

WAM WICHITA  
ART  
MUSEUM

# EDUCATOR GUIDE

# ROBERT

SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA

# PETERSON

On view September 28-January 5, 2025



Robert Peterson, *Head in the Clouds*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 48 x 72 inches. Collection of Yvonne Cook and Family

# ABOUT THE EXHIBITON

In his portraits, contemporary artist Robert Peterson renders African American life beautifully and joyfully, rejecting stereotypes to celebrate the “Black experience as (he) knows it.” The artist’s first major museum exhibition, *Somewhere in America*, features key paintings from Peterson’s existing body of work, as well as over 30 new canvases, many painted on a monumental scale. Each image lovingly depicts individuals, couples, and families in everyday moments—commemorating his community in small-town Oklahoma, his wider circle of friends and family throughout the country, and the people he encounters in various cities across the U.S. that spark memories of those he has known, both past and present. *Somewhere in America* tells a deeply personal—yet widely recognizable—story of family, community, and legacy.

Self-taught, Peterson picked up a paintbrush for the first time in 2012 to distract himself from an upcoming hip surgery. A little over a decade later, he has paintings at the Brooklyn Museum, Philbrook Museum of Art, Weisman Art Museum, Museum of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, and Wichita Art Museum. For Peterson, *Somewhere in America* is an opportunity to explore the themes that have characterized his career—masculinity, spirituality, intimacy, family, and community. The exhibition celebrates “everything that is important” to him, with work that “speaks [his] truth” and tells a larger story of Black American life. *Robert Peterson: Somewhere in America* is organized by the Wichita Art Museum Wichita Art Museum and Dr. Tera Lee Hedrick, Curator.

## PRESENTING SPONSOR

National Endowment for the Arts

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*Robert Peterson: Somewhere in America* is organized by the Wichita Art Museum.

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The exhibition catalogue *Robert Peterson: Somewhere in America* has been made possible with funds from the Friends of the Wichita Art Museum.

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# PETERSON

SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA

# ROBERT



Robert Peterson, *Daughter of an Immigrant*, 2021. Oil and diamond dust on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. Collection of Dr. Greg Shannon



Robert Peterson, *Apple of America's Obsession*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 inches. Collection of the artist



Robert Peterson, *Pure Joy*, 2024. From the series *Saints and Crowns*. Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches. Petrusci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art



Robert Peterson, *Back to black*, 2024. Oil on panel, 30 x 24 inches. Collection of Patrick Hardy and Stephen Dahlan



Robert Peterson, *Small Town Girl*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches. Collection of the artist



Robert Peterson, *When you see him, you see me*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches. Lang Hampton Art Collection

## THEMES TO ENGAGE WITH YOUR STUDENTS:

Family  
Community  
Legacy  
Black portraiture

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- What do you see in this artwork?
- Based on what you see, what can you tell about the person or people in the artwork?
- What connections can you make in your own lives to what you see in these portraits?

## SELECTED ARTWORK TO EXPLORE:



*Somewhere Between Heaven and Earth* references a memory from Peterson's childhood. The artist grew up in a military family that moved frequently but he spent every summer with his paternal grandparents in Denver, Colorado. Supposed to stay near home to avoid any danger caused by rival gangs, Peterson would climb the pole of his grandmother's backyard clothesline to look out from their troubled neighborhood toward downtown Denver and the Rocky Mountains beyond. The young man in *Somewhere* mimics this same posture but sits on a city light pole. Is he a lookout while his friends act up, ready to alert them when the police approach? Or does he—like Peterson as a child—look beyond his circumstances to his future and new opportunities?

Robert Peterson, *Somewhere Between Heaven and Earth*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 72 x 48 inches. Collection of Mike and Erin Brown

## SELECTED ARTWORK TO EXPLORE:



In *American Dreamin'*, Peterson uses the US flag draped behind the model and printed on his durag to visualize black-and-white thinking about African American masculinity. Peterson speaks frequently about the pressure on men—particularly Black men—to present themselves as invulnerable, without weakness, and lacking emotion. He explains: “History has said that we have to be strong, have no emotions...[we] do cry, do experience emotion ... [there is] more to us.” The artist pairs the model’s vulnerability and strength as core qualities—not uncombinable opposites—as he bears his muscular chest and rests on a crate marked FRAGILE. It is Peterson’s “goal and dream” to celebrate the nuance and complexity of men in his community.

### LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTWORK:

[Watch](#) a video about the painting on Robert Peterson’s Instagram.

Robert Peterson, *American Dreamin'*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 72 x 48 inches. Collection of Sol Aponte and Jennia Fredrique Aponte, Mahari Bailey, Azita Fatheree and George Fatheree, Natasha Fatheree and Andreas Neumann, Mira Hashmall, Jessica Legaux and Ryan Legaux, Erika Lewis, Robert Peterson, Ayesha Selden, and Byron Young



## SELECTED ARTWORK TO EXPLORE:



Peterson specializes in large scale paintings that honor his subjects by dedicating vast physical space to them. In *Golden Locks*, though, he uses a small canvas to invite viewers in for a quiet moment of close looking and reflection. The figure's blue jeans pop against the golden background. That glimmering gold also plays up the highlights in the figure's locks. Celebrating Black hair—the textures, colors, styles—is one of Peterson's hallmarks; he often compares afros to halos and durags to crowns. Pointedly, he celebrates these elements of Black culture and heritage to undercut dehumanizing anti-Black rhetoric. While dreadlocks have been the center of controversy, cultural appropriation, and discrimination, Peterson paints them as precious extensions of the model's body adorning his head.

## SELECTED ARTWORK TO EXPLORE:



Peterson named this striking diamond-shaped portrait of a woman in a blue blazer and pumps after a popular contemporary poem by Adrian Michael Green:

**she is water.**

**powerful enough to drown you**

**soft enough to cleanse you**

**deep enough to save you.**

Who is the woman in the painting? She could be Peterson's grandmother, mother, wife, daughter, sister, or a composite of all them. He speaks frequently about the major impact each of these women have had on his life and career. She could also represent one of the many American women—particularly Black women—who lift up their families and communities.

### **LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTWORK:**

[Read](#) more poetry on Adrian Michael Green's Pinterest page.

[Learn](#) about Adrian Michael Green on his website.

## SELECTED ARTWORK TO EXPLORE:



In *Sunday Kind of Love*, an entwined couple lounges on their bed, enjoying a moment of relaxation and connection. Painted on a monumental scale, the work is deeply personal for the artist. Although friends posed for the painting, the couple references Peterson, his wife Marina, and their life together. In the early years of their relationship, they would both come home after a long day at work and reconnect by curling up together without TV, cell phones, or other distractions, listening to each other's heartbeats and breathing. Peterson says, "When you find the right person for your life, nothing else matters. The world could be falling apart outside and yet somehow as long as you have each other everything feels complete."

### LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTWORK:

[Read](#) an article about Rock & Roll Hall of Fame singer Etta James, whose song "A Sunday Kind of Love" inspired the artwork.

Robert Peterson, *Sunday Kind of Love*, 2022. Oil on canvas, 54 x 114 inches. Wichita Art Museum, Museum Purchase, Burneta Adair Endowment Fund



## ABOUT THE ARTIST:

**“For a lot of artist to include myself at times, our work is inspired by the now. We paint our truth. We paint our life and the that which we see in the world around us. Every now and then we are inspired to paint something bigger than us, bigger than what we see or have seen.”**

–Robert Peterson (Instagram, February 29, 2024).



### Learn about Robert Peterson

Visit his [Instagram](#) and his [website](#).

[Watch](#) a YouTube video about his life.

[Watch](#) a video about the artist on PBS, Gallery America.

[Watch](#) a YouTube conversation between the artist and former Director/CEO of the Wichita Art Museum, Anne Kraybill.



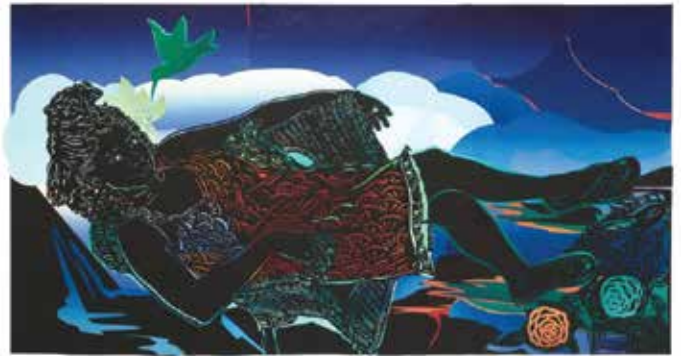
EXPLORE ARTWORKS IN THE WICHITA ART MUSEUM'S PERMANENT COLLECTION THAT ALSO RELATE TO THE THEMES OF:

