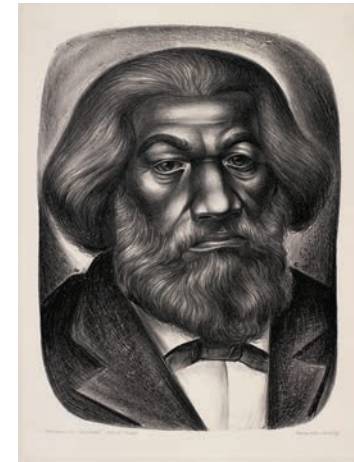
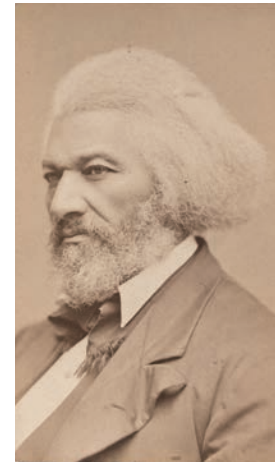




**BLACK
AMERICAN
PORTRAITS**

LACMA

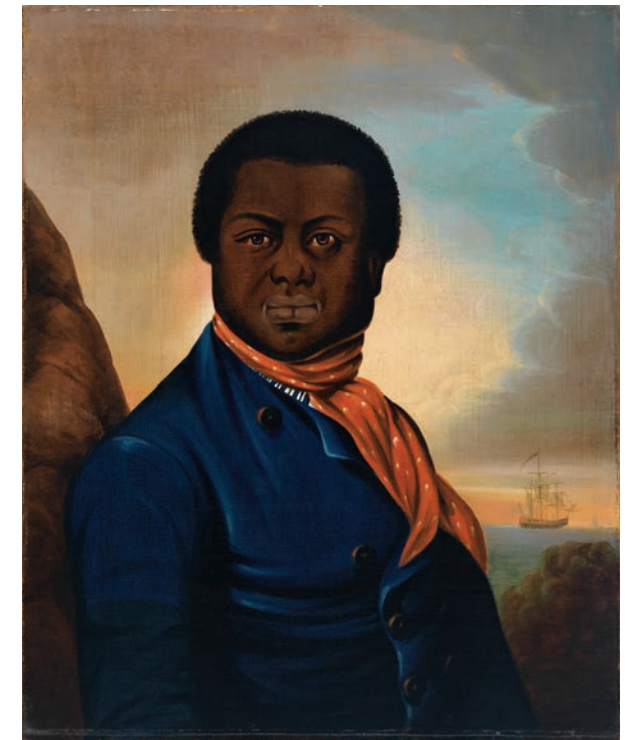
Black American Portraits articulates a history of America through portraiture. Featuring approximately 140 works of art in painting, sculpture, textile, drawing, printmaking, photography, time-based media, and augmented reality, drawn primarily from the permanent collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the exhibition expresses Blackness as powerful, beautiful, abundant, nuanced, and joyful. With works spanning over 200 years, this presentation highlights the ways in which African Americans have used portraits to envision themselves and reimagine Blackness in their own eyes.



Abolitionist Frederick Douglass escaped enslavement in 1838, just as the first photographic process, the daguerreotype, was being introduced in the United States. He went on to become the most photographed American of the time, sitting for over 160 portraits. Douglass believed photography would reveal the truth and humanity of enslaved African Americans and help realize the promise of democracy: “What was once the special and exclusive luxury of the rich and great is now the privilege of all,” he said. Black artists today reference Douglass’s likeness and his teachings on photography and emancipation to underscore the importance of self-representing Blackness, challenging stereotypes, and resisting racist classification. *Black American Portraits* features several images of Douglass, including an 1876 photograph and posthumous portraits created as recently as 2019.

The earliest work in the exhibition is a painting of a sharply dressed sailor from around 1790. It was highly unusual for a Black person to sit for a portrait at that moment in history, when the transatlantic slave trade was still the backbone of the republic. The sitter is thought to be Paul Cuffe, a mixed Black and Indigenous freedman in New England who had amassed a fleet of ships and would later sail nine Black families to Africa after the War of 1812. This painting is a defiant depiction of a Black man free from bondage and in control of his own image.

