foote, all of St. Louis, the museum says.

The grouping is similar to the figures in the wood, but the St. Louisans are fully clothed and painted in sharp detail, tattoos included. One wears overalls with stars. Another has a Band-Aid that’s so realistic, it looks like it’s been on the finger a day or two.

In addition to the unusual choice of the 1920 painting, Wiley also picked a statue called “Tired Mercury” and a drawing, “Saint Jerome Hearing the Trumpet of the Last Judgment.”

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The other historic progenitors are more traditional picks for Wiley, who, as Kelly says, often references paintings that evoke a history of power, colonization and slavery. “Power portraits,” as Kelly puts it.

A Dutch portrait of “Charles I” shows the monarch in rich red and white, hat monstrous with plumage. The king posed for Daniel Martensz Mytens the Elder with his hand on his hip, a jeweled crown beside him. The painting apparently was made in 1633 (before Charles was executed in 1649).

Wiley himself has been quoted as saying his work is partially 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 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.”

Two area residents are posed as Charles I, the title of each painting.

Remastered

Cooper didn't know it before the exhibit, but she is in one of the “Charles I” paintings.

In Wiley's work, Cooper is in a 6- or 7-foot frame, her bare legs glowing like burnished copper. She has long braids and leather sandals and wears camo print. The pattern of her clothing seems to morph from greens and browns to blues and purple, as if not just vines from the background are finding their way onto her body, but the colors are, too.

The other “Charles” is Thomas Bradley, whom Wiley found in a Ferguson barbershop.

“For me to be in an art museum, that's uncanny,” Bradley says. “That's mind-blowing.”

Wiley showed Bradley, 28, samples of his work: “I am a big art fan myself. Everything he showed me, it was really tasteful.”

Bradley remembers standing for 30 or so photos in various poses. He was paid a few hundred dollars. But, he says, “it was an honor just to be chosen. I would have done it for free.”

Wiley says that some of his sitters get to pick how they want to be seen. But with the St. Louis project, he had chosen the historic references, so he described to some extent how he wanted the subjects to pose.

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He says, “I told all of the sitters, ‘Remember, this will be in a museum. Think about what you’d like to wear.’” Little in the paintings actually alludes to the area — except for one hat labeled “Ferguson.”

A few years ago, an article in New York magazine called Wiley “the most successful black artist since Basquiat, possibly the wealthiest painter of his generation” and “the gallery world’s most popular hip-hop ambassador.” Born in 1977, the artist who grew up in South Central LA earned a master’s in fine arts from Yale University. He’s now painted people around the world and has multiple studios, including one in China.

Not all art critics are fans, of course, pointing out that his studio includes assistants to fill in the backgrounds or saying his motifs are too similar. Wiley says in the magazine article, “I don’t want you to know every aspect of where my hand starts and ends, or how many layers go underneath the skin, or how I got that glow to happen.”

But when tickets for his art lecture in St. Louis went on sale, they sold out in minutes. (It was to be live-streamed Friday and should appear on the museum’s YouTube channel.)

Klemm calls Wiley’s work “eminently relatable,” saying it’s “art that people who don’t think they like contemporary art get.”

Arnold Tutson Jr., of O’Fallon, Ill., met Wiley when the artist asked him for a haircut last summer. He Googled Wiley to learn about him. “I was most impressed with his insight with the culture and artistry. How he can combine so many elements of society and articulate what it means.”

Tutson, 38, who works at Breeze Unisex Salon in north St. Louis, was too busy to cut Wiley’s hair, so another barber did it. Both posed for portraits, but Tutson didn’t learn for a while that he had been chosen for one of the paintings.

“A year goes by, and I get a phone call and email. I was blown away.”

Tutson says he was so excited to be part of the show. He planned to bring not only his wife and kids to the exhibit, but also his mother (who has ALS and uses a wheelchair) and brother, who recently got out of prison.

Like the other sitters, he didn’t immediately connect Wiley’s name with the recognizable paintings, some of which have appeared on TV’s “Empire.”

But Tutson had been familiar with the work: “In the African-American community, it’s a big deal when someone does something like paint President Obama.”

For “street” models, too. As any power portrait would be.

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Artist Kehinde Wiley leaves the Art Museum after viewing his exhibit on Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2018, at the Kehinde Wiley art exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum. Photo by J.B. Forbes, jforbes@post-dispatch.com



Figure 2 Artist Kehinde Wiley talks about his exhibit on Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2018, at the Kehinde Wiley art exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum, where Wiley was seeing the paintings hung for the first time. He was pleased with the way the exhibit looked. Photo by J.B. Forbes, jforbes@post-dispatch.com

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Figure 3 Claire Winfield, associate painting conservator at the Art Museum, (foreground) and Julie Ribits, assistant painting conservator, do some last minute dusting of the portraits on Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2018, at the Kehinde Wiley art exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum. Photo by J.B. Forbes, jforbes@post-dispatch.com



Figure 4 Assistant painting conservator Julie Ribits uses the light on her phone to search for imperfections in the frame of the portrait titled: "Three Girls in a Wood" on Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2018, at the Kehinde Wiley art exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum. Photo by J.B. Forbes, jforbes@post-dispatch.com

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Figure 5 Artist Kehinde Wiley talks about his exhibit on Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2018, at the Kehinde Wiley art exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum, where Wiley was seeing the paintings hung for the first time. He was pleased with the way the exhibit looked. Photo by J.B. Forbes, jforbes@post-dispatch.com

