



BkM Art Hangouts
Process

Staged Photographs Inspired by Kehinde Wiley

Brooklyn Museum

Goals

In Art Hangouts, learners will:

- Look closely at a work from the collection
- Explore new artistic processes through close looking, conversation, and art-making
- Reflect on their own art-making processes

In this lesson, learners will:

- Observe Kehinde Wiley's *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*
- Create a self-portrait inspired by a work from the collection
- Consider how they might use facial expression, pose, clothing, and props to share part of their identity

Materials

- Camera (or cell phone camera)
- Clothing and props
- Paper or fabric to create a background
- Tape

BkM Art Hangouts are adapted from a series of virtual classes that took place in spring 2021. These thirty-minute lesson plans are designed for teachers and caregivers to engage learners with works from our collection and to explore hands-on, artistic processes. Lessons are created for ages 9–14, but can be adapted for any age group. In each lesson, participants will look closely at a work of art, consider how an artist finds inspiration, and create their own artworks inspired by these approaches. Art Hangouts are open ended, and students are invited to continue working on their projects even after the lesson ends.

Kehinde Wiley

American, born 1977

Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps (2005) is emblematic of Kehinde Wiley's long-standing and complicated engagement with the grand tradition of European portrait painting. The artist states that he is simultaneously "drawn toward that flame and wanting to blow it out." Wiley's work not only reflects his deep understanding of a portrait's ability to convey the power of the sitter (portraits are artworks that show people), but also highlights the fact that brown and Black people have been written out of mainstream history. Wiley redresses this omission by offering an alternative narrative.

This painting takes as its point of departure Jacques-Louis David's well-known portrait *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps* (1800–1), which commemorated the renowned French general Napoleon Bonaparte. In keeping with his practice, Wiley preserves the pose and composition in David's work, while swapping the heroic figure of Napoleon for a contemporary Black man wearing camouflage fatigues and Timberland boots. He also transforms the blue sky in David's painting into a red background embellished with gold floral motifs. Jewel-like sperm cells scattered across the surface refer to sexuality and a type of hypermasculinity that Wiley associates with aggression, whether military or otherwise. On the rocky outcropping in the foreground, inscribed with names of great historical military commanders, is the addition of "WILLIAMS," the model's last name. Aside from his name, little is known about the man sitting in the saddle, in contrast to the general whose role he assumes in Wiley's painting.



Kehinde Wiley (American, born 1977). *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 108 x 108 in. (274.3 x 274.3 cm). 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 William K. Jacobs, Jr. Fund, 2015.53. © Kehinde Wiley. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

● Part 1: Look!

Invite students to look at Wiley's [*Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*](#) and David's [*Bonaparte Crossing the Alps*](#).

→ What is similar about these two paintings? What is different?

Share that Napoleon Bonaparte was a powerful and renowned French general. Wiley paints Williams, an everyday man he met on the streets of Harlem, like Bonaparte. The artist invited Williams back to his studio and asked him to choose an image from an art history book. Williams chose Jacques-Louis David's portrait of Napoleon, and Wiley then photographed and painted Williams in the same pose.

→ What do you notice about Williams's pose, facial expression, and clothing?

Wiley says, "If you look at the paintings that I love in art history, these are the paintings where great, powerful men are being celebrated on the big walls of museums throughout the world. What feels really strange is not to be able to see a reflection of myself in that world."

Source: [cbsnews.com/video/kehinde-wiley-creates-paradigm-shift-in-the-art-world/](https://www.cbsnews.com/video/kehinde-wiley-creates-paradigm-shift-in-the-art-world/)

→ Can you make a connection between this quote and the artwork?

● Part 2: Explore!

Kehinde Wiley made portraits of Black men taking on the poses of famous figures in iconic artworks. He addresses the question of who gets to see themselves reflected in museum spaces, and seeks to expand the representation of Black people within these spaces. Wiley believes everyone should be able to feel powerful through posture. In this activity, you will create a self-portrait photograph inspired by a work of art. How will you portray yourself? What artwork will you use as your inspiration?

Step 1: Choose an inspiration artwork. Browse our [collection](#), and choose an artwork that inspires you. Think about what you want to convey in your portrait.

→ Example: In Wiley's work, the model, Williams, chose a powerful image of a war general. I chose a portrait of George Washington to use as my inspiration, in the hope that one day soon we will have a woman president.

Step 2: Gather materials. Collect items to recreate the elements of your inspiration artwork. Consider what you will keep and what you will change. Use fabric or paper to create a backdrop on a wall as well as your own clothing and props to customize the portrait. What will your choices say about you?

→ Example: I took on the pose of George Washington. I replicated the background of the original painting by taping tissue paper and scarves to the wall. I also added my own books for a personal touch.



← Project in Progress

● Part 2: Explore!

Step 3: Prepare your set and costume. Use the materials you've collected to create your setting. Tape things against a blank wall, use existing furniture, or even find a place outdoors. Choose an outfit to wear. What will your clothes say about you? Is your look inspired by the clothes in the artwork?

Tip: You can crop your picture after you take it, so don't worry about things outside the frame of your photograph.

Step 4: Take your photograph. You might ask a friend to take it for you, or you can use the self-timer mode on your phone or camera. Crop your photo afterward to show the view you want.

A Finished Project! ↓



● Part 3: Reflect!

What elements did you keep from your inspiration artwork?
What did you change?

What does your portrait say about you?

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