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Curran, Colleen. "VMFA acquires massive sculpture by artist Kehinde Wiley, created in response to Confederate monuments." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*. June 20, 2019.

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Kehinde Wiley's "Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps," a rendering of "Napoleon Crossing the Alps" by Jacques-Louis David, shows how Wiley places contemporary subjects in classical settings. Sarah DeSantis/Brooklyn Museum

Prominent artist Kehinde Wiley is creating a massive sculpture of a young African American on a horse — modeled after one of Monument Avenue's Confederate statues — that will be installed in front of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

The VMFA acquisition is Wiley's first piece of public art, called "Rumors of War."

The piece is specifically modeled after the monument to Confederate Gen. J.E.B. Stuart, which Wiley saw when he was visiting Richmond for his career retrospective "Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic" at the VMFA in June 2016.

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“Kehinde Wiley became enamored with Richmond, the VMFA and particularly with Monument Avenue and the sculptures that populate it,” said Alex Nyerges, the director of the VMFA. “He was particularly struck by the monuments to the Confederate generals and the notion of the Lost Cause in the midst of a booming, 21st-century, hipster town. He was inspired by it and talked about it a lot. We didn’t realize at the time that it would result in this fantastic 21st-century take on monuments.”

Created on the same scale as the Stuart monument, which is roughly 30 feet tall and cast in bronze, “Rumors of War” is Wiley’s largest three-dimensional work to date.

Described by Nyerges as one of the “most recognized artists in the world,” Wiley painted the official presidential portrait of Barack Obama.

The 42-year-old artist has built his career creating larger-than-life, regal portraits of minorities in classical poses, such as young African American men in modern clothing on horseback or holding swords, positioned in ways typically associated with wealthy and powerful white men.

His paintings reference the Old Masters, with Wiley placing his contemporary subjects in classical settings.

“His work builds on the iconography of power — how individuals are memorialized and edified,” said Valerie Cassel Oliver, the museum’s curator of modern and contemporary art. “He wanted to take what he does in the two-dimensional form and take it to the next level.”

Mounted on a stone pedestal, “Rumors of War” depicts a young African American in urban streetwear, sitting astride a horse in a striking pose. It will be unveiled in New York’s Times Square on Sept. 27.

In December, the sculpture will be installed at the VMFA’s entrance on Arthur Ashe Boulevard, just a mile from the J.E.B. Stuart statue on Monument Avenue.

“It just seemed to be the right place to expand the conversation about monuments and who gets memorialized,” Oliver said. “What Kehinde Wiley does is celebrate the everyday person.”

A ribbon-cutting ceremony will be held after the installation.

“The inspiration for ‘Rumors of War’ is war — is an engagement with violence,” Wiley said in a statement. “Art and violence have for an eternity held a strong narrative grip with each other. ‘Rumors of War’ attempts to use the language of equestrian portraiture to both embrace and subsume the fetishization of state violence. ... To have the ‘Rumors of War’ sculpture presented in such a context

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lays bare the scope and scale of the project in its conceit to expose the beautiful and terrible potentiality of art to sculpt the language of domination.”

Since 2015, the VMFA has been building its African American art collection with the goal of becoming one of the top three in the world for African American art.

Although the museum declined to comment on the specific price, Nyerges said, “It is the most expensive acquisition we’ve ever made in our history.”

The acquisition is funded by an endowment of private donations, not state money.