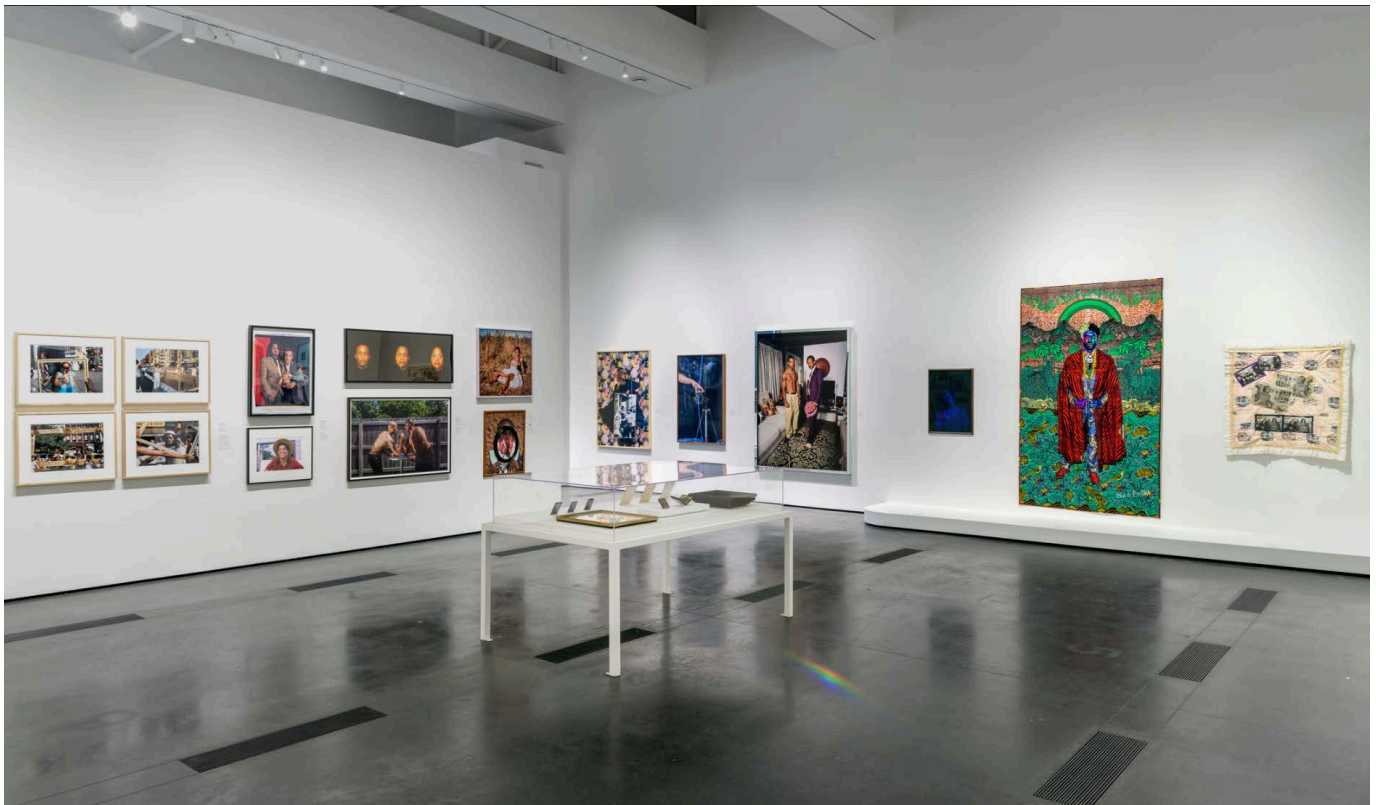


'Black American Portraits' Showcases 140 Artworks, Two Centuries of Representation Across Geographies and Diverse Practices

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Apr 13, 2022



Installation View of "Black American Portraits", Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Nov. 7 2021–April 17, 2022. Photo Museum Associates/LACMA

THE OBAMA PORTRAITS were such a hit at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., the museum launched a multi-city tour to give people throughout the country a chance to see the historic paintings.

Kehinde Wiley's portrait of President Barack Obama and the portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama by Amy Sherald (the first presidential and first lady portraits painted by Black artists for the museum) traveled to the Art Institute of Chicago and the Brooklyn Museum of Art before arriving at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) last fall. The occasion sparked an interest at LACMA in mining the museum's collection to further explore the power of African American portraiture.

On view through this weekend, "Black American Portraits" is drawn primarily from LACMA's holdings—including several new acquisitions—and features nearly all Black artists. The sweeping survey dates from circa 1800 to the present, with about 140 artworks spanning the emancipation era, Harlem Renaissance, civil rights and Black Power movements, and more recent decades.

The many subjects and sitters, real and imagined, well-known and ordinary, visualize and celebrate Blackness across generations. The portraits speak to individual identity, represent universal themes, and also provide insight into the African American experience, Black spaces, and Black style.

It's an all-star lineup. Sherald contributed "An Ocean Away" (2020), a group portrait at the beach, and Wiley is showing two portraits, "Yachinboaz Ben Yisrael II (2021) and "Portrait of Mickalene Thomas, the Coyote" (2017), his depiction of fellow artist Mickalene Thomas, who also has a painting in the exhibition. Works by Benny Andrews, Eldzier Cortor, Beauford Delaney, David Driskell, Jacob Lawrence, and Augusta Savage are displayed gallery-style alongside living figures such as Emory Douglas, Reggie Burrows Hodges, Lorraine O'Grady, Simone Leigh, Whitfield Lovell, Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker, and Carrie Mae Weems. Barkley L. Hendricks and Kerry James Marshall who inspired Wiley, Sherald, and a new generation of portrait artists are also represented.

A spectrum of paintings are on view with sculpture, prints, photographs, and multimedia works. James Van Der Zee, Gordon Parks, Roy DeCarava, Kwame Brathwaite, Anthony Barboza, Ming Smith, Dawoud Bey, and Deana Lawson, are among the photographers highlighted. Rising contemporary artists such as Jordan Casteel, Jonathan Lyndon Chase, Woody De Othello, Jerrell Gibbs, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Titus Kaphar, and Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, and Deborah Roberts, are featured, too.

Los Angeles artists are also well represented. The selection includes Greg Breda, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Karon Davis, Kenturah Davis, Genevieve Gagnard, Charles Gaines, Lauren Halsey, Arthur Jafa, Kahlil Joseph, Samella Lewis, Calida Rawles, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Martine Syms, Henry Taylor, Fulton Leroy Washington, Betye Saar, Lezlie Saar, and Alison Saar.

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In addition to being inspired by The Obama Portraits Tour, the exhibition pays homage to "Two Centuries of Black American Art," the landmark exhibition presented nearly half a century ago at LACMA. Organized by Driskell in 1976, Two Centuries is considered the first comprehensive survey of African American art. The show presented more than 200 works, produced between 1750 and 1950, by 63 African American artists, who up to that point had gone largely unrecognized by museums. The group included Charles Alston, Richmond Barthé, John Biggers, Elizabeth Catlett, Sargent Claude Johnson, Archibald Motley Jr., James Porter, Laura Wheeler Waring, and Charles White, whose work is also represented in "Black American Portraits."

Introducing the exhibition, co-curators Christine Y. Kim and Liz Andrews said the show presents artists working across "time, geography, and diverse practices" and "centers Black love, abundance, family, exuberance, self-possession, and self-expression through over two centuries of African American portraiture."

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