

Unit 8: Cultural Identity

Kehinde Wiley

Alios Itzhak (The World Stage: Israel)



Kehinde Wiley (American, b. 1977)

Alios Itzhak (The World Stage: Israel), 2011

Oil and enamel on canvas, 115 × 80 in. (292.1 × 203.2 cm)

Gift of Lisa and Steven Tananbaum Family Foundation in honor of Joan Rosenbaum, Director of the Jewish Museum from 1981–2011, 2011–31

Getting Started

- What do the subject's facial expression and pose tell you about his personality?
 - Describe the background. What images, creatures, and other elements do you recognize?
 - How does the artist relate the sitter to the background? What strategies does he employ? (*Enlarged versions of the floral motifs in the background surround the sitter; the blues and pinks from the background reappear in the highlights on the sitter's clothing; he is perfectly centered within the composition, almost exactly along the background's axis of symmetry.*)
 - The artist designed the elaborate hand-carved frame for this painting. How does the frame affect your reaction to the portrait? To the subject?
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Looking Closely

Alios Itzhak is painted in a **photorealist** style. The young man is dressed in dark blue jeans and a blue T-shirt decorated with a stylized image of a drill. His body is turned to the left, but he twists his torso and head toward us, with his left arm bent at the elbow, his left fist resting on his hip. His right arm dangles at his side. His stance and gaze project confidence.

In the background is an elaborate symmetrical image. It features a large pink and red building with columns in front and orange lions and small leopards perched on top. The building is surrounded by two framing devices: the interior frame is filled with designs and patterns and Hebrew text at the four corners; the exterior frame is populated by creatures, both real and mythical—including lions, eagles, deer, a leviathan, wild ox, a unicorn, fish, roosters, birds—and floral and vegetal motifs. The dark wooden frame features lions, human hands, the Ten Commandments, and leaves at the four corners.

The composition is dominated by bright, saturated blues, golds, reds, pinks, and oranges set against a black background. Wiley incorporates the colors in the background into the figure, with blue highlights on Alios's back and pinkish highlights on his chest. Gold and blue floral motifs, enlarged versions of those in the background, overlay the figure's legs, torso, and arms.

About the Work

This work is part of American artist Kehinde Wiley's series *The World Stage: Israel*, which in turn is part of his larger *World Stage* project, exploring the identities of individuals from different countries and cultures. In the series on Israel, Wiley presents young men of diverse backgrounds: Ethiopian Israeli Jews, native-born Jews, and Arab Israelis. Emphasizing local youth culture, Wiley scouted for his subjects in discos, malls, bars, and sporting venues in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Lod. He asked each young man to assume a pose borrowed from an Old Master painting and then embedded the figures in vivid, ornate backgrounds inspired by Jewish papercuts, an intricate form of folk and ceremonial art.

The series includes two portraits of Alios Itzhak, an Ethiopian Jew. To create this one, Wiley adapts, for the background, a nineteenth-century Ukrainian *mizrah* from the Jewish Museum's own collection (thejewishmuseum.org/collection/2460-mizrah). Such decorations were placed on the walls of homes and synagogues to indicate the direction of worship, which is always toward Jerusalem; for Jews living in the Western Hemisphere, Jerusalem is east. The word *mizrah*, meaning east, is also an acronym composed of the initial letters of the Hebrew phrase meaning "from this side the spirit of life." This inscription appears in the four corners of the central panel of the papercut (and also in Wiley's painting).

For each work in this series, the artist designed a wooden frame. The elaborate hand-carved frame on this portrait is decorated with emblems borrowed from Jewish tradition: the hands of a *kohen* (priest) and the Lion of Judah, which symbolize blessings, power, and majesty.

About the Artist

Kehinde Wiley grew up in South Central, Los Angeles. He attended art classes at several local museums, including the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino. He cites his early exposure to eighteenth-century portraits by English painters Thomas Gainsborough and Sir Joshua Reynolds at the Huntington as the source of his interest in portraiture. While participating in the Studio Museum in Harlem's residency program as a young man, Wiley became interested in contemporary, urban portraiture. In his early portrait series, he focused on African Americans from Harlem, but he has since painted portraits of individuals of races, ethnicities, and backgrounds from around the world.

Sources

Kehinde Wiley website: kehindewiley.com

Kehinde Wiley: The World Stage: Israel. Exh. didactics. The Jewish Museum, New York, 2012.

Nahson, Claudia, et al. *Kehinde Wiley: The World Stage: Israel*. Exh. cat. Culver City, CA: Roberts & Tilton, 2011.

