

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource

Kehinde Wiley. *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, 2005





Kehinde Wiley
(American, born 1977)
*Napoleon Leading the Army
over the Alps, 2005*

Oil on canvas, 108 x 108 in. (274.3 x 274.3 cm)

Collection of Suzi and Andrew B. Cohen, courtesy of Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California; Sean Kelly, New York; Galerie Daniel Templon, Paris; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © Kehinde Wiley



Painting is about the world that we live in. Black men live in the world. My choice is to include them. This is my way of saying yes to us.

—Kehinde Wiley¹

About the Artist

Born in Los Angeles in 1977, Kehinde Wiley was eleven when his mother enrolled him and his twin brother in a small art conservatory on the campus of California State University, where the boys spent most weekends. Wiley recalls how formative this experience was for him, especially field trips to the Huntington Art Gallery to study its collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British portraits: “I would visit and see portraits of wealthy, powerful men with all of their possessions around them, and in a lot of the grand narrative portraits I was looking at I wasn’t seeing people that looked like me.”² At twelve, he was awarded a grant to travel to Russia, where he studied the language and made art. He went to college at the San Francisco Art Institute, followed by graduate school at Yale University, where he studied painting.

Although this trajectory took Wiley far from South Central L.A., where he grew up, he remained keenly aware of the challenges faced by so many other young, urban black men. This consciousness deeply influenced his working process as an artist, as well as his portrait subjects. His practice of “street casting” his subjects—painting strangers encountered on the street—began in earnest when Wiley was just out of Yale, during a yearlong residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. He invited individuals back to his studio, where he asked them to select poses from paintings in art history textbooks, then photographed them in the pose, and finally painted them. He has since expanded this process to a global scale, finding portrait subjects around the world.

Description of the Artwork

This large painting features a youthful black man riding a horse. The man's head is turned toward the viewer. He gestures with his right hand toward the top of the painting, and his left hand grips the reins of his steed. He wears camouflage cargo pants and a matching collared, short-sleeve shirt over a white T-shirt, as well as Timberland boots, and Starter wristbands. A white bandana with black designs is tied around his head; a golden yellow cloak, wrapped around his shoulders, billows in the wind. The man's facial expression is calm and confident, in contrast to the horse's wide eyes and flared nostrils. The horse rears up on its hind legs, its mane and tail whipping against its body. Horse and rider face uphill on an angled, rocky surface with boulders engraved with the names WILLIAMS / BONAPARTE / HANNIBAL / KAROLVS MAGNVS M.P. The wallpaper-like background is crimson with a gold Baroque pattern. A few of the floral motifs drift below the background, floating over the middle and foreground. Dozens of small, white sperm cells appear across the canvas.



About the Artwork

The man invited to pose for this painting selected the famous equestrian portrait *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps at Grand St.-Bernard Pass* (1801) by the French artist Jacques-Louis David (see illustration). It was commissioned by the king of Spain to hang in the Royal Palace of Madrid as a symbol of Spain's important new relationship with France. Bonaparte is shown as a confident commander, in charge of his horse and his troops, wearing the uniform of a general and a gold-trimmed two-cornered hat, and armed with a saber. In the background is a line of soldiers, interspersed with artillery, making their way up the mountain. The painting is signed and dated on the horse's breastplate.

Wiley repeats many of these elements in his painting. His male subject has the same pose, confident expression, cloak, and saber, and he sits astride a horse; Wiley's signature appears in the same place, along with the painting's date in roman numerals. Bonaparte is replaced with a contemporary black man wearing fashionable street wear. The battlefield background is swapped for decorative designs and symbols of male virility. These important changes draw attention to the underlying meaning in Wiley's work. The revisions confront a long history of European and American portraiture that relegates black men to roles as servants, or excludes the black experience altogether.

Jacques-Louis David (French, 1748–1825). *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps at Grand St.-Bernard Pass*, 1801. Oil on canvas, 102³/₄ x 87 in. (261 x 221 cm). Châteaux de Malmaison et Bois-Preau, Reuil-Malmaison, France, inv. 49.71

Questions for Viewing

What's going on in the Kehinde Wiley painting?

