

Episode 9: Portraits of Rulers
May 20, 2021.

In this episode, “Portraits of Rulers,” I take a look at the history of portraits of rulers in the canon of Western art and examine how portraits engage with structures of power. Beginning with French and English royalty in the 17th and 18th century, I end with a visual analysis of Kehinde Wiley’s portrait of former American President Barack Obama. Focusing on these rulers allows us to see how European portrait conventions use a number of visual cues, from clothing, pose, setting, and the objects included within the painting, to convey wealth, power and the right to rule. Examining a portrait of late 17th-century Queen Marie Antoinette allows us to see gender differences in royal portraiture. Looking closely at Obama’s portrait reveals the ways in which Wiley both adopted and refined European portrait conventions in a way that makes his portrait stand out among portraits of other American presidents.

Sources + further reading:

Kirsty Oram. “Charles I (r. 1625-1649).” The Royal Family, December 30, 2015. <https://www.royal.uk/charles-i>.

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker. “Anthony van Dyck, Charles I at the Hunt – Smarthistory.” Accessed March 7, 2021. <https://smarthistory.org/anthony-van-dyck-charles-i-at-the-hunt/>.

Hyacinthe Rigaud. *Louis XIV (1638-1715)*. 1701. Oil on canvas, H. 2.77 m; W. 1.94 m. Louvre. <https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/louis-xiv-1638-1715>.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art. “Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun. Marie Antoinette in Court Dress.” Accessed March 9, 2021. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/656452>.

“President Barack Obama.” Accessed April 7, 2021. https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.2018.16.

America’s Presidents: National Portrait Gallery. “America’s Presidents: National Portrait Gallery.” Accessed April 7, 2021. <https://americaspresidents.si.edu/>.

Vinson Cunningham. “Kehinde Wiley on Painting President Obama, Michael Jackson, and the People of Ferguson.” *The New Yorker*. October 22, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/kehinde-wiley-on-painting-president-obama-michael-jackson-and-the-people-of-ferguson>.

Greg Allen. “There Is No Obama Chair.” Greg.Org. Accessed April 7, 2021. <https://greg.org/archive/2018/02/18/there-is-no-obama-chair.html>.

Music Clips

Thomas Lupo, "Fantasia," c. 1620-30. Lupo was a court musician under Elizabeth I Queen of England and later worked for the household of Prince Charles who would become Charles I, King of England. Performed by John Sayles. <http://www.jsayles.com/familypages/earlymusic.htm>

Jean-Baptiste Lully, "Ouverture" from the French opera "Cadmus et Hermione." Harpsichord arrangement by Jean-Henri d'Anglebert. c. 1763. Lully knew Louis XIV from a young age and worked for the King's court from 1632-1687. He was Master of the King's music and director of the Royal Academy of Music. Performed by Eddie Konczal. <https://www.soundclick.com/music/songInfo.cfm?songID=3795127>

Joseph Haydn, "Symphony 85," aka "La reine," from Paris Symphonies, c. 1785. This symphony was a favourite of Queen Marie Antoinette of France, hence its nickname. This is a sample from a performance conducted by Ernest Ansermet in 1963.

Obama's favourites. You can find Barack Obama's list of favourite songs from 2018 here: <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/barack-obama-2018-favorite-songs-list-773419/> Unfortunately they are all under copyright, so they could not be included in the podcast.

Credits

Unboxing the Canon is hosted and produced by Linda Steer for her course "Introduction to the History of Western Art" in the Department of Visual Arts at Brock University. Brock University is located on the traditional lands of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples.

Our sound designer and editor is Devin Dempsey, who is also reading these credits. Our logo was created by Cherie Michels. The music for this podcast has been adapted from "Night in Venice" and "Inspired" by Kevin MacLeod. Both are licensed under Creative Commons Attribution International 4.0. Additional music in this episode is from Bach, "The Well Tempered Clavier," Book I, BWV 846-869, musicians unknown. We are grateful to Alison Innes from the Faculty of Humanities for her sharing her podcasting wisdom and offering support.

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