

# Composition

# A NEW REPUBLIC

## KEHINDE WILEY

Nicole Martinez

Wiley enjoyed a vaunted career even before he was selected to immortalize President Obama. His large-scale portraits of everyday people, often Black men—subjects he meets on the street, photographs, and then inserts into reimagined scenes drawn from classical paintings—represented a new tradition of Black portraiture when they emerged from Wiley's studio at the Yale School of Art, and propelled the artist to a coveted residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. That experience would wind up landing Wiley several solo exhibitions, including one at the Brooklyn Museum when he was still in his twenties. Between continuously showing both domestically and internationally—Wiley is represented by galleries in New York, Los Angeles, Paris, and London—and a mid-career retrospective, "A New Republic," that has traveled to six different U.S. cities, the market for Wiley's work remains insatiable. The artist's studio produces about 20 paintings per year that typically sell for prices in the six- to seven-figure range, while at auction they have yet to surpass \$400,000.

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to meticulous technique, he also illuminates a persistently troubling treatment of Black bodies in American life, applying a sensitive and admiring gaze to his figures. Wiley's subjects, often donning streetwear popularized by hip-hop culture, are frequently posed according to biblical iconography or amid mazes of flora in the style of classical portraiture. Valerie Cassel Oliver, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Virginia

Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA), who worked closely with Wiley on the institution's acquisition of his bronze monument *Rumors of War* (2019), traced.

"Growing up in Los Angeles, his mother was very focused on [Wiley and his twin brother] having a sort of expansive view of the world, so she would take them to a lot of museums," Cassel Oliver said. "He saw so much beauty in these classical portraits, so grand and monumental, but the thing that really stuck with him is that no brown or Black people were presented within the portraits. He knew people who were powerful, he knew women who were graceful. He knew women who were dignified." his interest in transposing Black figures into classical European portraits to his childhood.



Kehinde Wiley, *Two Men with a Passage*, 2009, Archival ink jet on paper, 76.2 × 62.2 cm

Kehinde Wiley, *Thomas Armory*, 2006, Oil on canvas, 66.7 cm × 56.21 cm

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Kehinde Wiley,  
*Head Of A Young Girl Veiled*,  
2012, Archival ink on paper,  
78 x 98 cm (top left)

Kehinde Wiley,  
*Willem van Huythuysen*,  
2005, Oil and enamel on canvas,  
243.8 x 182.9 cm, (bottom right)

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curator of modern and contemporary art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA), who worked closely with Wiley on the institution's acquisition of his bronze monument *Rumors of War* (2019), traced his interest in transposing Black figures into classical European portraits to his childhood.

"Growing up in Los Angeles, his mother was very focused on [Wiley and his twin brother] having a sort of expansive view of the world, so she would take them to a lot of museums," Cassel Oliver said. "He saw so much beauty in these classical portraits, so grand and monumental, but the thing that really stuck with him is that no brown or Black people were presented within the portraits. He

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**"If art can be at the service of anything, it's about letting us see a state of grace for those people who rarely get to be able to be seen that way."**

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Kehinde Wiley, Alexander the Great, 2005, Oil on canvas, 243.8 × 182.9 cm

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