

# Jewish Museum

The Jewish Museum is located on Fifth Avenue and East 92nd Street in New York City. Our exhibitions and programs explore the intersection of art and Jewish culture for people of all backgrounds. The Museum's collection spans 4,000 years and includes nearly 30,000 works of art, ceremonial objects, media, and antiquities from around the world.

Use this lesson to support a discussion of identity and portraiture. Explore related works of art in the Museum's collection listed at the end of this lesson. For a more extensive look at portraits, visit our [online collection](#) and [Portraiture and Identity](#) Educator Resource.

## Kehinde Wiley: *Alios Itzhak (The World Stage: Israel)*, 2011



Find the work on the museum website [here](#)

Oil and enamel on canvas, 96 x 72 in. (243.8 x 182.9 cm). Purchase: Gift of Lisa and Steven Tananbaum Family Foundation; Gift in honor of Joan Rosenbaum, Director of the Jewish Museum from 1981–2011, by the Contemporary Judaica, Fine Arts, Photography, and Traditional Judaica Acquisitions Committee Funds, 2011–31

## About the Artwork

Kehinde Wiley traveled to different countries (e.g., India, China, Senegal, and Israel) to paint young people from diverse backgrounds with the goal of foregrounding their images and reflecting their local culture. In his series titled “The World Stage,” Wiley juxtaposes images of young men against patterned backgrounds that represent traditional art from their respective cultures. This painting is part of the series Wiley did in Israel. In these works, the backgrounds are based on traditional Jewish papercuts. Wiley describes this body of work saying, “I remember running into young Ethiopian Jews and young MCs who wanted to talk about contemporary life in Israel, but through the rubric of a very African American form. They created hip-hop music, they created art, they created their own statement about what it felt like to be alive in Israel in the 21st century.” ([Mobile Tours](#)) As in this portrait, “The World Stage” series presents young men of diverse backgrounds standing in powerful and confident poses, communicating their pride and their humanity.

The subject of this painting is a young man named Alios Itzhak, and Wiley paints him in a photorealist style. Itzhak identifies as an Ethiopian Jew living in modern day Israel. Wiley sets his subject’s striking pose against a backdrop inspired by a 19th-century Mizrah from Ukraine which is in the Jewish Museum’s collection. A Mizrah is a wall decoration that indicates the direction of Jerusalem, which is the direction of worship in the Jewish faith. Wiley also designed the wooden frame for this work, with the hands of a kohen (priest) and the Lion of Judah carved at the top, which symbolize blessings and power. Listen to the artist talk about this work [here](#).

## About the Artist

Kehinde Wiley is a Black artist who is best known for his naturalistic, vibrant, and celebratory portraits of Black men in heroic poses based on traditional European paintings. Throughout his career, Wiley has focused on addressing and remedying the absence of Black men and women in our visual, historical, and cultural narratives by reimagining paintings depicting white leaders and creating his own regal figures of Black men and women. Wiley's work explores representation, race, gender, and power ([VMFA](#)). The artist is also known for painting a portrait of President Barack Obama which is in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. Wiley was born in Los Angeles in 1977 and lives in Beijing, Dakar, and New York.

## Discussion Questions

1. Describe the central figure in the painting. What does his pose communicate about him? His clothes?
2. Describe the background of the painting. What do you see? What shapes and colors has the artist used?
3. Wiley depicts Itzhak in front of a Ukrainian Mizrah. There is a picture of the Mizrah included at the end of the lesson. Why do you think the artist chose this background? How does this background affect the overall portrait? Would you choose another background? Why?
4. This painting is over 8 feet tall, taller than the person portrayed in the painting. Why do you think Wiley chose to make the work so large?

5. Why do you think the artist designed his own frame for the painting? Does the frame affect the painting? Why/why not?
6. The artist includes Hebrew writing in five different places—in the four corners and on the frame on top of the painting. Why do you think Wiley chose to include the writing? What role can words play in art?

## Activities

1. **POWER POSES:** Stand or sit in front of the painting and try to mimic Alios Itzhak's pose to the best of your ability—with your hand in a fist on your hip, head leaning on one side, back straight, a slight twist to your upper body. How does this pose feel? What does this pose communicate? Compare this pose with those in these other paintings by Kehinde Wiley — *Juliette Recamier*, 2012, *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, 2005, *Jacob de Graeff*, 2018. What do the poses of these individuals tell you about them? Why do you think Wiley decided to put Black figures in these sorts of poses? Find a pose that makes you feel powerful. Take a picture of yourself in that pose and share with family or friends!
2. **ZOOM AND SKETCH:** Zoom into the painting by making a frame with your fingers. Hold the forefinger and thumb of both hands at right angles and turn one hand sideways until the fingers make a square outline. Look through the frame and find a small section of the painting that you like.