Further Discussion

- In this painting, Wiley juxtaposes a contemporary portrait of an Ethiopian Israeli Jew with a traditional Eastern European Jewish papercut. Why do you think he made this juxtaposition? What added meaning or insight does it lend to the portrait of Alios Itzhak?
- Wiley has appropriated his sitter's pose from an Old Master painting and the background from a nineteenth-century European papercut. How does he reinvent these sources? How does he invest them with new meaning in their new context? Consider this quotation from Wiley to further the conversation: "What are these guys doing? They're assuming the poses of colonial masters, the former bosses of the Old World" (kehindewiley.com).
- Wiley has said that his decision to focus on culturally diverse subjects "had to do with the way you fantasize, whether it be about your own people or far-flung places, and how there's the imagined personality and look and feel of a society, and then there's the actuality that sometimes is jarring."
 - As a group, discuss how this quote helps to understand the portrait.
 - Discuss how the quote relates to students' experiences of other cultures, perhaps through travel, study, or friendships.
 - Which of their stereotypes or preconceptions have been challenged by getting to know another culture more deeply?

Isidor Kaufmann

Man with Fur Hat



Isidor Kaufmann (b. Hungary, 1853–1921)

Man with Fur Hat, c. 1910

Oil on panel, 16 1/8 × 12 3/16 in. (41 × 31 cm)

Gift of Lisl Weil Marx in memory of her husband Julius Marx
and his brother Rudolf Marx, 1985–179

Born in Hungary and trained in Austria, Isidor Kaufmann began traveling throughout Eastern Europe in the 1890s to create genre paintings and portraits that documented traditional Jewish life. This painting portrays a devout Jew, dressed in a traditional fur-trimmed *shtraymel* (hat) and a black *kapote* (coat). A tapestry with Hebrew text hangs in the background. For both Kaufmann and his largely secular patrons, such portraits served a dual purpose. Hung in well-appointed parlors, they proclaimed the social status of the paintings' owners and enhanced Kaufmann's prestige as a painter. At the same time, Kaufmann's paintings linked the world of cosmopolitan Vienna to a traditional Jewish lifestyle that endured outside the capital.

Source

Culture and Continuity: The Jewish Journey. The Jewish Museum, New York, early 2004.

Discussion Ideas and Questions

- What do the subject's clothing and the background details reveal about the sitter's identity?
- Compare *Man with Fur Hat* with *Alios Itzhak*. Consider the facial expressions, poses, and clothing in each portrait.
- Compare the setting/background in *Man with Fur Hat* to that in *Alios Itzhak*. How does each artist take advantage of the background space to reveal additional aspects of the subject's identity?
- What do these two portraits not reveal about their sitters' identities? What do they leave you wondering about?

Dawoud Bey

Jacob



Dawoud Bey (American, b. 1953),
Jacob, 2005.

Inkjet print and audio, 51 1/8 × 40 1/4 in. (129.9 × 102.2 cm).
Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Fund, 2006-45a-b

In the early 1990s, photographer Dawoud Bey began exploring issues of identity and representation in minority communities. This image is part of a collaborative photographic and audio project he created to offer adolescents from Jewish backgrounds the opportunity to talk about issues of race, religion, and ethnicity. Bey's portraits also challenge assumptions about Jewishness and affirm his belief that young people "are arbiters of style in the community; their appearance speaks most strongly of how a community of people defines themselves at a particular historical moment." Much of the impact of these photographs is achieved through the image's large scale and through the proximity of the subject to the foreground. Bey photographed his subjects in their homes and posed some of them with arms or elbows propped on a table. These gestures are at once defiant and protective. In their directness, the portraits straddle the boundaries between public and private personas—what we keep to ourselves and what we show others.

Sources

Benedek, Nelly Silagy. *Examining Identity in Contemporary Art and Photography: A Resource for Educators*. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2005.

Chevlowe, Susan. *The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography*. Exh. cat. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

Discussion Ideas and Questions

- Compare the setting in *Jacob* with that in *Alios Itzhak*. How does each artist use background space? What does the background information reveal about each sitter's identity?
- If you were having your portrait painted or photographed and the artist let you choose the setting, what would you choose? Why?
- Both *Jacob* and *Alios Itzhak* are very large. What effect does this have? How do you think you would relate to these works if they were smaller?
- Consider how the men are dressed in *Jacob*, *Alios Itzhak*, and *Man with Fur Hat*. What can you learn about these men through their clothes? How much do your clothing choices reveal about you and your identity?
- By presenting young Jews in a global, multicultural world, both Wiley and Bey draw attention to stereotypes and assumptions about appearance as they relate to ethnicity and, specifically, to Jewish identity. Journal and share about a time when someone made assumptions about you that kept them from understanding who you are, how you self-identify, and how you think of yourself.