

Wiley's *Philip the Fair*: David Reinterpreted

Wiley and David

When we think of Neo-Classical artists, artists such as Girodet, Broc, and David come to mind. Rarely do we see in modern day art an artist who takes the famous portraits or historical paintings of important figures and reinterpret them. Kehinde Wiley does just this.

Kehinde Wiley is a native from Los Angeles, who now lives in New York. He has taken his education and used it to do amazing things with paintings. He takes young black, African American men, takes photos of them, and places them in a portrait. He has also been known to take photos of famous black African American men and put them in his portraits as well. His style is unique, and his paintings cannot help but make the viewer more curious as to the message he is sending. Wiley takes these photos of young African Americans, and puts them in place of famous white subjects from well known paintings by artists from various time periods, more commonly the neo-classical period. (Kehinde Wiley Studio)

Jacques-Louis David was an artist who focused on the male ideals; he painted historical paintings on a large scale with masculine subjects. He incorporated the Roman and Greek classical ideals in his works. David was born and raised in 19th century France. His influences can be seen before, during, and after the Revolutionary War in France. David played a huge part in the French Revolutionary War as far as influencing the art world, political propaganda, and politics in general. He was made head of the French Academy. Many of his works included political propaganda of important figures in the military, revolution, and those with imperial

status. After the war, and coming out of exile, David was made court painter to Napoleon. He painted portraits and historical paintings for Napoleon in accordance with the wishes and wants of Napoleon, and never his own. During this time David also did a number of portraits for French Dukes, Counts, and other people of high status. David's students from his studio can also be seen throughout 19th century France. David studied a lot in France and Rome, including studies at the Academy. His figures are very Greco-Roman with stoic qualities in many of his historical paintings.

Philip the Fair

The painting in the Mint collection that I have chosen to use for my paper is titled *Philip the Fair* (2006), by Kehinde Wiley. *Philip the Fair* makes a historical reference to King Philip IV of France, who was nicknamed "the fair", due to appearance. The male figure provokes a message of masculinity and importance. (Kehinde Wiley) He paints very heroic styled figures, but incorporates so much history into his works. From incorporating French Rococo style to contemporary urban street settings and figures, he meshes the two together to create truly unique works. He combines images of power, and then uses them to portray masculine figures. The painting was inspired by a 13th Century stained glass piece from the collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum, which was featuring Philip the Fair in the same pose. It was originally in the Cathedral Notre Dame of Reims. Philip the Fair was king of France from 1285-1314, and ruled until his death. His appearance often covered his "treacherous nature". Wiley uses a pattern and ornamentation around the painting that "juxtaposes" the masculine portrait with a variety of

flowers around the edges, which Wiley calls “floration”. All of the backgrounds in his portraits are decorative and ornamental. The particular pattern that he uses was originally from Asia, but it was used in Europe as well. During the 18th century it was referred to as *Indianische blummen*. (Wiley)

Kehinde Wiley attended Yale University for his MFA and graduated in 2001. After receiving his MFA he became an artist in Residence at the Studio Museum of Harlem. Los Angeles native, he lives in New York currently where his studio is based. His interest in portraiture came from his childhood in California. At age 11, Kehinde can recall painting,

“My mother took me to art classes on the weekends. As a kid growing up in Los Angeles in the eighties my mom took me to museums too. She is a linguist, and art was another language to her. I loved the Huntington Library galleries. Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough and John Constable were some of my favorites...It was sheer spectacle, and of course beauty. When I started painting, I started looking at technical proficiency, manipulation of paint, color and composition. The portraits were hyperreal. All the detail on the face was really well crafted, and the brushwork, the clothing, and the landscape were more fluid and playful...It wasn't until later that I started thinking about issues of desire, objectification and fantasy in portraiture...and of course colonialism. But I was just an adolescent, and these paintings were just powerful.” (Knafo)

While in residency in 2001 at the Studio Museum of Harlem, something happened to Kehinde one afternoon. It would change the course of his art work and all that he had learned in school. Kehinde says that one particular afternoon he was

on his way from 126th Street and Morningside to the Studio. As he was walking he found a balled up, wrinkled piece of paper sitting on the sidewalk. It had a dirty color photograph on the front of it, which turned out to be a mug shot of a young black man. On the front of the paper it read “CONFIDENTIAL: FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT PURPOSES ONLY.” The man’s name, whose picture appeared on the paper, was written on top. Everything about the paper “disturbed” Wiley. He picked up the document and pinned it up on his studio wall. It hung there for a year, and became the inspiration for his first series, *Passing/Posing*. (Knafo)

The Two Napoleons

Kehinde takes ordinary African American men, and social symbols and puts them in a historical painting, which traditionally has been reserved to preserve people of elite, needless to say, the white elite. (Knafo) It is interesting to watch as Kehinde takes paintings done by famous white neoclassicists, and places young black African American males in the picture, removing the white figure from the picture, as we see here in David’s Napoleon. The only things that have been changed is the backdrop, and the subject matter. He has taken one of the men from his photographs, and just as the man is dressed in the photo, placed him in place of Napoleon. Wiley offers a type of “symbolic redemption” in the portraits for the young black men,

“I create something akin to the diorama in that the figure is situated in a contrived, constructed space, but I’m also borrowing from images from, say, the ascension of Christ and placing Black bodies there. The whole purpose of this project is to manufacture a sense of eminent visibility, and to draw upon its strength

as a historical marker, as referent to something we all recognize intrinsically, much like when I was a youngster looking at those early English portrait paintings.”