FAMILY

COMMUNITY

LEGACY

BLACK PORTRAITURE





## Kehinde Wiley, *Portrait of Yaima Polledo & Isabel Pozo*



Kehinde Wiley, *Portrait of Yaima Polledo & Isabel Pozo*, 2023. Oil on linen, 108 x 81 inches. Wichita Art Museum, Museum purchase, American Art Acquisition Fund established by friends and franchisees of Pizza Hut, Inc. in honor of Dan and Frank Carney, 2024.<sup>1</sup>

# Kehinde Wiley, *Portrait of Yaima Polledo & Isabel Pozo*

## ABOUT THE ARTWORK:

Painter and sculptor Kehinde Wiley is one of the leading artistic voices of our generation. Known for his monumental portraits of Black people, often in poses and settings that reference famous European images of emperors and kings, Wiley's work asks viewers to consider who art and culture celebrates. The artist is most famous for his official presidential portrait of Barack Obama, unveiled at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in 2018.

*Portrait of Yaima Polledo & Isabel Pozo* features two dancers from a Havana, Cuba, dance company that preserves and celebrates Yoruba (Nigerian) ritual dances. Yoruba cultural, religious, and artistic traditions have influenced various aspects of Black life in the Caribbean and the United States, including Mardi Gras and other carnival celebrations in New Orleans and elsewhere. Wiley is interested in how carnival and circus traditions allow Black people across the African diaspora—communities of people of African descent originally forced to migrate because of the slave trade—to “suspend reality.” For Wiley, the circus and carnival are places where “all of the normal aspects of life are put aside in favor of a drunken, shifted, hyper, vibrant way of living, being, and seeing the world,” where Black people can “communicate love and joy in a radical act of defiance.” Wiley's celebratory, ennobling portrait also undercuts the long history of racist and sexist circus traditions. In acts like the “Hottentot Venus,” which exploited a Khoikhoi woman named Sarah Baartman, audience members gawked and jeered as a Black woman's body and supposedly heightened sexuality were presented as a “freak show.”

Resplendently dressed in their dance costumes, Yaima Polledo and Isabel Pozo pose like enthroned saints or European royalty, still and silent, with the tilted chins and regal expressions typical of Wiley's portraits. Their bare feet and hands—their instruments—peek out amidst the vibrant color of the painting and the flower-strewn background that is Wiley's signature. Women with little economic or social power from a poverty-stricken community, they convey a strength imbued by connections to a global Black culture, past and present.

## LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTWORK:

[Watch](#) a YouTube video about Yoruba dancing and singing at a festival in Cuba.

[Watch](#) a YouTube video of a Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba dancer demonstrating Yoruba dance moves.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST:

“If you look at the paintings that I love in art history, these are the paintings where great, powerful men are being celebrated on the big walls of museums throughout the world. What feels really strange is not to be able to see a reflection of myself in that world.”

—Kehinde Wiley (CBS Sunday Morning, November 2015).



## Learn about Kehinde Wiley

Visit his [website](#).

