

Black Artists ^{through} HISTORY

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BLACK ARTISTS THROUGH HISTORY, LESSON 3

Portrait of Geysha Kaua, by Kehinde Wiley, 2019

1- “There is a political and racial context behind everything that I do. Not always because I design it that way, or because I want it that way, but rather because it’s just the way people look at the work of an African-American artist in this country.” Kehinde Wiley.

2- Kehinde Wiley is a young, African-American painter who is quite literally changing the face(s) of portraiture with his sensitive, vibrant, and political portrayals of Black folk, ranging from teenagers he meets on the streets, to fellow contemporary artists, and even former President Barack Obama.

3- This beautiful portrait painting depicts Tahiti’s Māhū community, the Polynesian term for people who are a gender other than male or female. The bold colors and settings make direct reference to the iconic works of Paul Gauguin, who first went to Tahiti in 1890. While celebrating the identity of Tahiti’s Māhū community, Wiley questions the social construct of gender while also challenges the colonial gaze found in Gauguin’s Tahiti paintings.

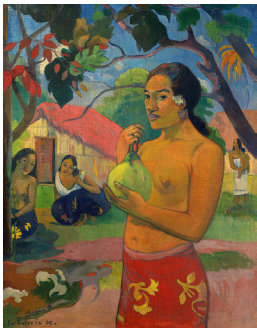
4- Wiley takes issues with Gauguin’s depictions of the Māhū for being unrealistic fantasies that sexually objectify the community for the sake of his white audience back home. The paintings in Wiley’s “Tahiti” series incorporate tribal patterns, bright colors, plants, and poses inspired by Gauguin’s work, but these distinctive elements were chosen by the models themselves as a form of “self-presentation.”

5- “I wanted to [both] honour and disrespect him,” Wiley says in reference to Gauguin. In response, he is showing these magisterial Māhū Tahitian women set against lively decorative backgrounds (these backdrops are based on linoleum patterns used to hand-print traditional textiles).

6- On the island Idyll, the artist immersed himself in the lives and ways of the Mahu. The result is a new series of paintings and a video installation on show at Galerie Templon in Paris, focused on this important indigenous social group.

Activity:

After studying the portrait of Geysha Kaua and understanding the bright colors of Wiley’s palette, print the B&W outline and color it to match the artist’s rendering -or in your own style.



Ea Haere Ia Oe - 36.42 x 28.94"

Woman Holding a Fruit, 1893 (Oil on Canvas), by Paul Gauguin

1- Gauguin’s alchemical use of color and simplified forms would go on to greatly impact the Symbolist and Modern art movements. In Tahiti, he was deeply influenced by the extravagant tropical colors. Largely abandoning any sense of subtlety and soft transitions of tone, his colors become loud, hot, and powerful. Untempered, the yellows are sharp lemon, the oranges are bright tangerine, and the delicate touches of the brush that had once indicated grasses and leaves gives way to flatter applications of paint.

2- To some, Paul Gauguin is one of Modernism’s great bohemian renegades and to many others, it doesn’t take a politically minded scholar or critic to recognize that his representations of nude Tahitians reflect a sexual and racial fantasy forged from a position of patriarchal colonialist power.

Discussion: Compare paintings of Tahitian portraits and find similarities and differences -both in style, intent, and ideology.



Portrait of
Geysha Kaua,
2019, Oil on
linen 59 3/4
x 48 1/4 in.
Presented at
Galerie Tem-
plon in Paris



Facts about Kehinde Wiley, Born Feb. 1977:

1- An American portrait painter based in New York City, who is known for his highly naturalistic paintings of Black people.

2- Born in California, Wiley’s father is from Nigeria and his mother is African American. At a young age, his mother enlisted him in after-school art classes. At the age of 11, he spent a short time at an art school in Russia and continued art classes in the US.

3- Dressed in street clothes, his models were asked to assume poses from the paintings of Renaissance masters, such as Tiziano Vecellio and Giovanni Battista Tiepolo.

4- In September 2019, in Times Square, Wiley unveiled his Rumors of War, a contemporary counterpoint to old Confederate monuments. At 27 feet high and 16 feet wide, it is his largest work to date.



