

# TEMPLON



KEHINDE WILEY

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## Two Napoleons in Brooklyn, One in Timberlands

The Brooklyn Museum has hung Jacques-Louis David's "Bonaparte Crossing the Alps" alongside an adaptation by Kehinde Wiley. It's a face-off between two visions of the political power of art.



Kehinde Wiley's "Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps" (2005), left, and Jacques-Louis David's "Bonaparte Crossing the Alps" (1801) shown in a composite photo of the exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum. Photographs by Emily Andrews for The New York Times

By **Jason Farago**

Feb. 12, 2020

A French masterpiece has come to New York for the first time ever, and has been greeted with a curious silence.

It's Jacques-Louis David's "Bonaparte Crossing the Alps," from 1801, and you know it even if you've never seen it in person, so enduring is its propaganda. To commemorate Napoleon's victory over Austria at the Battle of Marengo, David painted him charging up a mountain on a piebald steed, right arm pointing skyward, trademark bicorne on his

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head, cool and cocksure as his horse bucks its front heels. In copies the artist and his studio made afterward Napoleon wears a red cape, but here, in the original, he's wrapped in a mantle of gold, starchy and solid in the Alpine air.

It's actually here! Usually, to see "Bonaparte Crossing the Alps," you have to trek to the suburbs of Paris, where it hangs in the Château de Malmaison, the home of Empress Joséphine. Until May, you'll find it in a little-trafficked gallery on the fourth floor of the Brooklyn Museum — and it is not alone.

In a face-off between two visions of the political power of art, the museum has hung another equestrian portrait: ["Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps,"](#) by Kehinde Wiley, which pictures a young black man in the same pose, the bicorne replaced by a bandanna, the riding boots swapped for Timberlands. The two Napoleons appear alongside a few engravings, cartoons and imperial medals from the museum's collection, in the exhibition ["Jacques-Louis David Meets Kehinde Wiley,"](#) which was first presented at the Malmaison last year.

Mr. Wiley painted the official portrait of our last president but likes ornament and glitz as much as the incumbent one. His painting and David's appear in Brooklyn under spotlights, in a room carpeted Oscar-night red. Between the canvases is an ostentatious gold monogram of the two artists' initials, framed by heavy velvet curtains. It's a mix of imperial and urban forms of bling, two parallel forms of bluster and self-marketing.

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Detail from Jacques-Louis David's 1801 work, "Bonaparte Crossing the Alps," at the Brooklyn Museum. Political propaganda, it shows David inventing a fresh iconography for a modern ruler, in which authority derives not from divine right but from valor. Emily Andrews for The New York Times



Detail from Kehinde Wiley's "Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps" (2005). The artist draws forth some of David's themes: iconicity and masculinity, empire and conquest. Emily Andrews for The New York Times

We may have reached a point when Mr. Wiley is a bigger name than David, the official court painter of the First French Empire. Whatever, times change. But I've been thinking about how concerned young audiences are with the social impact of art — and for them, there may be no greater case study than Jacques-Louis David to see how far-left politics can shape painting for good and ill.

Born during the reign of Louis XV, David in the 1780s became the leading figure of Neo-Classicism. In pictures like ["The Oath of the Horatii,"](#) now at the Louvre, and ["The Death of Socrates,"](#) at the Met, he purged French art of its Rococo frippery and foreshadowed the moral s

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stringency of the Reign of Terror. When the Bastille fell David joined the Jacobins, and he designed the Revolution's propaganda both on canvas (Marat dead in the bath) and in the streets, where he masterminded lavish parades featuring huge effigies of Reason and Liberty.

You wonder about the political power of art? David took his politics out of the studio and right into the new legislature. He served as a member of the National Convention, where he voted to deliver Louis XVI to the guillotine. Many artists aim to speak truth to power. Only David actually drew blood.

After Robespierre's fall, David went to jail twice. When he got out he stepped back from politics — but by 1799 France had a new boss, and David channeled his propagandistic genius into a new vessel. Napoleon had taken power in a bloodless coup d'état, and the next year he solidified his political supremacy with a victory in Piedmont, where the 30-year-old general surprised the Austrians by traversing the Alps's most hazardous pass.

He wanted the victory to become a legend, and David delivered. Instead of the mule Napoleon actually rode, he provided a near-untamed war horse. The billowing gold mantle recalls the Roman and Italian sculptures Napoleon had recently pillaged and brought to the Louvre. Napoleon has no weapon drawn, and doesn't even wear a glove on his raised right hand. David has invented a wholly new iconography for a modern ruler, bereft of the old monarchical symbols, in which authority derives not from divine right but from valor.

In Mr. Wiley's "Napoleon," from 2005, the Alpine setting has given way to an abstract ground of red and gold brocade, speckled, strange to say, by swimming spermatozoa. The artist found his model via what he called "street casting": He is a young man called Williams, his name inscribed on the Alpine rock next to "Bonaparte."

