

ROBERTS PROJECTS

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Kehinde Wiley: A Portrait of a Young Gentleman

Huntington Art Gallery, Thornton Portrait Gallery, San Marino, California

October 2, 2021 – January 3, 2022



A newly commissioned painting by renowned American artist Kehinde Wiley, *A Portrait of a Young Gentleman*, debuts in the historic Thornton Portrait Gallery, across from Thomas Gainsborough's iconic painting *The Blue Boy* (ca. 1770). Inspired by *The Blue Boy*, and using the same title that Gainsborough originally used for his painting, Wiley's *Portrait of a Young Gentleman* is a large-scale work in the Grand Manner style. Wiley has long talked about the role The Huntington played in his formative years as an artist growing up in Los Angeles. When he was young, his mother enrolled him in art classes at The Huntington, where he encountered a formidable collection of British Grand Manner portraits—monumental depictions of England's 18th- and 19th-century noble class. The portraits

made such an impression on Wiley that he would later incorporate their stylistic representations of wealth, glory, and power into his own artistic practice, focusing on the Black and brown bodies missing from the museums he visited.

“I loved The Huntington’s galleries; the paintings by Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough, and John Constable were some of my favorites,” Wiley said. “I was taken by their imagery, their sheer spectacle, and, of course, their beauty. When I started painting, I started looking at their technical proficiency—the manipulation of paint, color, and composition. These portraits are hyperreal, with the detail on the face finely crafted, and the brushwork, the clothing, and the landscape fluid and playful. Since I felt somewhat removed from the imagery—personally and culturally—I took a scientific approach and had an aesthetic fascination with these paintings. That distance gave me a removed freedom. Later, I started thinking about issues of desire, objectification, and fantasy in portraiture and, of course, colonialism.”

The acquisition of the Wiley portrait celebrates the 100th anniversary of the purchase of the Gainsborough painting by Henry and Arabella Huntington, the founders of the institution.

Wiley, who earned a bachelor of fine arts degree from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1999 and a master of fine arts degree from Yale University in 2001, became famous for full-length depictions of everyday Black men and women in street clothes. The subjects are painted in classical poses against vibrant, patterned backgrounds, reminiscent of West African fabrics as well as wallpaper and textile designs by William Morris and Co. Wiley’s portraits have come to include depictions of a number of public figures, the most well known of which is the presidential portrait of Barack Obama, which coincidentally will be on view just a few miles from The Huntington at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) this fall, as part of a tour organized by the National Portrait Gallery.

A Portrait of a Young Gentleman was commissioned through Roberts Projects and is on view from October 2, 2021 through January 3, 2022, in The Huntington’s Thornton Portrait Gallery, opposite the institution’s iconic and recently restored “Blue Boy.”

Installation view © The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens

View at huntington.org

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Kehinde Wiley

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Kehinde Wiley

A Portrait of a Young Gentleman

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