As photography studios sprang up around the country in the mid-nineteenth century, the tradition of creating portraits became available to Black people *en masse*. During and after the Civil War (1861–65), Black people sat for portraits—realized as daguerreotypes, tintypes, ambrotypes, *cartes de visite*, and in other early photographic formats—that became treasured keepsakes and evidence of humanity and dignity. One early daguerreotype in the exhibition depicts an impeccably dressed



TOP LEFT: George Kendall Warren, *Frederick Douglass*, 1876. Albumen silver print; 3⅜ × 2¼ in. (9.7 × 5.7 cm). National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Open Access

TOP CENTER: Charles White, *Frederick Douglass*, 1950. Lithograph; 26⅞ × 19⅞ in. (66.4 × 50.5 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Sylvia and Frederick Reines, M.90.193. © The Charles White Archives, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

TOP RIGHT: Isaac Julien, *Serenade (Lessons of the Hour)*, 2019. Digital print on matte archival paper mounted on aluminum, edition 2 of 6; 39⅞ × 44⅞ in. (100 × 113 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Amar Singh, M.2021.59.1. © Isaac Julien, courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro

BOTTOM: *Portrait of a Sailor (Paul Cuffe?)*, United States, c. 1800. Oil on canvas; 25¼ × 20½ in. (64.1 × 52.1 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Cecile Bartman, M.2005.2. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA



and coiffed woman holding a book, indicating the importance of knowledge and education in the years following enslavement, when literacy had been outlawed for Black people.

The Harlem Renaissance (1918–30s) was a cultural and artistic movement that blossomed in Harlem, New York. As Black people began searching for new ways of living in northern U.S. cities, Harlem attracted what writer Alain LeRoy Locke called “the New Negro,” a generation defined by modern dress, city life, intellectual engagement, art, and a more outspoken advocacy of dignity. The creativity and flair of this period are evinced in photographs taken by James Van Der Zee, who chronicled the style, class, and beauty of the Black middle class. His iconic street scenes show citizens dressed in their Sunday best, posed with cars and luxury belongings. Van Der Zee also produced studio portraits with dramatic backdrops and extravagant props, such as his photograph of Daddy Grace (Marcelino Manuel da Graça), founder of the denomination the United House of Prayer for All People.

The Harlem Renaissance gave rise to creative expression in a range of media—from poetry and painting to dance and sculpture. Writers such as Langston Hughes; painters such as Charles Alston, Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, and Archibald Motley; and sculptors such as Richmond Barthé, Sargent Claude Johnson, and Augusta Savage introduced and expanded new forms of Black expression in the twentieth century. Savage, who became the first Black member of the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors, turned her Harlem workshop into the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts in 1934. The studio offered free art classes to many young artists including Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight, of whom Savage cast a bust that emphasized Knight’s youth, pride, and confidence. Sargent Claude Johnson’s terracotta bust of a young boy, *Chester*, shows how Johnson used sculpture to reveal the beauty, elegance, and humanity of Black features.

Works produced during the Great Migration (1916–70s) reflect Black Americans’ mass movement from the South to the industrial North and Midwest—and later to the West—in search of new opportunities and communities. Charles Alston’s *The Conductor* portrays a Black railroad worker in the years following the Harlem Renaissance, evoking the access to industry, labor, and mobility that came with migration. This imagery stands in stark contrast to the narratives and images of generations before, when Black Americans’ movement was prohibited and controlled by white people. Bridget “Biddy” Mason, for example, was born enslaved in 1818 and traveled on foot behind her owners’ caravan from Mississippi to Southern California. There, she won her freedom and became one of the first landowners in Los Angeles, founding the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1872. *Black American Portraits* includes an augmented reality monument



OPPOSITE, TOP: *Untitled*, late 19th century. Daguerreotype; 3¼ × 3¼ in. (9.8 × 8.9 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds from the Ralph M. Parsons Fund. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: James Van Der Zee, *Daddy Grace*, *Harlem*, 1938. Gelatin silver print; 9¾ × 7½ in. (23.8 × 18.9 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Emerald and Harriet Merrill, M.83.315.1. © 1969 Van Der Zee, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

