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Editors. "The Defining Artworks of 2021." ARTnews, December 6, 2021.

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After a tumultuous 2020 that involved the beginnings of a pandemic and worldwide upheaval, the art world began to slowly go back to a form of normal in 2021. Along with that shift came a number of developments that brought art-making in new and unexpected developments. There was the rise of a new medium, and there was the return of performance art. There were artworks that spoke to a continued reckoning with systemic racism, and there were powerful pieces that offered forms of healing in a time when illness was prevalent. There was no shortage of creativity on display. The list below, featuring 15 works that defined this year, attests to that.

Despite the fact that some were able to get vaccinated and resume social activities, not everyone went back to traveling internationally. Possibly for that reason, some cast their eyes toward artworks of the past and considered them anew. For that reason, this list includes several works that were produced decades ago but speak to the current moment.

To look back on the past 12 months in art-making, below is a survey of some of the most important artworks made or presented in a new light in 2021.



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## Kehinde Wiley, A Portrait of a Young Gentleman (2021)



At center, Kehinde Wiley, A Portrait of a Young Gentleman, 2021, flanked by (left) Joshua Reynolds, Diana (Sackville), Viscountess Crosbie, 1777, and (right) Thomas Gainsborough, Elizabeth (Jenks) Beaufoy, later Elizabeth Pycroft, ca. 1780.

Thomas Gainsborough's 18th-century painting *Blue Boy* is so iconic that the Huntington museum in San Marino, California, where it is housed, sells Christmas ornaments in the titular boy's image. And why wouldn't they? The blushing child, wearing bows on his satin shoes, is positively angelic. Those shoes, and the boy's impeccable outfit, telegraph his privileged status—heir to a fortune. Museum founders Henry and Arabella Huntington acquired the painting a hundred years ago, and the museum wisely decided to pay homage to that moment by giving it a contemporary counterpart. They ended up choosing Kehinde Wiley for the job. Wiley, the official portraitist to Barack Obama, posed a young Black man in the exact same manner as Gainsborough's boy, and outfitted him in vibrant streetwear. The two paintings were installed such that they faced one another. Wiley told NPR, "Here, I'm trying to allow for even the presentation of the painting to take on the nature of its meaning." —*Sarah Douglas*