

# SEANKELLY

Liou, Caroline Ellen. "Looking at Kehinde Wiley and Thomas Gainsborough Side by Side."  
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## HYPERALLERGIC



*Kehinde Wiley's "A Portrait of a Young Gentleman" (2021) (© Kehinde Wiley, collection of the Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, and commissioned through Roberts Projects, Los Angeles)*

LOS ANGELES — Over the past weekend, I attended a very fancy press preview (complete with chocolate croissants!) at the very fancy Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California. The institution, known for its somewhat staid and largely Eurocentric art collection, was unveiling its newest commission to be added to its permanent collection: a portrait by Kehinde Wiley inspired by Thomas Gainsborough's "A Portrait of a Young Gentleman" (famously known as "The Blue Boy"), the new acquisition celebrating the centennial of the Huntington's purchase of the original painting.

Like many museums of late, the Huntington is working to become more inclusive, engaging in a long-term initiative to invite contemporary artists such as Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Alex Israel, and Monica Majoli to activate its storied collection, in an effort to address the lack of diversity in its canon. It is perhaps no surprise that Wiley's oeuvre is a favorite among curators seeking to inject new relevance into their collection of European masters, as Wiley's work (the most famous of which is his portrait of former president Barack Obama) has always functioned in a rather unidirectional philosophy of respectability politics in its objective to insert

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the Black body into the canon of classical figurative painting. And perhaps like many of you, I was feeling a bit skeptical sitting in a sea of mostly older, mostly white, art-world insiders oohing and aahing over the new addition to the Huntington's portrait gallery.



*Thomas Gainsborough, "The Blue Boy" (ca. 1770), installation view in the Thornton Portrait Gallery at the Huntington (photo by Joshua White, the Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens)*

Upon taking a closer look, however, I changed my mind. Hung directly across from Gainsborough's portrait, Wiley's painting of an anonymous Senegalese man electrifies the room with its palette of shocking purples and oranges, set off against its ornate black matte frame. The figure's pose is the same as the original, a casual contrapposto with one hand resting on his hip and the other hanging loose to the side, fingers holding onto the edges of his hat. His stance slightly wider, his gaze more confrontational than the Blue Boy's more demure expression. Like the reference image, Wiley's version is rendered with extreme technical precision and virtuosity. The only differences are apparently slight: the present-day clothing of the figure, the almost-psychedelic effect of the painting's saturated hues, its decorative pattern creeping over the foreground. And, of course, the blackness of the figure. Which is to say, the difference is earth-shattering.

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*Installation view in the Thornton Portrait Gallery at the Huntington. Left to right: Joshua Reynolds, "Diana (Sackville), Viscountess Crosbie" (1777), Kehinde Wiley, "A Portrait of a Young Gentleman" (2021), Thomas Gainsborough, "Elizabeth (Jenks) Beaufoy, later Elizabeth Pycroft" (ca. 1780) (photo by Joshua White, the Huntington Library, Art Museum and Botanical Gardens)*

By inserting a Black subject into the conventions of traditional portraiture, Wiley asks the viewer to consider who has the right to be the subject of a worthy portrait, or more broadly, a work of art. Whereas Gainsborough intended his portrait to be a *tour de force* demonstrating his painterly skill — clearly visible in his brushwork depicting the soft blush of the boy's flushed cheeks, the stiffness of the silk fabric, and the extravagant piles of ruffles and lace — Wiley's portraits are not about painting. They are about representation. And despite that it is not always enough, representation still matters. As a medium, painting — and one could argue even art— is inherently about representation, and sometimes that's all we can ask it to do.

*Kehinde Wiley's "A Portrait of a Young Gentleman" will continue at the Thornton Portrait Gallery at the Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens (1151 Oxford Road, San Marino, Calif.) through January 3, 2022.*