Carrier, David. “Kehinde Wiley Seizes the Throne.” *Hyperallergic.* February 15, 2020.

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“Jacques-Louis David Meets Kehinde Wiley” at the Brooklyn Museum: installation view; photo: Jonathan Dorado (all images courtesy the Brooklyn Museum)

In a grand decorated, nicely theatrical gallery, with more red in the carpet and on the walls than in Eugène Delacroix’s “Death of Sardanapalus” (1827), *Jacques Louis-David Meets Kehinde Wiley* at the Brooklyn Museum stages a dramatic confrontation.

On the right is Jacques-Louis David’s “Bonaparte Crossing the Alps” (1800–01). And on the left, Kehinde Wiley’s “Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps” (2005), his appropriation of that picture. His painting is slightly bigger and has a somewhat more elaborate frame.

In the place of Napoleon, Wiley depicts a young African American man in contemporary dress, swaps David’s landscape image for a gold-and-red design, and removes the solders in the background struggling to push a cannon over the Alps. The exhibition includes, also, a sculpture by Wiley; wall texts providing useful information about the historical context of David’s picture; and a marvelous video in which Wiley describes his picture.

In a characteristically magisterial essay, his introduction to *Art About Art* (1978) by Jean Lipman and Richard Marshall, Leo Steinberg traced the history of artistic appropriations. By calling attention to its sources, a painting may mobilize our critical awareness of traditions, demonstrating that what appears to be a novel image is, in fact, drawing upon older works.

Jacques-Louis David, "Bonaparte Crossing the Alps" (1800-01), oil on canvas, 102 1/3 x 87 inches (Collection of Château de Malmaison, photo by RMN-GP)

Because Wiley's image is so closely modeled on this famous David, no particular acumen is needed to see its source, certainly not in this setting. The wall text displays a reproduction of a history painting by Hippolyte Paul Delaroche, "Napoleon Bonaparte Crossing the Alps" (1853), in which the French ruler rides on a mule. As the text notes, David's picture is "not meant to be historically accurate," but is rather "propaganda at its most legible and persuasive." In fact, David's picture was so popular that five versions were painted. And it appeared, in the 1960s, on advertisements for Courvoisier cognac.

The interesting question, then, is how to critically judge Wiley's appropriation of "Bonaparte Crossing the Alps." Here there are two seemingly opposed ways to proceed: We may believe that by painting this simulacra of David's picture, with a Black man in the place of Napoleon, he has deconstructed the rhetoric of white European power. We all know that David's image of Napoleon is a politically pernicious construct, like many images of rulers. How useful, still, to see that demonstrated so dramatically.

But there is, also, an alternative way to read this visual evidence. By borrowing his image so self-consciously from tradition, as this exhibition emphasizes, Wiley calls attention to the lasting power of David's iconic picture. "Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps" reminds us that "Bonaparte Crossing the Alps," which maybe seemed to have become mere kitsch, is still a potent rhetorical statement. Indeed, since Wiley's painting offers such an effective copy of the prior picture, could that suggest that he is unwilling (or even unable) to create an equally flamboyant original image? The Romantic flourishes he parodies in "Napoleon" are certainly absent from the portrait he made of another history-making leader, President Barack Obama.

So far as I can see, then, the meaning of Wiley's "Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps" is indeterminate. Its political significance is essentially ambiguous. And if this is correct, then nothing the artist (or anyone else) can do will be able to resolve this quandary.

Kehinde Wiley, "Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps" (2005), oil on canvas, 108 x 108 inches (Brooklyn Museum, partial gift of Suzi and Andrew Booke Cohen in memory of Ilene R. Booke and in honor of Arnold L. Lehman; Mary Smith Dorward Fund, and Will K. Jacobs, Jr Fund; © Kehinde Wiley; photo courtesy Brooklyn Museum)

Just as the famous rabbit-duck diagram can be seen as a rabbit and as a duck, so Wiley's painting can be seen as denuding of the rhetoric power of David's picture, and as capturing its power in a tribute to the French master. And while the artist's supporters may dislike this analysis, which I grant is politically tricky, they too, so I hope, will recognize that this conclusion is inescapable, for it depends upon examining Wiley's basic procedure.

Myself, I don't see this analysis as critiquing Wiley's progressive political claims, which are convincing and obviously significant. It is important right now to deconstruct our traditional images of white male power. Rather, I admire his extreme ingenuity (and that of the curators who organized this setting) for creating such a visually forceful presentation.
A generation ago a great deal of appropriation art in the galleries wrestled with the claims of originality. When such different artists as Sherrie Levine and Mike Bidlo created simulacra of modernist masterpieces, works all but indistinguishable from their sources, they questioned how critics could critically evaluate this achievement. What Wiley has done here, with brilliant success in my judgment, is demonstrate how this very same argument applies to his picture dealing with race.

What is at stake, "Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps" demands to know, when a contemporary African-American replaces a white European imperialist? It's one thing to work within and extend the tradition, as many contemporary artists of all races do, and another to play with fire, so to speak, as Wiley does here, not simply referencing the David but swallowing it whole. What does he intend to do after seizing Napoleon's power? His boldness is totally admirable. These observations apply also, with some qualifications, to the much-discussed history paintings by Kent Monkman, which have recently been installed in the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and rely, too, upon quotations from prior masterpieces, though they are original compositions.

There is no one set of observations, though, that can apply across the range and variety of Wiley's other paintings, which I admire greatly, or to his magnificent portrait of President Obama, which I know only from reproduction. But that's another story for another review.

Jacques Louis-David meets Kehinde Wiley *continues at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (200 Eastern Parkway, Prospect Park, Brooklyn) through May 10.*

The exhibition is organized by the Brooklyn Museum and Musée national des châteaux de Malmaison et Bois-Préau. The Brooklyn presentation is curated by Lisa Small, Senior Curator, European Art, and Eugenie Tsai, John and Barbara Vogelstein Senior Curator, Contemporary Art, Brooklyn Museum.