Do you notice anything that surprises you?

Describe the man on the horse. What do his clothing, pose, and facial expression tell us about him?

If the horse and rider in this painting suddenly came to life, what do you think would happen next? What do you think the man would say? What do you see that makes you say that?

Kehinde Wiley finished this painting in 2005. He likes to paint with the same style as artists in Europe and the United States hundreds of years ago, but he also likes to include details about the world around him. Can you find an example of something historical and something contemporary?

The man shown in this painting was a stranger Wiley met and invited to visit his studio and select a pose from an art history book. The man chose the painting *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps at Grand St.-Bernard Pass* by the French artist Jacques-Louis David. Wiley took a photograph of the man posing like Bonaparte so he could include him in a new painting. What do you notice about the painting by David? Compare it with Wiley's painting. What similarities and differences can you find?

When Wiley was an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, on the sidewalk he picked up a police sketch of a young black man. It caused him to think a lot about the negative portrayal of black men in mainstream media. Wiley also knew that art history books rarely show paintings that include black men. Why do you think Wiley chose to reuse parts of a traditional painting instead of creating a completely new one of his own?

Why do you think Wiley chose to paint a stranger instead of someone he knew?

Classroom Activities

Staying Power

Wiley's portraits challenge a longstanding tradition of showcasing the rich and powerful because they feature anonymous sitters wearing everyday clothing in "a mash-up of museum treasure and the urban life outside of its gates."³ Go to your local library and locate an art history textbook. Select a painting or sculpture with one or more people. Make a photocopy. What information does the textbook provide about the subject and why the portrait was made? Identify someone in your life to celebrate in a portrait. Find and photocopy or print a photograph of this person or prepare a quick sketch. Use scissors to carefully cut out the face and paste it over the original face in the photocopied painting or sculpture. Write a wall label to share the various choices you made.

Snapshot

Wiley invites his subjects to choose a pose from a preexisting portrait. These paintings are often centuries old, and many of the poses carry symbolic meaning, conveying strength, blessing, or humility. Working with a partner, select a group portrait from an art history textbook. Practice posing like one of the figures. How does the pose feel? What do you think the sitter wanted to communicate to the viewer? Take a photo of your partner and compare it with the portrait in the book. How are they similar? What differences can you find?

What's Next?

Wiley is pursuing new directions in his work, creating artwork in different media that features women and men from around the world. Visit his website, www.kehindewiley.com, to learn more about these new projects. How is this recent artwork different from *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*? Why do you think Wiley started to make sculptures in marble and bronze? Why might he be featuring people from different backgrounds in his work?

Resources for Teachers

Book: *Kehinde Wiley*. Contributions by Thelma Golden, Robert Hobbs, Sarah H. Lewis, Brian Keith Jackson, and Peter Halley. New York: Rizzoli, 2012.

This monograph, with chapters by leading scholars, offers an in-depth analysis of Wiley's art, from early works to recent forays into sculpture.

Interview: Video of *Artnet* interview with Kehinde Wiley. Posted online, March 20, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IJLSOP6WPI>. Contemporary art specialist Heather Russell interviews Wiley in his studio about his artistic process and the ideas behind his work.

Website: www.kehindewiley.com

Wiley's site contains images and information about his current projects, along with his CV and his responses to several frequently asked questions.

Notes

1. Kehinde Wiley, quoted in Brian Keith Jackson, "Visualize," *Vibe*, vol. 11, no. 8 (August 2003), p. 117; reprinted on the object label for *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps* at the Brooklyn Museum.
2. Kristen Anderson, "In Print: Kehinde Wiley," *Hi-Fructose Magazine*, vol. 29 (April 2013); excerpts published online, <http://blackartistnews.blogspot.com/2013/10/in-print-kehinde-wiley-hi-fructose.html>.
3. Kehinde Wiley, quoted in M.I.A, "Kehinde Wiley," *Interview*, vol. 38, no. 9 (November 2008); published online, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/kehinde-wiley>.

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Photo of Kehinde Wiley by Kwaku Alston, 2010; courtesy of Kehinde Wiley Studio



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