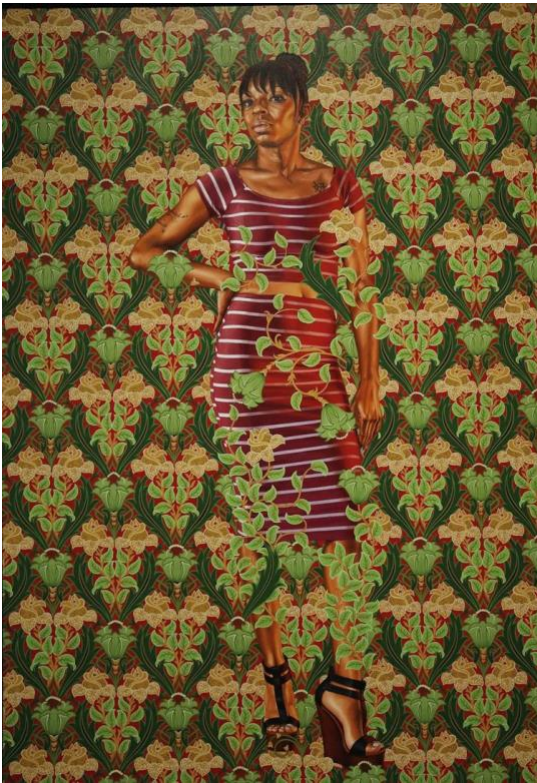


Artist Kehinde Wiley talks about his exhibit on Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2018, at the Kehinde Wiley art exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum, where Wiley was seeing the paintings hung for the first time. He was pleased with the way the exhibit looked. Photo by J.B. Forbes, jforbes@post-dispatch.com

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Photographer Jean Paul Torno documents all of the Wiley portraits for the Art Museum before it's opening on Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2018, at the Kehinde Wiley art exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum. The museum plans to use the photos of the paintings in promotional materials to advertise the exhibit. The painting behind Torno is titled: "Major Moses Seymour". Photo by J.B. Forbes, jforbes@post-dispatch.com

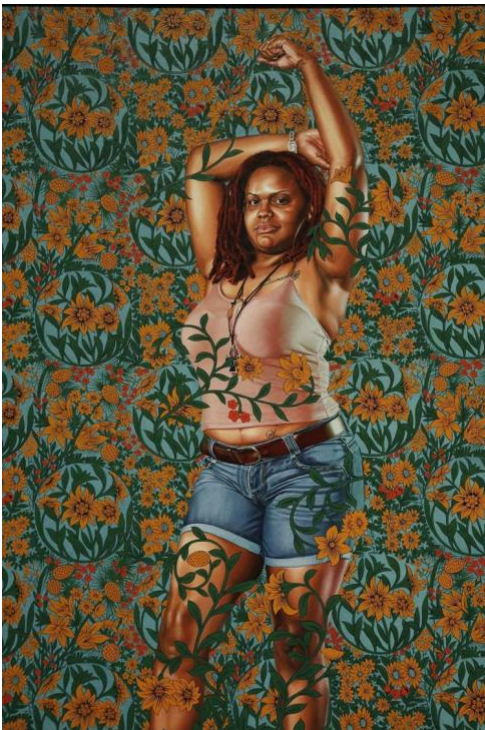


This portrait titled: "Portrait of a Florentine Nobleman" on Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2018, at the Kehinde Wiley art exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum. Photo by J.B. Forbes, jforbes@post-dispatch.com

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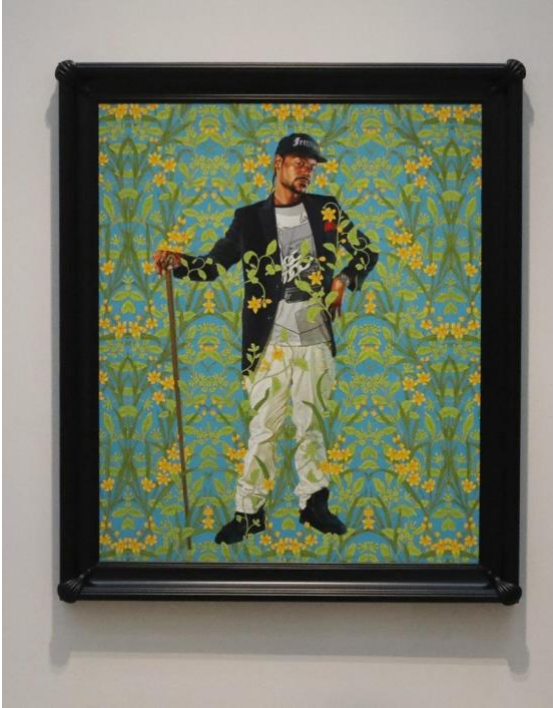


The portrait is called: "Robert Hay Drummond, D.D. Archbishop of York and Chancellor of the Order of the Garter" on Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2018, at the Kehinde Wiley art exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum. Photo by J.B. Forbes, jforbes@post-dispatch.com



The portrait is called: "Tired Mercury" Garter" on Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2018, at the Kehinde Wiley art exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum. Photo by J.B. Forbes, jforbes@post-dispatch.com

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This painting is titled "Jacob de Graeff" on Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2018, at the Kehinde Wiley art exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum. Photo by J.B. Forbes, [jforbes@post-dispatch.com](https://www.post-dispatch.com)



This portrait is titled "Madame Valmont" on Wednesday, Oct. 17, 2018, at the Kehinde Wiley art exhibit at the St. Louis Art Museum. Photo by J.B. Forbes, [jforbes@post-dispatch.com](https://www.post-dispatch.com)