

PRESS RELEASE

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Kehinde Wiley's *Portrait of Melissa Thompson* (2020) goes on display at the V&A alongside original William Morris designs that inspired it

- *Portrait of Melissa Thompson* (2020) was acquired with support from Art Fund and a legacy donation from Dr Philip Da Costa, as part of a drive to collect works by artists and designers currently underrepresented in the V&A's collection
- The portrait will be on display in the William Morris Room (125) in the V&A South Kensington's British Galleries until 2024, when it will move to its permanent home at V&A East Museum in 2025
- Part of V&A activity celebrating 125th anniversary of William Morris's death

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Today, the V&A announces that *Portrait of Melissa Thompson*, 2020, by American artist Kehinde Wiley is now on display in the museum's William Morris Room (room 125) in the British Galleries, alongside William Morris's *Wild Tulip* designs that inspired it.

The monumental two-metre oil painting was made as part of Wiley's series *The Yellow Wallpaper*, first exhibited at the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow in 2020 and was acquired by the V&A East team in June 2021. The portrait goes on display as part of a series of initiatives marking the 125th anniversary of William Morris's death this October, including the new V&A and Thames & Hudson publication, *William Morris*, by Anna Mason, due for release on 21 October.

Wiley's portrait depicts Melissa Thompson, a young woman the artist met at Ridley Road Market in Dalston, east London – a market first founded in the late 1880s and that remains a vibrant community hub today. Thompson, who lives in Ilford, but who grew up in Hackney, was with her mother and sister when Wiley approached her to feature in his new work.

Melissa Thompson said: "It was such a surreal moment when Kehinde Wiley approached me at Ridley Road Market and asked to take my portrait – I never thought I would end up in a museum! His work is so unique and powerful, it was a really lifechanging thing for me. I love this portrait – it captures a moment in time. Seeing it on the wall at the V&A feels really special – I can now see parts of my own culture and east London represented in a museum."

Wiley's *Yellow Wallpaper* series offers a visual response to American novelist Charlotte Perkins Gilman's acclaimed 1892 feminist text, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Gilman's text is a semi-

autobiographical tale that sees the narrator confined to her bedroom after being diagnosed with hysteria and explores the disastrous consequences that can come about by denying women independence. Wiley calls Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* '... a work of literary fiction that explores femininity and insanity by stepping upon the contours of what social decorum and societal mores are composed of. Madness becomes a metaphor for freedom and self-realisation.' For these portraits, Wiley's idea was 'to use the language of the decorative to reconcile blackness, gender, and a beautiful and terrible past', to position each of his female subjects 'as autonomous, as powerful, as open to individual interpretation and as an emblem of strength within a society of complicated social networks.' The portrait's background features a repeating floral motif inspired by the wallpaper and textile designs of William Morris – an artist and designer long associated with and collected by the V&A.

Gus Casely-Hayford, Director of V&A East, said: "I'm so grateful to Art Fund, the late Dr Philip da Costa and the Stephen Friedman Gallery for their support in enabling us to acquire such an evocative work by Kehinde Wiley, one of the most influential artists working today. One of our first acquisitions for V&A East, the painting speaks to the creative heritage and cultural diversity of east London and will help realise our ambitions to spotlight previously underrepresented artists and movements through V&A East's programme, which tells global stories of creativity and reflects the pressing debates in society today."

Catherine Ince, Chief Curator of V&A East, said: "Kehinde Wiley's 'Portrait of Melissa Thompson' is a hugely powerful work, from the first series in which Wiley actively chose to feature exclusively female portraits. Recalling a style once used to predominantly depict European and aristocratic subjects, Wiley deftly distils a complex dialogue about race and identity in paint. This, combined with a sitter street cast in Dalston's Ridley Road Market and a creative process deeply connected to east London, makes it a vitally important new acquisition for V&A East."

Kehinde Wiley was born in 1977 in Los Angeles, USA and lives and works between New York, USA; Beijing, China and Dakar, Senegal. Widely known for his highly naturalistic portraiture set against intricately patterned backgrounds, Wiley's approach to painting exquisitely subverts the visual conventions of historic European and American portraiture typically depicting the power and privilege of the royal and aristocratic. In Wiley's work, his own subjects – African American and African-Diasporic men and women – predominantly encountered on the street in cities around the world are crafted with fastidious detail at a larger-than-life scale. Wiley's portraits elevate his sitters, challenge perceptions of blackness, and raise important questions about race, identity and the politics of representation.

Portrait of Melissa Thompson, 2020, was acquired from the Stephen Friedman Gallery with generous support from Art Fund and a legacy donation from Dr Philip da Costa, and is one of the first acquisitions destined for display at V&A East. One of the UK's most significant new museum projects, V&A East celebrates global creativity and builds on the V&A's long-standing heritage in east London and founding mission to make the arts accessible to all. Currently under construction in Stratford's Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, V&A East encompasses two sites – **V&A East Storehouse** at Here East, housing over 250,000 objects, 1,000 archives and 350,000 books from the V&A collections, and **V&A East Museum** on Stratford Waterfront, opening in 2024 and 2025 respectively.

The V&A's William Morris collection is large and varied and reflective of Morris's output as one of Britain's most prolific 19th century artists, designers, social activists and authors. The collection – some of which will be housed at the forthcoming V&A East Storehouse – includes Morris's most celebrated wallpaper and printed textile designs, including *Strawberry Thief* and *Willow Bough*, and his first attempt at a figurative tapestry, *The Orchard*, 1890, designed in collaboration with John Henry Dearle. The V&A collections also include other insights into Morris and his collaborators' creative practice, including ceramic tiles, stained glass, floor coverings, embroidery and furniture, examples of his publishing design for Kelmscott Press, as well as several illustrated manuscripts.

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Notes to Editors

For further PRESS information please contact Laura Mitchell on l.mitchell@vam.ac.uk / +44 (0)20 3949 4509 (not for publication).

A selection of press images is available to download free of charge from pressimages.vam.ac.uk

About V&A East

One of the UK's most significant new museum projects, V&A East celebrates global creativity and builds on the V&A's long-standing heritage in east London and founding mission to make the arts accessible to all. Currently under construction in Stratford's Queen Elizabeth Park, V&A East encompasses two new sites – V&A East Storehouse opening at Here East in 2024, and V&A East Museum opening on Stratford Waterfront in 2025. Underpinned by values of equity, empathy, openness and sustainability, V&A East is committed to creating opportunities for young people and fostering the next generation of creatives. Across its two sites, V&A East will celebrate making, highlight underrepresented movements and voices, advance cultural conversations, and support the creation of new work, with its collections and buildings acting as a catalyst and studio space to platform new ideas. Developed with its local communities, V&A East will spotlight east London's artistic, manufacturing and making heritage and give a voice and platform to local talent, spotlighting the youth and ingenuity of east London. V&A East is part of East Bank, the Mayor of London's £1.1 billion Olympic legacy project, which will create a new arts, innovation and education hub in Stratford's Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. vam.ac.uk/east

About Kehinde Wiley

Kehinde Wiley (b. 1977, Los Angeles) is an American artist best known for his portraits that render people of colour in the traditional settings of Old Master paintings. Wiley's work brings art history face-to-face with contemporary culture, using the visual rhetoric of the heroic, the powerful, the majestic and the sublime to celebrate Black and brown people the artist has met throughout the world. Working in the mediums of painting, sculpture, and video, Wiley's portraits challenge and reorient art-historical narratives, awakening complex issues that many would prefer remain muted.

In 2018 Wiley became the first African-American artist to paint an official U.S. Presidential portrait for the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. Former U.S. President Barack Obama

selected Wiley for this honor. In 2019 Wiley founded Black Rock Senegal, a multidisciplinary artist-in-residence program that invites artists from around the world to live and create work in Dakar, Senegal. Wiley is the recipient of the U.S. Department of State's Medal of Arts, Harvard University's W.E.B. Du Bois Medal, and France's distinction of Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters. He holds a BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, an MFA from Yale University, and an honorary doctorate from the Rhode Island School of Design. He has held solo exhibitions throughout the United States and internationally and his works are included in the collections of over 50 public institutions around the world. He lives and works in Beijing, Dakar, and New York.

About William Morris and the V&A

William Morris and his family had a longstanding relationship with the V&A. The work of William Morris's company, Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., took off following the 1862 International Exhibition. His relationship with the V&A began when his company decorated the West Dining Room of the South Kensington Museum (renamed the V&A in 1899). Influenced by the Gothic Revival and medieval style, Morris, and his main collaborators, architect Philip Webb and artist Edward Burne-Jones, created a blue-green scheme for one of three new spaces in the V&A's refreshment rooms, which opened in 1869. In 1876 Morris became an examiner at the South Kensington Museum's art school, and in 1884 he joined the museum's Committee of Art Referees, a group of consultants including painters Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Sir Edward Poynter and Frederic, Lord Leighton, who helped the V&A make decisions on new acquisitions to build its collections. Morris advised on many acquisitions and helped the museum build its collections, with highlights including the late Medieval tapestry *The War of Troy* from Tournai in Belgium, and the 16th-century *Ardabil Carpet* – one of the largest and finest Persian rugs in existence today.

About Art Fund

Art Fund is the national fundraising charity for art. It provides millions of pounds every year to help museums to acquire and share works of art across the UK, further the professional development of their curators, and inspire more people to visit and enjoy their public programmes. In response to Covid-19 Art Fund has made £2m in adapted funding available to support museums through reopening and beyond, including Respond and Reimagine grants to help meet immediate need and reimagine future ways of working. Art Fund is independently funded, supported by the 130,000 members who buy the National Art Pass, who enjoy free entry to over 240 museums, galleries and historic places, 50% off major exhibitions and receive Art Quarterly magazine. Art Fund also supports museums through its annual prize, Art Fund Museum of the Year. In a unique edition of the prize for 2020, Art Fund responded to the unprecedented challenges that all museums are facing by selecting five winners and increasing the prize money to £200,000. The winners are Aberdeen Art Gallery; Gairloch Museum, Science Museum, South London Gallery; and Towner Eastbourne.
artfund.org