

Stephen Friedman Gallery

ARTnews

Important Kehinde Wiley works come to Phillips in quickening market

Marion Maneker

22 June 2021

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Image: Passing/Posing (Mercury After Raphael), left, and Passing/Posing (Decoration of the Chapel of the Sacrament in the Cathedral of Udine, Resurrection), right. Courtesy Phillips

Long-simmering discontent with the symbols of white supremacy that line Richmond's Monument Avenue erupted last year in a cathartic rejection of the Civil War generals and Confederate leaders enshrined there. In response, the City of Richmond has removed all but one, a statue of Robert E. Lee that is controlled by the State of Virginia. As Richmond determines what should be done with Monument Avenue, a heroic statue of a young man on horseback, a conscious rebuke to the monuments of Monument Avenue, conceived five years ago by artist Kehinde Wiley waits patiently nearby at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

Nestled between two driveways, a stone's throw from the headquarters of the Daughters of the American Confederacy, Wiley's Rumors of War anticipates its role as monument to inclusion and representation. Wiley hastened the battle over Monument Avenue four years earlier when he was invited to visit Richmond by the VMFA and responded after a week in the city by proposing the 27-foot-tall Rumors of War. The museum eventually commissioned the work.

Rumors of War may be the most impressive execution of Wiley's career-long project to depict contemporary descendants of the African diaspora in heroic poses of power. But before he created the huge work which was unveiled in New York's Times Square before its installation in Richmond, he made an edition of nine smaller (though still more than 7ft. tall) bronze casts of the statue.

The third in that edition is being offered on Thursday at Phillips during its 20th Century & Contemporary Art day sale. The low estimate is \$350,000. If it sells there, the statue will set a new record for the artist. In December of last year, also at Phillips, Wiley's portrait of Mickalene Thomas made \$378,000. Two other strong prices were paid for Wiley's work in the last year too. Charles I and Henrietta Maria patterned after Anthony van Dyke and painted in 2006 was sold at Sotheby's in May for \$352,800. A year earlier, in June of 2020, Le Roi à la Chasse II from 2007 was also sold at Sotheby's for \$350,000 to a third-party guarantor. These are the three highest prices paid at auction for Wiley's work to date.



Image: Kehinde Wiley, Rumors of War. Courtesy of Phillips

Work from earlier in the artist's career is particularly prized. Long before the boom in figurative painting or the current vogue for Black artists, Kehinde Wiley emerged as an artist using portraiture to represent young African-American men in the style of Old Master paintings. During 2003's Art Basel in Miami, developer Craig Robins hosted a show of Wiley's Faux Chapel, a collection of eight arched works and a ceiling piece, at one of his buildings. A collector

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saw the piece and agreed to buy the entire group from dealer Jeffrey Deitch. (Robins kept one of the works presumably for being the sponsor.)

Later, the Brooklyn Museum's Arnold Lehmann, now an advisor to Phillips, told Deitch he wanted to buy the chapel for the Brooklyn Museum and feature it in what became a seminal show of Wiley's work *Passing/Posing* that ran from late 2004 until early 2005. Although a number of the *Passing/Posing* works have been sold at auction, the Faux Chapel paintings are closely held. The Brooklyn Museum's website shows that four of the arched chapel works are in the permanent collection. The ceiling piece, *Go*, is there too. Robins still has his. One seems to be unaccounted for. But the last two works are now on offer at Phillips. *Passing/Posing (Mercury After Raphael)* and *Passing/Posing (Decoration of the Chapel of the Sacrament in the Cathedral of Udine, Resurrection)*, each with a low estimate of \$150,000. That's pretty much where the most recent sales of *Passing/Posing* works have landed recently. Though one painting did make \$252,000 at Sotheby's in March.

The real question isn't what price the chapel works will make—though their rarity and relationship to a prominent museum series would generally suggest they'll attract an above average price—but whether the buyer has good feelings toward the Brooklyn Museum. The only hope the museum has of finally re-assembling the Faux Chapel is for a generous collector to buy these two works and promise them to the museum. For an artist like Wiley—with a market lagging far behind many of his peers from the same period—that still seems like a faint possibility. Given the painter's prescience and influence, and his market's rapid recent acceleration, that moment may already have passed.