

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Forbes

From Jacques-Louis David To Kehinde Wiley, Gaze At The Painting That Quells Your Quarantine Malaise

Natasha Gural

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Image: Portrait of the Sisters Zénaïde and Charlotte Bonaparte, 1821, Jacques-Louis David. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Getty's Open Content Program

Awkwardly embracing on the corner of a plush red velvet sofa emblazoned with golden bees, the Bonaparte family emblem, sisters Zénaïde and Charlotte appear emotionally disconnected. They're tethered by their bloodline tiaras, dark, curly tresses, and pale flesh, while conveying disparate demeanors.

Jacques-Louis David depicts Napoleon's older sister, Zénaïde, exuding a cosmopolitan flair, lumbar engaged in a glamorous, fitted black gown while gazing directly at the viewer. In stark contrast, Charlotte slouches in a drab, matronly grey gown, as she stares downward near the letter Zénaïde is holding. Their father, Joseph Bonaparte, who was exiled in the United States while they lived in Brussels, Belgium, after their disgraced brother's collapse from power, wrote the sisters from a Philadelphia address.

"As the pandemic continues and plans for travel are uncertain, I relate to this beautiful portrait of two sisters separated from their father by circumstances beyond their control," Laura Gavilán Lewis, an educator at The J. Paul Getty Museum, told Jim Cuno, president of the J. Paul Getty Trust. "After Napoleon's defeat the sisters and their mother went into exile in Brussels, while their father Josef came to the United States, seeking support to reinstate his brother Napoleon back to power the portrait was painted by Jacques-Louis David in 1821. He was a friend of the family, also in exile."

Originally from Mexico, said Gavilán Lewis. "I have lived in the United States many years now. And in all these years, I always felt a short flight away, so to speak, from my family in Mexico City. Having the assurance of the next trip was of great comfort and helped bridge the distance, until I visited again."

While high fashion may have shifted over the last two centuries, the emotions swirling in this masterpiece, by the preeminent French artist of his time and an important figure in late 18th-century Neoclassical reaction against the Rococo style, are universal and timely.



"Their comfort makes me reflect on my own privilege," Gavilán Lewis observed of the sisters. "To freely travel back and forth to my country without restrictions was a gift. I never could have imagined that a worldwide pandemic would put a stop to it. I sense, an air of melancholy and vulnerability in their expressions, a longing to reunite with their father. But I also see fortitude strength and bravery. And those are the feelings that I try to draw upon. As I patiently wait to safely plan my next trip to visit my family and friends in Mexico, and be able to embrace them."

Image: Kehinde Wiley 'The Sisters Zénaïde and Charlotte Bonaparte' (2014) Oil on linen 83 1/2 x 63 in 212.1. © Kehinde Wiley. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer, Courtesy Of Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, California

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Locked out of museums and galleries and estranged from loved ones during the dragging, deadly pandemic, we find ourselves indulging in digital images that offer comfort within our fragile vulnerability.

Kehinde Wiley reimagines the Bonaparte sisters as Black women in contemporary dress, hair slicked back without any jeweled adornment, bracing for the same intense news from their letter. The portrait was a highlight of *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic*, on view at the Brooklyn Museum in 2015.

Wiley's captivating portraits marry traditional formats and motifs with modern modes of representation. Borrowing from masters like Peter Paul Rubens and David, Wiley swaps white historical figures with Black women and men.

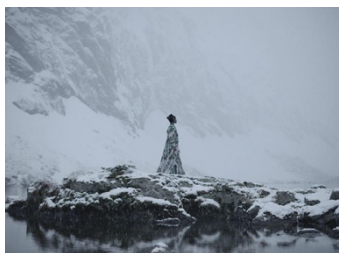


Image: Kehinde Wiley, *In Search of the Miraculous* (film still) (2021). Video. Courtesy Stephen Friedman Gallery and Galerie Templon.

If portraiture doesn't steal your lingering glance, look to London for the upcoming *Kehinde Wiley at the National Gallery* exhibition, and witness the American artist's radical journey into landscape painting. Wiley presents new artworks, including film and painting, that examine European Romanticism and its focus on sweeping scenes of oceans and mountains. The exhibition will draw comparisons with the museum's collection of historical landscapes and seascapes by Claude Lorrain, Caspar David Friedrich, J. M. W. Turner, and Claude-Joseph Vernet.