TOP LEFT: Augusta Savage, *Gwendolyn Knight*, 1934. Bronze; 17½ × 8 × 8 in. (44.5 × 20.3 × 20.3 cm). Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York. Photo courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York

TOP RIGHT: Charles Alston, *The Conductor*, 1941. Gouache with casein on paper; 20⅞ × 14¼ in. (53 × 37.5 cm). Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, NY. © Estate of Charles Alston, courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

LEFT: Sargent Claude Johnson, *Chester*, 1930. Painted terracotta; 11½ × 4½ × 4¼ in. (29.2 × 11.4 × 12.1 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. William J. Robertson in memory of her father Adolph Loewi, AC1997.71.1. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA



to Mason by Ada Pinkston titled *The Open Hand is Blessed*, which can be experienced near LACMA's Smidt Welcome Plaza. This work pays tribute to Mason's voice and spiritual philosophy, bringing to life the only known photograph of Biddu Mason alongside a soundscape conveying her story. For more information on the project, see p. 9.

The Civil Rights Era (1954–68) is represented in this exhibition by portraits of figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, and Thurgood Marshall, as well as images from the Black Arts Movement (BAM, 1965–75), the cultural sister to the Black Power movement. BAM aimed for a “radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic” at a time when portraiture was not a dominant artistic mode. Anthony Barboza's photograph of Amiri Baraka and Dawoud Bey's image of James Baldwin communicate boldness, poise, and urgency. Benny Andrews's mixed-media portrait of playwright and poet Ntozake Shange epitomizes Andrews's painterly realism and tactile “rough collage” technique. Shange's unflinching pose and searing gaze bring to mind her critique of the misogyny and sexism of BAM and her efforts to develop an aesthetic for Black women on the West Coast.

While many of the sitters portrayed in the exhibition posed and styled themselves for the camera, the self-portraits on view show how artists represent themselves through a range of expressions, poses, props, colors, locations, and artistic strategies. Self-portraits by artists such as Cedric Adams, Arthur Jafa, Kerry James Marshall, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya externalize complex interiorities and explore the tension between seeing oneself and being seen. Marshall's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self* (see back cover) centers Blackness as subject, material, and condition, and counters stereotypes by destabilizing a white gaze. A student of Charles White, who was widely considered the grandfather of twentieth-century Black American figuration, Marshall renders himself almost completely in shades of black except for the whites of his eyes, his gap-toothed smile, and his shirt. Jafa delivers a similarly dark, shadowy image in *Monster*. He looks assuredly into the lens while holding a second camera, thereby displaying it as an apparatus of power. Margaret Burroughs and Jordan Casteel adhere to more classical elements of portraiture, telling their stories through color, book titles, decor, textiles, and personal objects in addition to facial expression, style, and pose.

Like Van Der Zee, who created exuberant images of a new Black middle class in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s, Alvin Baltrop documented subjects in their own social space: the underground gay culture that flourished along Manhattan's West Side Piers during the 1970s. Baltrop captured his subjects sunbathing, cruising, and having sex, in images that are imbued with a heightened sense of drama and sensuality. Also from this era,



