

Kehinde Wiley's *Saint Adelaide*

Who is Kehinde Wiley?

Kehinde Wiley was born in Los Angeles, California in 1977 and currently resides in New York. He is an established and celebrated visual artist, best known for his portraits that place black men and women in traditional settings of original historical, religious or mythological portraits. His work encompasses oil paintings, photography, sculpture and stained glass.

As a child, Wiley's mother wanted him and his brother to stay off the streets and enrolled them in after-school art classes. At the age of 11, Wiley and his brother were part of a small group selected to spend a short time at an art school in Russia, just outside Saint Petersburg. It was here that Wiley developed his passion for portraiture.



Artist Kehinde Wiley, at the A New Republic exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 8 June 2016.

(Photo: Travis Fullerton, © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts)

Kehinde Wiley is a proud, black, LGBTQI / queer artist whose work is about racial equality and striving for equal representation in art. Inspired by portrait artists such as Reynolds, Gainsborough, Titian, and Ingres, among others, Wiley engages with the signs, symbols and visual rhetoric of the 'heroic', 'powerful', 'majestic' and the 'sublime' in his representation of black and brown men, and more recently women too.

Who are the people in Wiley's portraits?

Wiley's portraits are often based on historic portraits but depict contemporary young black men or women, dressed in their own clothes. Wiley uses a process called 'street casting' to find sitters for his paintings. He approaches ordinary people in the street who represent their community and invites them to be photographed. He then works on their portraits in his studio. He has produced several series of portraits in different locations across the world including Jamaica, China, Lagos and Dakar.

What is the significance of Wiley's artworks today?

In his recreation of old portraits, these modern black men and women take the place of the original subjects, in turn, assuming their position or power. He paints them as people who are worthy of being noticed, rather than background elements or in subservient positions.

Although he has recently began to include women in his portraiture, Wiley's work is predominantly focused on men. As an artist he challenges the historic depiction of

black and brown men in western art history and our present-day media by creating portraits where the male figures are dignified, confident, and at times vulnerable. These contemporary figures adopt poses and gestures that do not always align with what is considered masculine for black men today, playing with ideas of race, gender and sexuality.

Wiley's larger than life figures disturb and interrupt tropes of portrait painting, often blurring the boundaries between traditional and contemporary modes of representation and the critical portrayal of masculinity and physicality. He applies the visual vocabulary and conventions of glorification, history, wealth, and prestige to the models he uses. Many figures are dressed in their everyday clothing revealing the influence of contemporary fashion, style, and identity. Yet the figures are asked to assume poses found in historic paintings or sculptures. This juxtaposition of the "old" inhabited by the "new" adds a new provocative dimension to his artwork and our readings of it.

IN FOCUS: *Saint Adelaide* at The Stained Glass Museum (2014)

One of the largest pieces on display at The Stained Glass Museum is *Saint Adelaide* (2014), a contemporary portrait of a young black man by Kehinde Wiley (b. 1977).



The artwork was purchased for the museum's permanent collection with the help of Art Fund and Arts Council England/V&A Purchase Grant Fund and Arts Council England/SHARE Museums East Acquisitions Fund in 2021.

Saint Adelaide is one of a series of Wiley's freestanding stained glass panels depicting contemporary portraits of young black residents of Brooklyn, New York. The title and subject for *Saint Adelaide* (2014) were inspired by a 19th century stained glass window designed by the French painter Ingres for the Royal Chapel of Saint Ferdinand (or Notre-Dame de la Compassion) in Paris, France, and made by the Royal manufactory at Sevres around 1843.



Left: Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867), design for *Saint Adelaide*, 1842. © Louvre

Centre: Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) (Designer), Royal Manufactory of Sèvres (Maker), *Saint Adelaide*, 1842. St. Ferdinand Royal Chapel, Notre Dame de Compassion, Paris.

Right: Kehinde Wiley (b.1977), *Saint Adelaide*, 2014, stained glass, 251 x 116 cm. © The Stained Glass Museum (ELYGM:2021.1).

Saint Adelaide is one of three stained glass artworks inspired by Ingres' designs, the others being *Saint Remi* and *Saint Amelie*. All three were made to Wiley's designs by artisans in the Czech Republic and exhibited together at his first major retrospective exhibition *A New Republic* at the Brooklyn Museum in 2014.

In this series of stained glass artworks Wiley places contemporary portraits of black men in the place of traditional saints. These men mimic the form, pose, positioning and framing of the historic stained glass windows.



Left: Saint Adelaide, 2014, stained glass, 251 x 116 cm. © The Stained Glass Museum (ELYGM:2021.1).

Centre: Saint Remi, 2014. © Kehinde Wiley

Right: Saint Amelie, 2014. © Kehinde Wiley

In place of the Holy Roman Empress Adelaide (931-999) is Brooklyn model Mark Shavers. Shavers is shown standing on a plinth against a decorative blue background underneath an ornamental gothic frame and decorative border. He wears a halo and holds the same attributes as Ingres' Adelaide – a crossed orb, book and sceptre in his left hand, and a golden object in his right hand. It seems most likely that the golden object (also in the original by Ingres) is intended to represent a coin.

In a simple but powerful way Wiley's art addresses the representation of young black men in contemporary culture and challenges the conventions of western art.

As cultural institutions in the UK are beginning to confront the lasting impact of its imperialist history today, this acquisition enables us to explore and question attitudes towards race, gender and religion in stained glass.

