

TEMPLON

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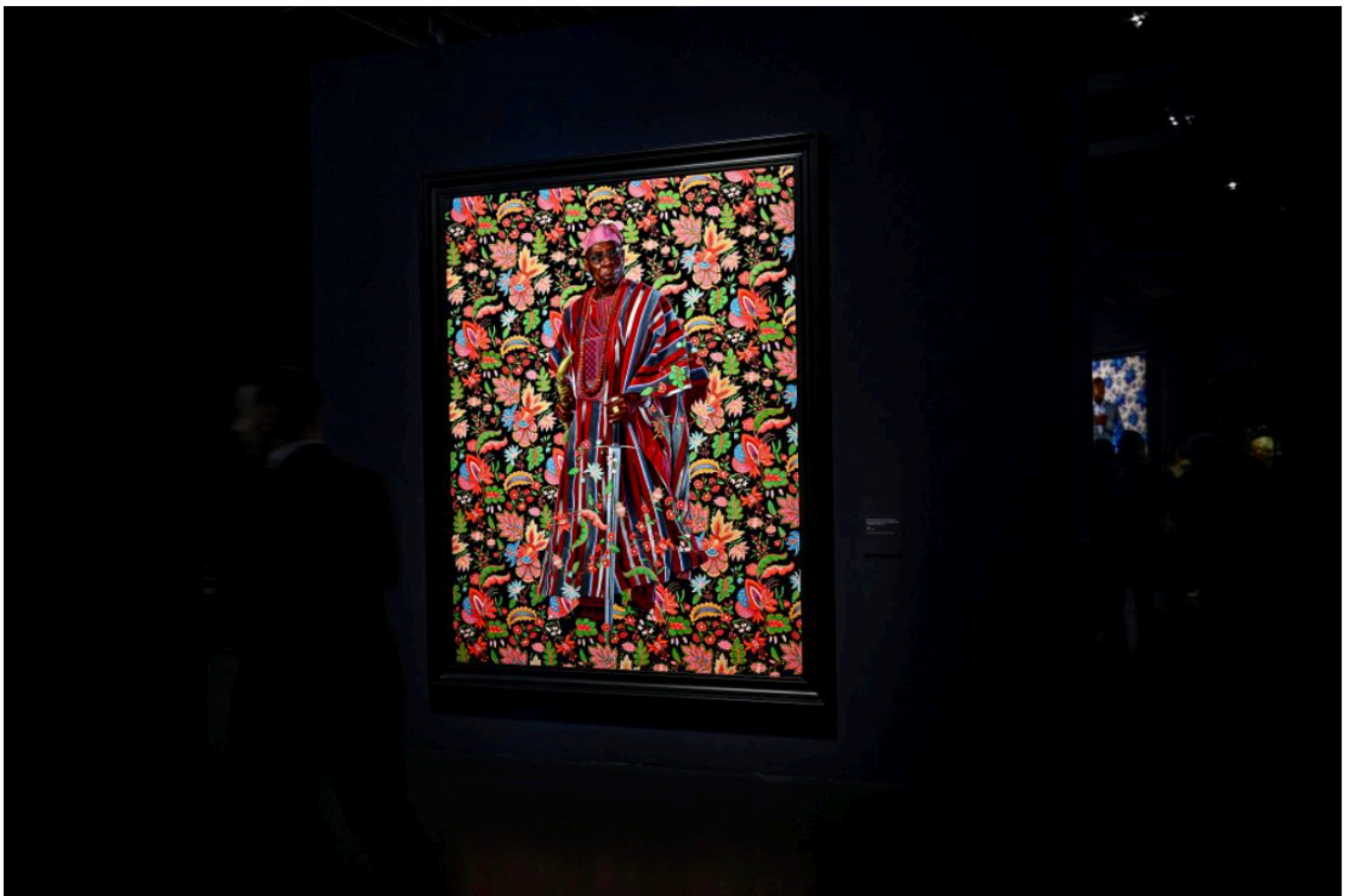
KEHINDE WILEY

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See Kehinde Wiley's New Suite of Presidential Portraits That Depict African Heads of State With an Ornate 'Vocabulary of Power'

The artist's newest body of work, which he has quietly been working on since 2012, debuted today in Paris.