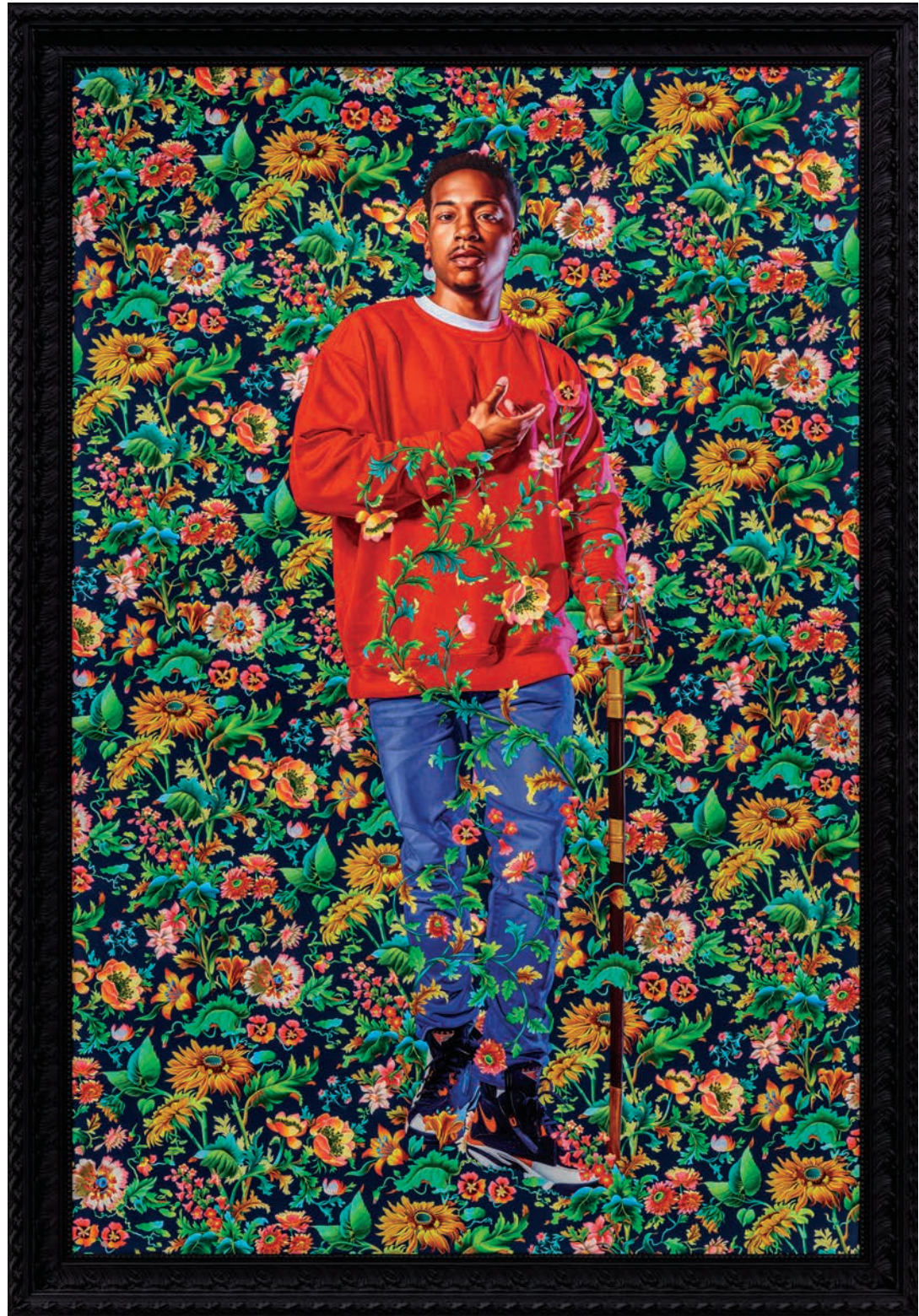
OPPOSITE, TOP: Edward Biberman, *I Had a Dream*, 1968. Oil on Masonite; 24 × 30 × 3 in. (61 × 76.2 × 7.6 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by the American Art Council, M.2011.42. © Edward Biberman Estate, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Benny Andrews, *For Colored Girls*, 1977. Oil on canvas with painted fabric collage; 46 × 40 × ¾ in. (116.8 × 101.6 × 1.9 cm). Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, NY. © 2021 Estate of Benny Andrews/licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, NY

TOP: Jordan Casteel, *Jordan*, 2020. Oil on canvas; 90 × 78 in. (228.6 × 198.1 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Andrew Xue. © Jordan Casteel, courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York, photo by David Schulze

RIGHT: Alvin Baltrop, *The Piers (three men on dock)*, n.d. (1975–86). Gelatin silver print; 11 × 13¼ in. (27.8 × 34.9 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, promised gift of Graham Steele and Ulysses De Santi. © 2021 Estate of Alvin Baltrop/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York