5- He was commissioned in 2017 to paint a portrait of former President Barack Obama for the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. He and Amy Sherald, whose portrait of former First Lady Michelle Obama was simultaneously unveiled, are the first black artists to paint official portraits of the president or First Lady for the National Portrait Gallery.

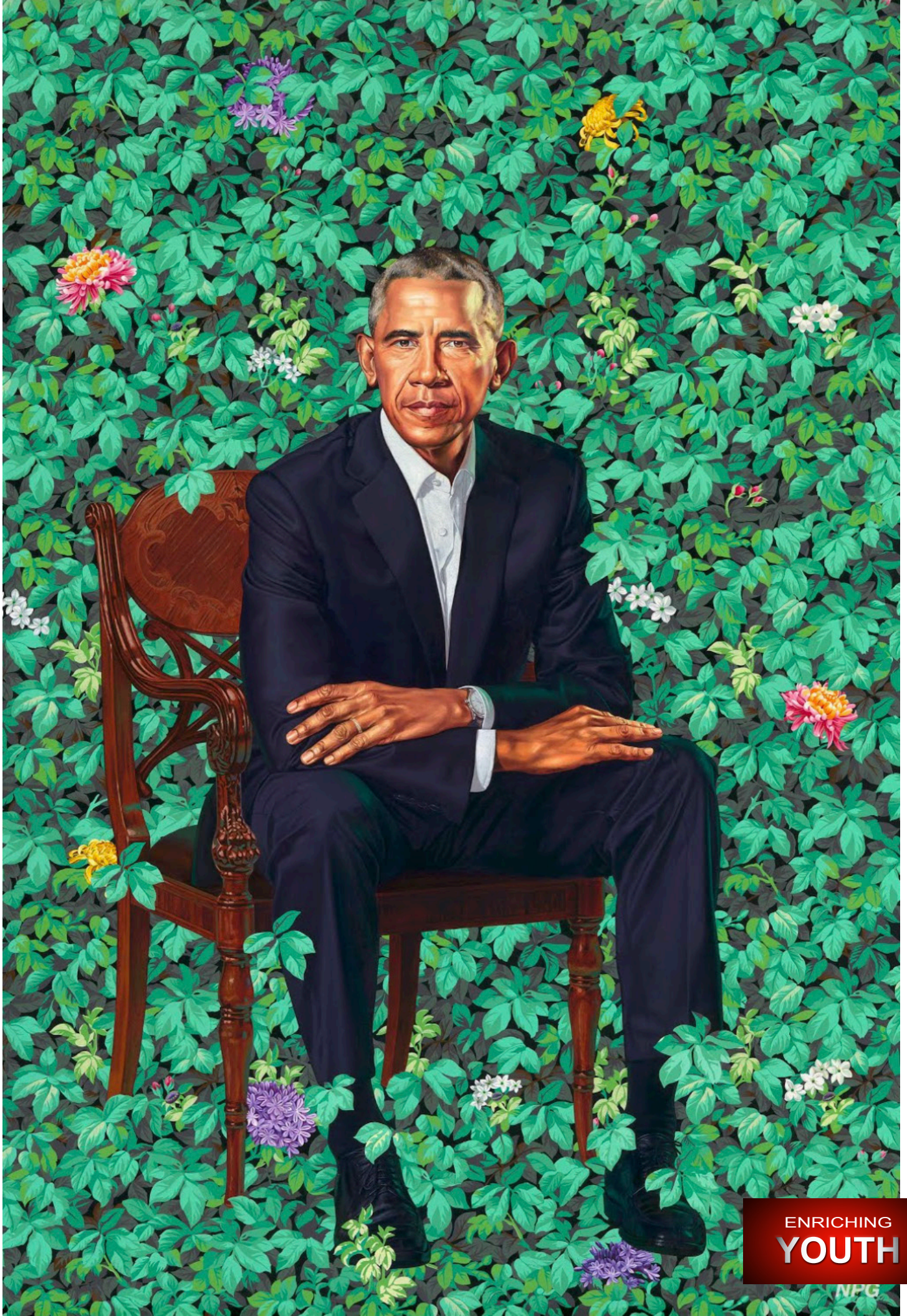


Some flowers in the background carry special meaning for President Obama. The chrysanthemums, for example, reference the official flower of Chicago. The jasmine evokes Hawaii, where he spent the majority of his childhood, and the African blue lilies stand in for his late Kenyan father.



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