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The “Napoleon” is one of Mr. Wiley’s better paintings. His translations of the 18th- and early 19th-century French tradition for black American models — he has also made paintings after Fragonard and Géricault — have always been his most interesting for how they update traditions of ornament and how they poke at Enlightenment promises of universalism and freedom. (The British-Nigerian artist [Yinka Shonibare](#), with his wax-print sculptures drawn from Gainsborough and Fragonard, has plumbed more deeply the Enlightenment’s mixed inheritance.)

Comparing and contrasting is the foundation of Art History 101, and the Brooklyn Museum’s pairing does draw forth some of David’s themes: iconicity and masculinity, empire and conquest. (Napoleon reinstated slavery in the French colonies in 1802; the Jacobins had abolished it eight years previously.) Yet what does this contrast reveal about Mr. Wiley’s painting? Does it exceed simple substitution? Is it more profound than, say, [Banksy’s pastiche](#) on a Paris wall of an equestrian in the same pose as Napoleon, but wearing a burqa?

There are passages, especially the brocaded background and the naughty sperm, that offer hints of transgression. Unlike David’s Napoleon, Mr. Wiley’s Napoleon is as teasing as it is heroic, and lightly queers the masculine pretensions of military painting. But by and large, his art has treated the mere *presence* of a black sitter as a sufficient corrective to the oversights of European art. (The artist drives that point home in a video in the next gallery.)

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Detail from "Bonaparte Crossing the Alps" (1801). Emily Andrews for The New York Times



Mr. Wiley's Napoleon, seen here in detail, is as teasing as it is heroic, and lightly tweaks the masculine pretensions of military painting. His rider wears camouflage pants and Timberland boots. Emily Andrews for The New York Times

Contemporary art ought to offer more: not just clapping back at the past, but reconstituting it into newer, fresher languages. Think here of [Kerry James Marshall](#), [Njideka Akunyili Crosby](#), and other black figurative painters for whom European painting is one vital source among many that they assume as part of a global inheritance.

Right now is a rumbling, exciting moment for places like the Brooklyn Museum, which is taking on the challenge of exposing the past inequities of art and art institutions. But what if public school students here on a field trip encountered David's Napoleon alongside a portrait of a black French citizen by one of David's students, such as Anne-Louis Girodet's

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“Portrait of Citizen Belley,” in which a freed slave wears a tricolor sash? Might that, more than Mr. Wiley’s Napoleon, help them see themselves in the art of the past, and inspire a love for art of all ages?

What if students compared David’s Napoleon with the nearly contemporaneous equestrian portrait of [Toussaint Louverture](#), the leader of the Haitian revolution, nicknamed “the black Napoleon”? Or — if we are interested in the construction of power via images — might they learn more from seeing David’s Napoleon with [Mr. Wiley’s portrait of Barack Obama](#), which will tour to the Brooklyn Museum next year?

OK, these may be impractical proposals, any one of which would require major diplomatic lifting. I’m not raising them to knock this David-Wiley pairing per se: The Brooklyn Museum got the extraordinary loan, and has executed the hang nicely. What I am asking is whether the now frequent refrain that “representation matters” goes far enough, and whether we can derive models of engagement with the art of the past that go deeper than one-for-one substitutions.

We have a shining recent example of a show that did more: [“Posing Modernity.”](#) Denise Murrell’s watershed 2018 exhibition at the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University, which illuminated the presence of the black model in paintings from Manet to Matisse. Do that for the art of France’s early imperial era, bring the same keen gaze on race and representation that she brought to the later 19th century, and you might inspire a new generation of painters to draw more deeply from the past.

As for David, he proved that a great painter can make a great propagandist. Mr. Wiley shares with him a commitment to clear symbols with direct impact that made David the ideal artist of political power, and makes Mr. Wiley quite nice for the age of Instagram.

But don’t hate me for suggesting that the most enduring reinterpretation of Jacques-Louis David by a contemporary American artist is not Mr. Wiley’s portrait, but a more recent work. It’s [Beyoncé’s video](#) for her song “Apes\*\*t,” shot in the Louvre, in which she and her dancers wriggle in

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formation before David's epic canvas of Napoleon's coronation. She understood that, to establish your place in the museum, invention will carry you much further than mimicry.

## **Jacques-Louis David Meets Kehinde Wiley**

Through May 10 at the Brooklyn Museum; 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn; 718-638-5000, [brooklynmuseum.org](http://brooklynmuseum.org).

Jason Farago is an art critic for The Times. He reviews exhibitions in New York and abroad, with a focus on global approaches to art history. Previously he edited *Even*, an art magazine he co-founded. In 2017 he was awarded the inaugural Rabkin Prize for art criticism. [@jsf](https://twitter.com/jsf)

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