(Wiley)

David paints Napoleon as a heroic figure, and uses it as propaganda. The painting was very Baroque like in the fact that it is very decorated and detailed. He presents Napoleon as a masculine figure, almost like a new king of great imperial status. David makes Napoleon seem heroic in a grand sense, making him appear strong, non effeminate, and prideful.

The Equestrian

He gives the black man a status that they could never have by placing them in the place of the white subjects. Sometimes the connections between the paintings are subtle and almost go un-noticed. He quotes David in some of his paintings with the changing of the subject matter in the portraits. He then adds his own signature style into the painting with the backgrounds he creates. However as we can see it is the same painting: it is the same horse, same pose with the hand outstretched on one side and the other bent across the chest, the straight back, and the hat in hand.

LL Cool J

Kehinde Wiley incorporates his personal life into these paintings as well in a way most of us would never notice. Wiley, who is gay, uses an erotic impulse in his works, and his subject matters are limited to “good-looking young black men”, and the occasional and rather androgynous man. Wiley says, “I want to aestheticize masculine beauty.” (Knafo)

Bara

It is often said that without David's paintings we would not know much about the French Revolution, and therefore David is often said to be a painter of the French Revolution. (Brookner, 95) Bara was a French Revolutionary figure. David paints Bara as a Greek youthful looking male possessing the idea of Greek beauty. He makes Bara appear as a youthful effeminate martyr as you see Bara lying almost gracefully on the ground.

The floral backgrounds of Kehinde, combined with the subject matter's look and pose, create an effeminate looking person. The interesting thing with Kehinde's image is that we cannot see the person's face. He covers part of his body as he is laying down making the man appear as an anonymous clothed male. When put up against Bara there is little difference in the qualities the two subjects possesses. The lightness of the body, long hair, gentle fingertips, graceful placement of the legs. Nevertheless all of these examples are a type of portraiture.

Two Seated Napoleons

As mentioned before David was court painter to Napoleon, but some of David's students also did portraits of Napoleon. One such student was Ingres. Here we see Wiley taking the portrait Ingres did of Napoleon and putting an African American man in place of one of the greatest rulers of France. Interestingly enough Wiley takes the robes and places the entire robe behind the African American figure in the portrait. The figures look almost feminine in the paintings. Many of David's

students, known as the Primitifs, created homoerotic images in their portraits and works of art.

Endymion

A great example of a student, who was part of the Primitifs, creating homoerotic images was Girodet. Here we see two androgynous figures who are “sleeping”. Endymion looks quite feminine with the hands and body, long hair, and the light shines right on the face highlighting the feminine qualities of the face and hair. Wiley’s figure is much more masculine, but still possesses an almost feminine quality. There is something about him when you look at him and you think of a feminine looking figure, despite the masculinity. The Greek idea of beauty was quite important, and David emphasized Greek ideals of beauty in his studio.

The Primitifs, also known as the *Barbus*, originated in David’s studio. Their focus was primarily on the Greek ideals of beauty. They sought out inspiration from what they considered the “primitive” period of the pre-classical, medieval, and Renaissance time. The sensuousness of Endymion is far from the nature of a David painting. It also differs in the fact that David’s figures are pictured as heroic, and this was a very effeminate body pictured in Endymion. There are two ways of looking at Greek ideals of beauty. The first is that of a masculine and heroic figure, and the second is more feminine, sensuous, and has graceful and feminine like qualities.

(Chu)

Marat

Marat was also a French Revolutionary figure. Marat appears as a partially clothed nude with a very Academy style. The Marat is detailed, life like, heroic in a

sense, and appears as a half nude. David presents Marat as a martyr in the French Revolution using it as propaganda to show death of a great well-known figure in 19th century France.

Wiley does not become too removed from David even here. Sleep is just another way of seeing death. They “sleep” almost peacefully. Even as we see the hands draped to the side of each figure you see a graceful quality to the hand being draped and the hand laying across the body of each. You almost see them each as a martyr like figure. Wiley creates a martyr like figure, and when put up against Marat, who was considered a martyr of the French Revolution, they do not look all that different.

Wiley and Broc

In this comparison we see “Philip the Fair” again, next to Broc’s image of Hyacinth dying. Hyacinth is a figure of Greek mythology, so it is only fitting we see the Greek ideals of homoerotic beauty applied here. The figures in Hyacinth are so effeminate. The hair, and the body, the softness of the hands and feet, all make you think of a feminine figure. I remember the first time I saw this image I glanced at it very quickly and thought it was two women, before taking a closer look and realizing it was two men! The poses of the figures are light, graceful, again feminine looking. The pastel and floral backgrounds in each painting makes you think of feminine qualities. The figure of Philip possesses an androgynous quality, as does Broc’s image who was part of the Primitifs in David’s studio. So no matter the tiny qualities that make the images similar you find the most subtle similarities in the most curious way.

David and Broc

When the Primitifs formed they began to influence David to be a little more homoerotic in his paintings as we see here in "Mars disarmed by Venus". The figure of Mars, who is seated in the lounge chair, possesses the Greek ideals of Beauty by having the muscular body, but also looking feminine in the hands, face, and pose.

When compared to Broc's image of "Hyacinth" we can see the androgynous similarities in the figures. Since Broc was one of David's students, Broc had learned the same techniques that David uses in his paintings as we can see the similarities in painting technique and color as well.

Citations

Brookner, Anita. Jacques Louis David. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980.

Chu, Petra Ten-Doesschate. Nineteenth-century European art. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006.

Kehinde Wiley Studio <http://www.kehindewiley.com>

Knafo, Robert. "Kehinde Wiley- Chapel Style." SV. kmap. 22 Mar 2009
<http://www.studiovisit.net/SV.Wiley.pdf>