The scale is stunning! The painting is 25 feet wide by 11 feet high (see Fig. 1). A young black muscular male is sleeping, on a wispy veil-like sheet, floating on and enveloped by a sea of flowers and ornamental white ferns. The figure in Sleep is lifelike in detail—you can see veins on the back of the hands, the fingernails, and the tendons on the dorsal aspects of the feet. The image evokes Caravaggio. The image is more than life-size—it is monumental. It also invokes a sense of cognitive dissonance. It is hypnotic; you cannot unsee it. You try to understand it.

Kehinde Wiley is perhaps the best-known Black visual artist in America. A brief review of his life history might help unravel the mysterious roots of this work. Wiley’s father had come from Nigeria in the ’70s to attend UCLA to study architecture, where he met his mother. They broke up before Kehinde was born, and his father returned to Nigeria. Wiley had no contact with his father and had never seen him. “So, when I turned 20, being fatherless, and also being profoundly interested in portraiture and wanting to know what he looked like physically, I decided to hop on a plane.” He ultimately found his father who was head of an architecture department of a major university in Nigeria.

Wiley then started on an obsessive series of portraits of his father and studied how African art evolved and its influence on European art. At the back of his mind seemed to be several intertwining themes. How did White people see Black people? How did Black people see themselves? Who were the subjects of great art in major museums? After receiving an MFA at Yale, he became the artist in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The foundations of his art had been built.

Decades later his work appears in major collections all over the world. The official portrait of President Barak Obama painted in 2018 hangs in the Smithsonian Institution’s National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. Obama is seated in a chair, seemingly floating on a sea of living leaves and flowers that tell a story: jasmine refers to Hawaii where Obama was born; the African blue lilies refer to Kenya, Obama’s father’s birthplace, and the chrysanthemum is the official flower of Chicago where his professional and his political careers began and where he met his future wife, Michelle Robinson.

The painting Sleep was part of Down, an exhibit of monumental paintings of African-American men in recumbent poses suggested by works from European art. The subjects in the paintings are young black men from Brooklyn who posed as...
though they were the characters in classical portraits, except they wore contemporary clothing.

Sleep shares elements of old masters’ work, especially The Entombment of Christ by Caravaggio (see Fig. 2). Considering this, is the subject in Sleep asleep or dead? The musculature, facial expression, and glow suggest sleep. He looks relaxed. The image is one of dignity, vulnerability, and power. Yet, there is confusion in a viewer’s mind.

A monumental work by Wiley displayed at the Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France, shows a recumbent person in a similar pose as the subject in Sleep (see Fig. 3). Here there is also confusion. Is it a male or female? Asleep? It is not until one sees the title of the work, Femme piquée par un serpent (Woman Bitten by a Snake), that one realizes the person is dead or dying.

Nearby in the museum is another life-size work, a marble statue with the same name created by Auguste Clésinger in 1847 (Fig. 4).

Wiley has thus updated classical works with Black subjects. He also leaves the viewer to ponder the similarities between sleep and death.

Fig. 2. Caravaggio, The Entombment of Christ (1603-1604). Oil on canvas. 300 × 203 cm (120 × 80 in). Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City. Credit for the image above: Caravaggio [Public domain] via Wikimedia Commons.

Fig. 3. Viewers admiring Kehinde Wiley’s Femme piquée par un serpent (Woman Bitten by a Snake) at Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France. Photo courtesy of Meir Kryger.

Fig. 4. Auguste Clésinger, Femme piquée par un serpent, 1847. Photo courtesy of Meir Kryger.
Declaration of conflict of interest

The author has declared no conflicts of interests.

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