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Portrait of Olusegun Abasanjo, former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2023) on view at "Kehinde Wiley: A Maze of Power" at The Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac museum in Paris, 2023. Photo: Julien de Rosa/AFP via Getty Images.

A new series of presidential portraits by Kehinde Wiley just went on view in Paris—but you won't find Barack Obama's face among them. On view, instead, are ornate paintings of Macky Sall, Nana Akufo-Addo, and other African heads of state.

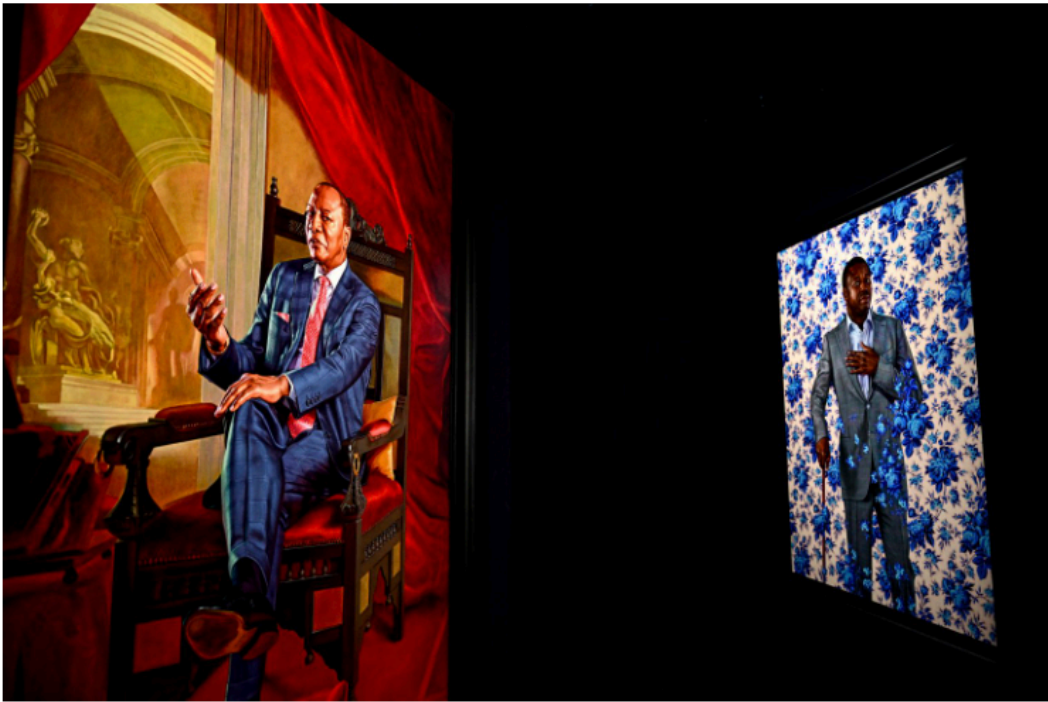
These make up Wiley's "A Maze of Power" series, which the artist has quietly been working on since 2012—years before he was tapped by President Obama. The new artworks are, in Wiley's words, an effort to look at the African presidencies through the lens of Western European art history.

"What happens when we use the language of aesthetic domination in the context of Africa in the 21st century?" the artist said in a short film he made to accompany the project. "Is it possible to use the language of empire, as it related to painting, in an African context, and arrive on the other side with something completely new? This body of work supposes that there is."