Kehinde Wiley, *Yachinboaz Ben Yisrael II*, 2021. Oil on linen; 108 × 77 in. (274.3 × 195.6 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, promised gift of Rich Paul. © Kehinde Wiley, photo by Joshua White, courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects Los Angeles



colorful life-size portraits by Barkley L. Hendricks monumentalize everyday people, defining an age and influencing a younger generation of Black figurative painters, including Kehinde Wiley and Mickalene Thomas. In response to those who claimed that his work was political—because his subjects embodied the “Black is Beautiful” message boldly, loudly, and proudly in the 1970s—Hendricks countered, “My paintings were about people that were part of my life.” Black joy and celebration were also at the heart of Lorraine O’Grady’s *Art Is...*, performed at Harlem’s African American Day Parade in September 1983. The performers shouted, “Frame me, make me art!” and “That’s right, that’s what art is, we’re the art!”

In addition to images from past eras, *Black American Portraits* features work by living artists reflecting on history and representation. Titus Kaphar takes on the Eurocentric tradition of portraiture that informed the depiction of prominent early Americans and recasts the subjects of these portraits to center Black subjectivity. In *Enough About You*, he reinterprets an eighteenth-century painting of university founder Elihu Yale. In the original, Yale sits comfortably with other white male figures, while a young Black boy at the far right looks on. The boy wears an iron collar, indicating his position of servitude, which contrasts sharply with the freedom and dominance enjoyed by Yale and



TOP: Titus Kaphar, *Enough About You*, 2016. Oil on canvas with antique frame; 45 × 70 × 5½ in. (114.3 × 177.8 × 14 cm). Collection of Arthur Lewis and Hau Nguyen. © Titus Kaphar, photo courtesy of the artist

BOTTOM: Lorraine O’Grady, *Art Is... (Man with Rings and Child)*, 1983, printed 2009. Chromogenic print; 16 × 20 in. (40.6 × 50.8 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Alice and Nahum Lainer. © 2021 Lorraine O’Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York, photo courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York



his cronies. In Kaphar’s portrait, the subject is the young Black boy, who looks straight at the viewer while the white figures have been obscured.

As part of the project of centering Black subjectivity, *Black American Portraits* invites a reconsideration of how allyship can operate in image making, community, and interpretation. From Catherine Opie’s portrait of Kamala Harris in the type of self-assured, regal pose typically reserved for male subjects to rafa esparza’s relaxed portrait of Patrisse Cullors, co-founder of Black Lives Matter, painted on the artist’s signature earthen adobe, the exhibition includes examples of work by non-Black artists committed to thoughtful representations of Black, Brown, queer, and other marginalized people that enable and encourage identities and stories to come through with power, grace, and love.

One of the newest works in the show is an image of togetherness and belonging by Amy Sherald. In the colossal painting *An Ocean Away* (see front cover), Sherald uses her signature grayscale approach to brown skin tones to depict two Black surfers resting on the beach in Far Rockaway, New York. Contrasting historically negative associations with Black people and water—such as the transatlantic slave trade and the segregation of public pools during Jim Crow—this double portrait shows Black people who

have come to the water of their own accord to ride the waves and experience a sense of freedom.

Portraiture has been used as a tool of self-definition by Black Americans for generations, and *Black American Portraits* is dedicated to showcasing Black subjects as powerful, beautiful, and complex. From the time of Frederick Douglass, when the dominant representations of Black people were used to justify enslavement, to the age of Black Lives Matter, when images of death and pain flash across our screens, Black people have offered counterimages. The portraits in this exhibition span media, decades, and regions, yet are united in centering Black subjects and subjectivities and in reframing the history of portraiture to foreground and uplift Black stories.

—Christine Y. Kim and Liz Andrews, exhibition co-curators

TOP LEFT: Catherine Opie, *Kamala Harris*, 2015. Pigment print; 24 × 20 in. (61 × 50.8 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the artist. © Catherine Opie, digital image courtesy of the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

TOP RIGHT: rafa esparza, *big chillin with Patrisse*, 2021. Acrylic on adobe; 72 × 57 in. (183 × 145 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Liana Krupp. © rafa esparza, photo by Ruben Diaz, courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles



Ada Pinkston
The Open Hand is Blessed, 2021

“If you hold your hand closed, nothing good can come in. The open hand is blessed, for it gives in abundance, even as it receives.”
—Bridget “Biddy” Mason (1818–1891)

The Open Hand is Blessed is a memorial series honoring Bridget “Biddy” Mason. Artist Ada Pinkston combines a portrait of Biddy Mason, archival images of African American residents of nineteenth-century Los Angeles, her own original watercolors, and a soundscape to create this augmented reality monument.

