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Kehinde Wiley

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Fantasy and realism mingle in the paintings of Kehinde Wiley. These portraits blur the boundaries between traditional and contemporary modes of representation. While making references to specific old master paintings, Wiley creates a fusion of period styles, ranging from the late French rococo, Islamic architecture and West African textile design to hip-hop, urban fashion and the "Sea Foam Green" of a 1999 Martha Stewart Home Collections Interiors color swatch.

Wiley's slightly larger than life size figures are depicted in a heroic manner. Their poses connote power and spiritual awakening. Wiley's portrayal of masculinity is filtered through these poses.

His portraits are based on photographs of young men who Wiley sees in city streets. He began last year with men mostly from Harlem's 125th Street; the series now includes models from the South Central neighborhood where he was born. Dressed in street clothes, Wiley's subjects are asked to assume poses from the paintings of Renaissance masters, such as Titian and Tiepolo. Wiley also embraces French rococo ornamentation. His references to this style compliment his embrace of hip-hop culture. Similarly, the poses of his figures can be simultaneously read as derivations from either contemporary hip-hop culture or from Renaissance paintings.

The artist describes his approach as "interrogating the notion of the master painter, at once critical and complicit." Wiley's figurative paintings quote historical sources and position young black men within that field of power. In this manner, Wiley's paintings fuse history and style in a unique and contemporary manner.