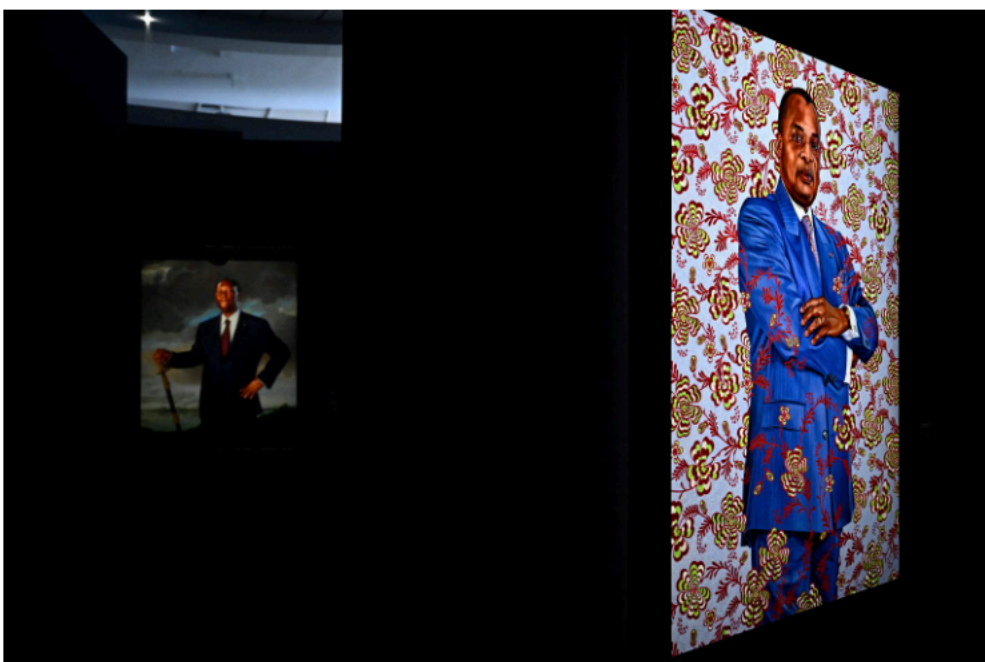
The portraits debuted today in a Galerie Templon-sponsored exhibition at Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac. Among those depicted in the show are Olusegun Obasanjo, the former President of Nigeria; Hery Rajaonarimampianina, the former leader of Madagascar; and Félix Tshisekedi, the current President of Democratic Republic of Congo.

Wiley, who initially set out to paint all 54 African presidents, visited each of his subjects on their own turf, in sites of their choosing. He brought with him a book of aristocratic, noble, and military portraits from the 17th to 19th centuries, introducing what he called a "vocabulary of power that each one of the presidents could choose to work with, or choose to ignore."



Installation view of “Kehinde Wiley: A Maze of Power” at The Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac museum in Paris, 2023. Photo: Julien de Rosa/AFP via Getty Images.

The “Maze of Power” referred to in the show’s title is one that exists between Wiley and his subjects, the artist explained. “‘The Maze of Power’ is the maze that’s being run by me the artist, but also by the sitter—the sitter deciding how they want to be seen, me responding to their set of decisions,” Wiley said in his film. “Each one of us are responding to a received history of image-making, power, and the ways in which art function within that dynamic.”



Portrait of Denis Sassou Nguesso, President of the Congo's Republic (2023) on view at “Kehinde Wiley: A Maze of Power” at The Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac museum in Paris, 2023. Photo: Julien de Rosa/AFP via Getty Images.

In producing his series, Wiley made a point not to talk politics, just pictures. The series, he explained, is not a “celebration of individual leaders,” but a “look at the presidency itself.”

“The very act of creating a set of portraits in Europe, and now using that language in Africa, creates an... interesting provocation,” the artist went on. “This is an invitation for the viewer to expand the possibilities of what it means to look at art in Africa, about Africa, and about power.”

“Kehinde Wiley: A Maze of Power” is on view at Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, 37 Quai Jacques Chirac, Paris, France, through January 14, 2024.