The Open Hand is Blessed, newly reimagined for *Black American Portraits*, can be experienced at LACMA; look for the sign near the Smidt Welcome Plaza. The original work can be seen at Earvin “Magic” Johnson Recreation Area, or from anywhere by downloading Snapchat and scanning the code to the left.

The Open Hand is Blessed was commissioned as a part of LACMA x Snapchat: Monumental Perspectives and is now in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Open your Snapchat

Ada Pinkston, *The Open Hand is Blessed*, 2021. Augmented reality Snapchat Lens. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, commissioned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Snap Inc. © Ada Pinkston, image courtesy of Snap Inc.



Black American Portraits is in part a tribute to *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, a groundbreaking exhibition curated by artist and art historian David C. Driskell (1931–2020) that opened at LACMA in 1976. *Black American Portraits* opens in tandem with the exhibition of Kehinde Wiley's portrait of President Barack Obama and Amy Sherald's portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama, on loan from the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, and the companion exhibition *Family Album: Dannielle Bowman, Janna Ireland, and Contemporary Works from LACMA*, on view at Charles White Elementary School. All three exhibitions center Black artists and subjects for a new generation, in Los Angeles and beyond.

This brochure was made possible by **Snapchat** 

Black American Portraits is organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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Major support provided by Janine Sherman Barrois and Lyndon J. Barrois, Sr.; Ina Coleman; Brickson E. Diamond; The Claire Falkenstein Foundation; Kristen Boggs Jaeger and Jeffrey Jaeger; Jill Lawrence and Paul Koplin in honor of Martha Koplin; Arthur R. Lewis; and Janet Dreisen Rappaport.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Black American Portraits will be accompanied by a full slate of public programs, including talks, performances, films, panel discussions, and more. On November 7, 2021, the museum will host a day of music, activities, and programs during an Open House celebration. For more information, please check lacma.org.

SOUNDTRACK

The *Black American Portraits* exhibition soundtrack celebrates the radiance of Black musical culture in its most joyful forms, featuring song selections from several of the artists represented in the show. To listen to the soundtrack, visit www.lacma.org/bapsoundtrack.

VISIT AGAIN AND TELL A FRIEND

Free Days

Admission to the museum is free to everyone on the following days. Advance timed-entry tickets required. Tickets to free days are released at the same time as General Admission tickets (see lacma.org for details).

Tuesday, November 9

Saturday, November 20

Tuesday, December 14

Other Free Admission

Visit lacma.org/tickets for other ways to attend for free, including free admission after 3 pm every weekday for people living in L.A. County.

EXPLORE FURTHER

Continue the journey of *Black American Portraits* with a new exhibition at LACMA's off-site gallery, just four miles east of the museum.

Family Album: Dannielle Bowman, Janna Ireland, and Contemporary Works from LACMA explores the work of artists of color who examine themselves and history through the visual language of family photographs.

FREE

Saturdays 1–4 pm | November 19, 2021–June 5, 2022

Charles White Elementary School | 2401 Wilshire Blvd.

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Your support helps us fulfill our mission of sharing art with the widest possible audience. Plus, you'll receive special members-only benefits and exciting behind-the-scenes access designed to enrich your LACMA experience. Visit the ticket office today or go to lacma.org.

TOP: Kerry James Marshall, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, 1980. Egg tempera on paper; 8 × 6½ in. (20.3 × 16.5 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, promised gift of Steven and Deborah Lebowitz. © Kerry James Marshall, courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

FRONT COVER: Amy Sherald, *An Ocean Away*, 2020. Oil on canvas; 130 × 108 × 2½ in. (330.2 × 274.3 × 6.4 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, promised gift of Willow Bay and Bob Iger. © Amy Sherald, photo by Joseph Hyde, courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth