

**Teachers’ notes**

**The Superpower of Looking:**

**A powerful portrait by Kehinde Wiley**

**How to use this resource**

[Open larger images of the work, including close-ups of details, on the V&A Museum website](https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1629582/portrait-of-melissa-kehinde-wiley/?carousel-image=2021NA8772).

Use the prompts in these notes to guide your students through the lesson.

**Contextual background for teachers**

**Portrait of Melissa Thompson (2020)**

Kehinde Wiley (b.1977)

Oil on linen

H 265.5 x W 201.8 cm

Victoria and Albert Museum, London

<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/portrait-of-melissa-thompson-334146>

Nigerian-American artist Kehinde Wiley has become well-known for portraits of people of colour with nods to the traditions of European and American portraiture. In this way, he challenges the exclusion of Black subjects within the history of art. Compare *Portrait of Melissa Thompson* with a royal or aristocratic portrait such as [*George III*](https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/george-iii-17381820-149145) by Joshua Reynolds or even this painting of [Elizabeth II](https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/elizabeth-ii-19262022-80054). Can you spot elements in these paintings which Wiley has borrowed? Presented in a similar style, Melissa Thompson presents just as powerful an image as the historical portraits Wiley references.

Melissa sits against a patterned backdrop, typical of Wiley’s work. Here, he looks again to artists of the past, taking inspiration from the [Wild Tulip](https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/wild-tulip-334147) design created by Victorian craftsman William Morris. What is the effect of placing Melissa, dressed in a hoodie and ripped jeans, against this traditional wallpaper design?

This artwork is part of Wiley’s series [*The Yellow Wallpaper*](https://www.stephenfriedman.com/news/202-kehinde-wiley-the-yellow-wallpaper/): a group of paintings depicting Black women (all recruited through a street-casting process on the streets of London) in powerful poses borrowed from historical portraiture and set against richly patterned backgrounds.

**Tip:** if you'd like more insight into the painting before teaching the lesson, an [audio description](https://artuk.org/learn/learning-resources/audio-description-of-portrait-of-melissa-thompson-by-kehinde-wiley/view_as/grid/search/2024--lrresource%3Aaudio-description-of-portrait-of-melissa-thompson-by-kehinde-wiley/page/1) is available. It is accompanied by a full written transcript which can also be used to describe the painting.

**Look, describe and discuss**

You can start by showing the whole image, and then use close-up images to explore details of the painting.

Encourage your students to look carefully – this is their superpower! It’s best to not give too much background information about the artwork at this stage, so students can develop their own ideas and opinions.

**Nudge questions**

Now when looking at the painting, ask more specific ('nudge') questions:

* What are your first impressions of the person in this painting?
* What do you notice about her clothes?
* Where do you think she is sitting for this painting?
* Do you notice anything unusual about the yellow wallpaper in the background?

**Watch this video**

In this video, museum director Gus Casely-Hayford uses his own 'Superpower of Looking' to explore *Portrait of Melissa Thompson*.

Ask your students these questions before watching the video to support close looking and listening:

* Look closely at the painting. Did you spot anything Gus missed?
* What else do you notice about the painting when watching the video?
* Gus invites us to imagine what’s going on in Melissa’s head. What do you think she is thinking and feeling?

You can also [watch the video on YouTube](https://youtu.be/vI5gW_RLfJE?si=OUmu3vD2IBpP8UyB).

**Questions from The Superpower of Looking Kit**

Now we can start to explore the 'elements' of the painting. For this artwork, you will focus on [composition](https://artuk.org/learn/learning-resources/the-superpower-of-looking-kit#Composition), [space](https://artuk.org/learn/learning-resources/the-superpower-of-looking-kit#Space) and [figures.](https://artuk.org/learn/learning-resources/the-superpower-of-looking-kit#Figures)

Ask your students to evidence their points:

* Where exactly are they looking when they make a statement?
* Can everybody see what they see?
* Slow down, take time to really look closely

You can introduce knowledge from the contextual background for teachers while asking these bespoke questions with helpful responses below.

**Composition**

* What is the focus of this painting?

*The figure, Melissa Thompson, draws the focus.*

* How does the artist show us that this figure is important?

*Melissa’s whole body fits into this large painting, in which she takes up most of the picture plane. By placing her on this elegant chair, the artist gives us the sense that this is a formal portrait, like those we might typically see featuring kings and queens. Tip: you may like to take a look at the royal portraits suggested above in the contextual background for teachers.*

* Does the artist use colour to tell us who or what to look at?

*Look for the difference in colours used for the background of the painting and the colours used for the figure. The darker colours used for Melissa, her clothes and her chair stand out against the lighter yellow of the background.*

* What shape does the top half of the figure’s body form?