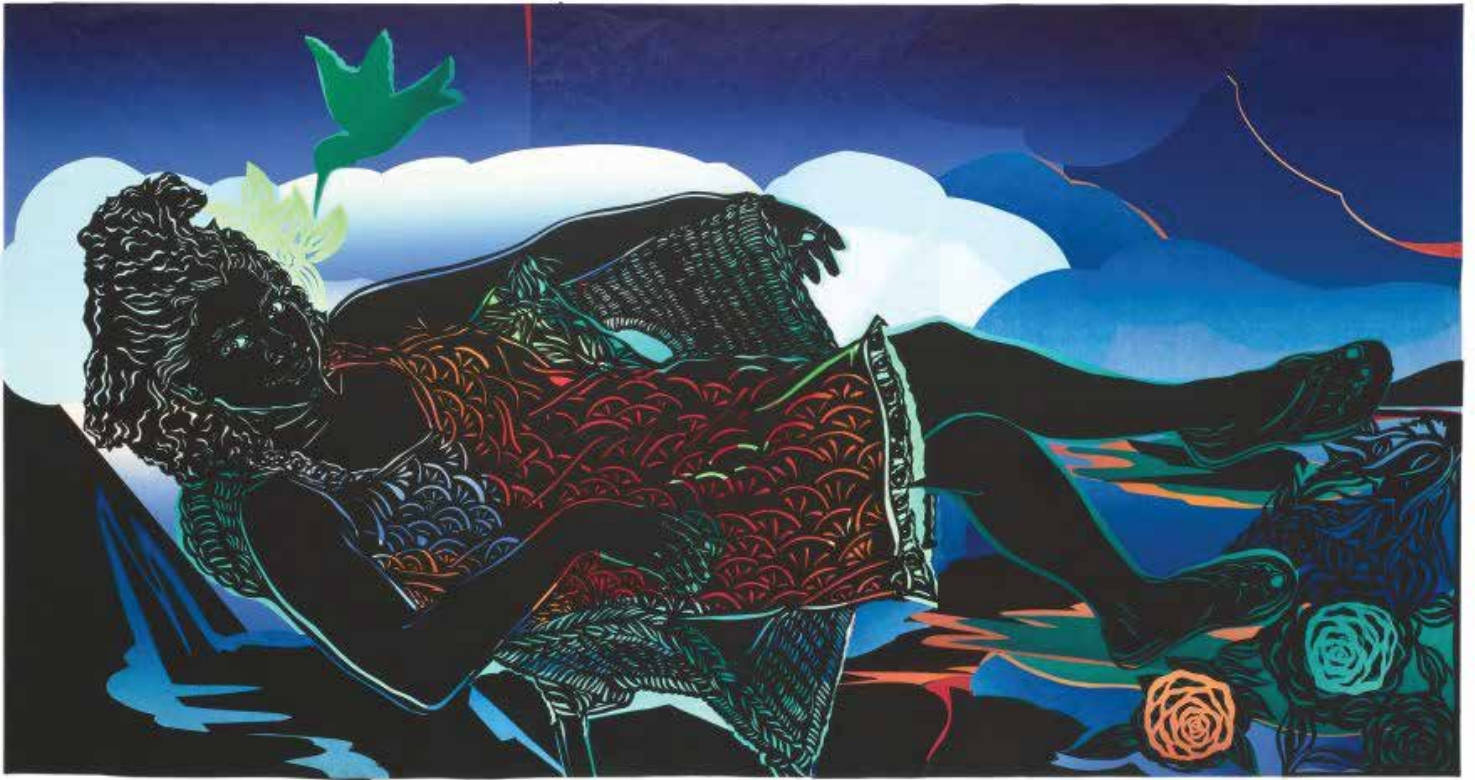
[Read](#) an article from *The New Yorker* about the artist.

[Read](#) a biography of the artist from The Art Story.

[Watch](#) a video about the artist from the CBS Sunday Morning.



**Barbara Earl Thomas, *Girl with Flowers II***



Barbara Earl Thomas, *Girl with Flowers II*, 2022. Cut black paper on hand-printed colored papers, 29 x 56 1/2 inches. Wichita Art Museum, museum purchase, Burneta Adair Endowment Fund, 2023.11

# Barbara Earl Thomas, *Girl with Flowers II*

## ABOUT THE ARTWORK:

As a visual storyteller, Thomas uses the grand tradition of portraiture to embody not only the Black community's struggle but also grace, resilience, and joy. Her work invites viewers to explore her illuminated paper portraits to discover embedded objects, words, and notations that reveal bits and pieces of life as a kind of non-linear biography of her subjects—Thomas' family, friends, neighbors, and icons of Black literature. Color is profoundly important in Thomas's cut-and-layered paper artworks. The beautiful, vivid colors serve to sculpt and model the figures and spaces into three-dimensional illusions with density, shadow, and depth. Thomas's deft handling of the paper layers produces a seamless, painterly quality akin to watercolor. Color complements the floral patterns, hummingbirds, and serene appearance of the individuals whom Thomas reveals by means of slicing into the black paper. "I have made everything beautiful," the artist confides. (Exhibition copy from *Barbara Earl Thomas: The Geography of Innocence*, 2022).

## LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTWORK:

[Watch](#) a video of the artist speaking about this work at the Wichita Art Museum.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST:

"I use my knife like the oar that slices the water's surface in a swirling motion to reveal, through some magic, the biofluorescence—I cut to reveal, to make seen."

—Barbara Earl Thomas (Needell, 2023, 7).

## Learn about Barbara Earl Thomas

Visit her [website](#).

[Watch](#) a YouTube video about the artist from the Seattle Art Museum.



## Stan Squirewell, *The Flower Girls*



Stan Squirewell, *The Flower Girls*, 2023. Mixed Media, 87 x 54 inches. Wichita Art Museum, Museum purchase, American Art Acquisition Fund established by friends and franchises of Pizza Hut, in honor of Dan and Frank Carney, 2024.3



# Stan Squirewell, *The Flower Girls*

## ABOUT THE ARTWORK:

Mixed-media artist Squirewell takes historic images he finds at the Library of Congress and other archives and then enlarges, mixes, layers, and colorizes them. Finally he “dresses” the images—as if they are paper dolls—with fabric and clothing that he has photographed in his studio. Through this process, Squirewell aims to “breathe life” into history, reanimating the lives of the forgotten. *The Flower Girls* uses Depression-era photographs of girls from the 1930s as its basis. Squirewell adorns the girls with elaborate scarves and bows and surrounds them with flowers, honoring them in art as they were not in life. The frame renders Langston Hughes’ classic 1926 poem “I, Too”—which references African American contributions to our country—in a West African script. *The Flower Girls* is also a celebration of Squirewell’s eight-year-old daughter, Ananda, who named the work.



Detail of frame depicting West African script



## LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTWORK

Read Langston Hughes's poem, "[I, Too,](#)" on Poetry Foundation's website.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST:

"I aim for viewers to not only appreciate the aesthetic beauty captured in the photographs but also to cultivate a deeper understanding and acknowledgment of the past."

—Stan Squirewell (Stewart, *My Modern Met*, December 2, 2023).

## LEARN ABOUT STAN SQUIREWELL

Visit his [Instagram](#) account.

Read an article about the artist from:

[Print Magazine, December 2023](#)

[My Modern Met, December 2023](#)

[Courier Journal, February 2022](#)



## Stephen Towns, *The Chain Gang*



Stephen Towns, *The Chain Gang*, 2021. Natural and synthetic fabric, polyester and cotton thread, crystal glass beads, 47 x 58 x 2 inches. Wichita Art Museum, Museum Purchase, Burneta Adair Endowment Fund, 2023.7

# Stephen Towns, *The Chain Gang*

## ABOUT THE ARTWORK:

Guided by his research about the violent treatment of African Americans in United States history, Stephen Towns reimagines historical events, narratives, and artistic traditions in his story quilts to honor Black Americans. In *The Chain Gang*, he represents the forced labor of Black incarcerated people in an inhumane early 20th-century system called convict leasing, also known as *chain gangs* because the laborers were brutally shackled together as they worked. The violence and oppression of convict leasing—most commonly utilized in Southern states—continued the government-sanctioned oppression of African Americans well after the Civil War. Towns approaches this dark history with reverence for people who were forced to labor in this way, while he celebrates craft practices refined in Black communities—quilting—with precious materials like crystal glass beads. With each of these strategies, Towns is forging a distinctly Black American visual language today.

## LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTWORK:

[Read](#) about Chain Gangs on PBS’s website.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST:

“My work is often based on Black American historical figures or events, especially moments that can be challenging to discuss. I want my art to be an avenue for education and understanding, so I title my works to give a bit of context, or I provide written material to help viewers understand what’s going on.”

–Stephen Towns (Carson, Textile Artist, October 4, 2024).



## LEARN ABOUT STEPHEN TOWNS

Visit his [Instagram](#) and his [website](#).

[Read](#) an article about the artist on Textile Artist’s website.

## EXTENDED RESOURCES:

Find books for your classroom from the annual Coretta Scott King Book Award recipients list. The award is given to outstanding African American authors and illustrators of children's and young adult books that celebrate an appreciation of African American culture and universal human values.

Find online lesson plans and educational resources for African-American artists at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Engage with African American history in the Learning Labs and find other resources at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.