Use your pencil to sketch this section on a piece of paper and enliven it with the artist's or your own color choices!

3. **COLLAGE PORTRAIT:** Choose a person whose portrait you wish to create. This can be a family member, neighbor, friend, favorite TV show character, or even yourself. Find paper (colored paper, newspaper, wrapping paper, magazines, cardboard) or even fabric scraps to cut or tear into shapes to create your figure. You can attach the pieces together using glue, tape, or a stapler. Next, find something that can serve as the background—a piece of paper, plastic, cloth, cardboard, or even a rug with an interesting pattern. Place your portrait on your background and take pictures of your work to share with a friend! You might want to place your figure on a few different backgrounds to see which one you like best.
4. **BUILD A FRAME:** The artist Kehinde Wiley built the black frame for this painting. If you had to build your own frame for the painting, what would that look like? Imagine your own frame and design it using materials found at home. Get creative with your material choices: You can use cardboard, coins, beads, or cloth. Share your frame with a friend, and tell them why you chose this design.
5. **SEARCH FOR WILDLIFE:** Included in the painting are several animals and creatures, also known as zoomorphic figures. Make a list of all the zoomorphic figures that you can identify. Think about where you might have seen them. Does their placement in the painting mean anything? Share your list with a friend!

6. **SYMMETRY:** Look at the background of the painting and at the Mizrah. Do you notice that one side looks like the reflection or mirror image of the other side? Can you identify the line of symmetry? Take a piece of paper and a scissor. Fold the piece of paper in half and cut at least 5 different shapes out of the paper. Make sure that at least 3 of the shapes start and end along the fold. Open up your paper to reveal your symmetrical paper cut.
7. **HISTORY HUNT:** Alios Itzhak, depicted in this painting, identifies as an Ethiopian Israeli Jew: He was born in the country of Ethiopia in Africa, practices the religion of Judaism, and lives in the country of Israel. Find five facts about the history of Judaism in Ethiopia and/or about Ethiopian Jews living in Israel. Discuss your facts with a family member or friend.

Here are some sources of information about Ethiopian Jews:

[My Jewish Learning](#)

[Jewish Virtual Library](#)

# Vocabulary

- **PORTRAIT:** Painting, drawing, or photograph of a person or people
- **PHOTOREALIST:** A style of painting depicting commonplace scenes or ordinary people, with a highly detailed realism, flat images, and barely discernible brushwork that suggests and often is based on or incorporates an actual photograph
- **MIZRAH:** Translates to the Hebrew word for 'east.' A Mizrah is a wall decoration in some Jewish homes and synagogues showing the direction of Jerusalem, which is the direction of prayer for followers of the Jewish faith
- **ZOOMORPHIC FIGURES:** Images of animals
- **SYMMETRY:** When two or more parts are identical after a flip, slide, or turn or when an object is reflected across a line, like looking in a mirror

Selected definitions are adapted from the following sources:

[www.Dictionary.com](http://www.Dictionary.com)

[www.Mathisfun.com](http://www.Mathisfun.com)

## Related Works of Art in the Jewish Museum's Collection

- Moritz Daniel Oppenheim: [\*Self-Portrait\*](#), 1814-1816
- Adi Nes, [\*Untitled\*](#), 1996
- Rineke Dijkstra: [\*Abigael, Herzliya, Israel, April 10, 1999\*](#) and [\*Abigael, Palmahim Israeli Air Force Base, Israel, December 18, 2000\*](#)
- La Maison Bonfils: [\*19th century portrait of a Young Jewish Girl in Beirut\*](#)

## Other work by Kehinde Wiley

- Information about [\*Other portraits from the series 'The World Stage'\*](#), [www.kehindewiley.com](http://www.kehindewiley.com)
- [\*Portrait of President Barack Obama\*](#), 2018, National Portrait Gallery





Israel Dov Rosenbaum, *Mizrah*, 1877, Paint, ink, and graphite on cut-out paper, 30 1/2 × 21 in. Gift of Helen W. Finkel in memory of Israel Dov Rosenbaum, Bessie Rosenbaum Finkel, and Sidney Finkel, 1987-136