*Melissa’s torso, with her arms splayed out onto the armrests of the chair, forms a triangle.*

* What do you find at the top of this shape?

*The top of a triangle is known as the apex – this is where we would expect to find something important within the painting. Here, the top of the triangle is where we find Melissa’s head; the shape guides our eyes upwards to look at her face.*

**Figures**

* How is this figure sitting?
*Tip: try copying Melissa’s pose, thinking about how you sit on your chair. Melissa sits with a slight twist to her body; her legs turn one way, her head turns another. She sits up straight in her chair, taking up space and spreading her arms out across the armrests. Her legs are placed much more casually. Melissa appears confident, seeming to take ownership of this chair.*
* Is she sitting still? Or is there movement?
*Melissa seems to be sitting very still, but look closely at her hands and her feet. Is there a slight movement in her hands – perhaps just as we gesture when we talk? Do you see movement in her feet? Maybe she is about to stand up or is fidgeting! (It’s not easy to sit still to pose for a portrait!).*
* Look at her expression. How do you think she is feeling?
*Tip: copy Melissa’s expression. Invite students to make their own suggestions, giving reasons for their answers. They may notice that Melissa looks directly at us, suggesting confidence.*
* What sort of impression of herself do you think Melissa wants to give? What does she use to show us her identity?
*Tip: whenever we take a selfie, we think about what image we want to project, constructing our own identity – from the clothes we choose to wear to the pose we make and the face we pull. What do Melissa’s clothes say about her? Think about the ripped jeans, her Nike-branded trainers and the logo on her hoodie (even if we’re not able to read this, it must be important to her). Are these clothes you would be allowed to wear to school?*

**Space**

* Which parts of this painting are three-dimensional? Which parts are two-dimensional? Why?

*The figure of Melissa and her chair are three-dimensional. Look at the use of light and shade (modelling) to show the shape of her face and the folds in her clothes. In contrast, the background of the painting is two-dimensional and flat. There is no shading on the flowers in this patterned wallpaper to suggest they could be real flowers.*

* Is the background of this painting always two-dimensional?

*Here, things become a little confusing! Some of the plants in the wallpaper seem to leave their two-dimensional background to wind themselves around the three-dimensional figure of Melissa.*

* How does light help us tell the difference between the textures in the painting?

*How does the artist trick us into thinking the various elements of this painting, all crafted from paint, are different textures such as leather, denim, wood or skin? The way in which light interacts with these surfaces can give us a clue. Notice how light is absorbed by fabrics like Melissa’s jeans and hoodie. However, it is reflected by the shiny varnish of the chair, by Melissa’s smooth skin, and even, to a lesser extent, by the leather of her trainers.*

**Everyone learning**

You can find out more about The Superpower of Looking SEND/ASD/ALN approach on the [Superpower homepage](https://artuk.org/learn/the-superpower-of-looking).

Now it's time to explore the artwork in different ways. This list of sensory activities encourages students to apply their learning and can suit a variety of learning needs.

**Make**

* Take inspiration from Kehinde Wiley’s elaborate patterned wallpaper in this painting. [Students could design their own pattern with the William Morris Gallery’s Playing with Pattern resource.](https://playingwithpattern.com/)
* Invite students to draw their own portrait. How will they present themselves through the clothes they choose and the pose they strike? They may like to present their portraits against a background of their own wallpaper designs (see above).

**Listen**

* [Listen to the audio description of the painting](https://artuk.org/learn/learning-resources/audio-description-of-portrait-of-melissa-thompson-by-kehinde-wiley/view_as/grid/search/2024--lrresource%3Aaudio-description-of-portrait-of-melissa-thompson-by-kehinde-wiley/page/1).

**Touch**

* Touch the textures shown in the painting: wood, various fabrics, a metal chain and rubber wristband. Which feel shiny, rough or smooth?

**Move**

* Explore sitting in different ways on your chair. In pairs, student could photograph the different poses. Which pose feels relaxed, proud, or nervous?

**Communicate**

* Learn the Makaton sign or British Sign Language for ‘yellow’. Try learning other colours too.
* What do you think it feels like to sit for a portrait? Invite students to share their ideas with a partner. [You can read how Melissa Thompson felt in this article from The Hackney Citizen.](https://www.hackneycitizen.co.uk/2021/10/12/major-artwork-inspired-encounter-dalston/)

**Final stage: review**

Ask your students to:

* share their sketchbooks in groups and discuss the 'elements' they have identified
* choose an element/aspect they find most interesting about the artwork and record it in their sketchbooks
* choose their own name/s for the title of the artwork
* think of a question they would like to ask the artist

**Congratulations!**

You have now completed The Superpower of Looking lesson resource.