



Kehinde Wiley (American 1977-present)

Marechal Floriano Peixoto (From the World Stage: Brazil Series), 2009

Oil on Canvas

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In honor of the Museum's 50th Anniversary, 2009.328

MEET THE ARTIST

Kehinde Wiley, born in Los Angeles, is a large-scale portraitist. His typical subjects are “urban, black and brown” young men, whom he not only sees as reflections of himself but as representations of cultural exchange. While his first subjects or models for his “heroic portraits” originated from Harlem, he has since taken an international focus with his art, traveling around the globe to places that he feels Americans view as “exotic.” Rather than create art that agrees with this label, however, his work asks the viewer to confront and question it.

His choice of subjects and regions stems from his interest in shining light on cultures and peoples that have traditionally been invisible in the art world. By adding modern themes and everyday people to artworks that represent a country’s history, Wiley’s portraits highlight underrepresented youth in an effort to include them in their country’s narrative. In doing so, he intends to elevate these native, urban men to redefine their role in society and eliminate their label as foreign or exotic.

To learn more about the artist and his works, visit his website at <http://www.kehindewiley.com>.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

This work is part of the third installment of Wiley’s series *The World Stage*. Titled *Brazil*, works from this installment were created during the artist’s 2008-2009 residency in Brazil. Wiley depicts Afro-Brazilian males in poses drawn from iconic and art-historically recognizable portraits of rich, powerful, and usually white men. In doing so, these portraits explore how power is defined and represented, and challenge Brazil’s persistent colonial influence.

The Afro-Brazilian men in this particular portrait are residents of Rio de Janeiro’s *favelas* (slums). Their poses are adapted from two figures at the base of a famous monument dedicated to the military marshal and second President of Brazil, Floriano Peixoto.



Eduardo de Sa
Marechal Floriano Peixoto (detail)
Praça Floriano, Cinelândia
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

The two figures in the sculpture are meant to represent the original inhabitants of Brazil and are shown low to the ground in contrast with the likeness of Peixoto, which sits atop the monument. Similar to the two men in the sculpture, the men in Wiley's painting portray the real, working class of Brazil. However, unlike the figures in the sculpture, Wiley's models stare boldly back at the viewer. They reveal a sense of empowerment, a quality that is heightened by their monumental size. Despite their humble social origins, these men are transformed into symbols of power and valor. They overcome the oppression embodied by the monument, staking their own claims to history.

LOOK CLOSELY

Questions to start a conversation:

- What are some similarities between Wiley's painting and the sculptural monument? What are some differences? Pay close attention to the subjects and how they interact with the background. Consider using a Venn diagram as a tool for comparison.
- Look at the background of the art work. How would the work be different with another style behind the two men? Would a solid neutral colored background change how the painting is viewed? What would be the effect of having a cityscape or landscape in the background? Why might the artist have chosen to use the floral motif in these colors?
- Consider the clothing of the two men. What clues about the subjects and their environment can be inferred from the clothes? Why might the artist depict the subjects in such attire?
- Compare this portrait to other portraits you may be familiar with (or even with your own annual school photograph). If you were being painted or photographed for a large scale portrait, would you dress in a similar or different fashion?
- How does the artist use color and/or scale to reflect a particular time, tradition, or culture?
- Kehinde Wiley has said he asks his models to select the artwork they would like to be painted in the style of. What well known art object would you select, if asked to pose as one of his models? Why?
- What do the subjects' facial expressions and stances evoke? In pairs, try to replicate their poses and body language. How do you feel standing in this position? What do you think the relationship is between the two men?
- If Kehinde Wiley selected two Arizona models to pose for this painting, how might it be different from this painting of two Brazilian models?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

HISTORY/ SOCIAL STUDIES

Portraiture through History

1. Have students brainstorm famous portraits through history.
2. Next, have them think outside the box and consider other representations of portraiture: monuments, sculpture, land works (hint: Mount Rushmore!), and even monetary portraits. What traits do the people represented in these portraits share? Can you think of any that feel non-traditional in comparison? What about ones that are important to other cultures or time periods?
3. After the class discussion, have students individually research/ select a portrait. Ask them to write down why they think the portrait and/or the person represented are important. Then, have them think of someone *else* they would like to see in the portrait *instead* – someone whom they feel is equally important to society and history. Ask the students to discuss or write down why they would choose this person over the portrayed person. (Note: To tie in current events, consider using the portraits on coins and bills for this step of the exercise, using the introduction of Harriet Tubman on the \$20 bill as an example.)

SCIENCE

From the Rainforest to the Desert: Environmental Considerations

1. Discuss: Brazil is known for its expanse of rainforest. The background of Wiley's painting evokes this tropical environment through the bright colors, floral motifs, and native birds. Consider how this image of Brazil ties in with the social situation to which Wiley is bringing the viewer's attention.
2. Have students think about their own environment, how it affects their lives, and how their lives affect it. Which characteristics of their neighborhood or environment directly shape their community? For example, how does living in a desert affect daily life? How does it affect the neighborhoods and towns?) What actions does their community take that directly affect this environment?
3. As a class or at home, have students walk around their community (school campus, neighborhood, etc.) and make observations about the interactions between nature and humans. These could be as simple as the presence of parks and plants, roads, trash, constructed homes for animals, etc. Have them share these observations with their classmates.

WRITING

A Written Monument

1. Discuss: A monument often takes the form of a building or statue; however, it can also take the form of a written tribute. Have students think about someone who is great or important in their minds. Have them write an accolade to those individuals in the form of a letter. Ask students to think about the qualities of their chosen person that make them significant.
2. Have students use descriptive language to describe a potential physical monument that would honor this person. How would this structure look, what would the medium be, and why? Where would such a monument be erected? Ask students to draw their monuments based on the written descriptions in their letters.

ART STARTS

PORTRAITS

Materials

- 8x10 in. drawing paper
- Colored pencils, fine line markers, or other drawing materials
- Carbon paper
- Paper for sketching a symbol

Instructions

1. Kehinde Wiley selects his models from young people he finds when visiting inner cities. Have students select a classmate, family or community member to serve as their model.
2. Have students interview their subjects to identify personality traits, hobbies, or interests to incorporate into the final artwork.
3. Have students create a full body portrait of their subject, leaving the background empty.
4. Using the identifying trait discovered through the interview process, have student create a symbol to represent this using the sketch paper.
5. Have students fill the background of their portrait with this symbol, using the carbon paper to repeat the same pattern.
6. Add color to add interest and contrast to the background.
7. Have students share their portraits with the class, asking classmates to try to identify the trait from the symbol used.

LEARN MORE

About the Artist:

Kehinde Wiley's artist website: <http://www.kehindewiley.com>

About Brazilian Art, Culture, and Society:

Bayón, Damián, and Murillo Marx. *History of South American Colonial Art and Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1992.

Sullivan, Edward J., ed. *Brazil: Body & Soul*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2001.

Zoker, Yatta. "The African Roots of Afro-Brazil Explored in a New Documentary Series." <http://www.okayafrika.com/culture-2/brasil-dna-africa-5-part-documentary-series/>. September 21, 2015.

TIME for Kids: Around the World. "Brazil: Native Lingo." <http://www.timeforkids.com/destination/brazil/native-lingo>. 2016.

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