Phoenix Art Museum Presents World Premier of New Series by Kehinde Wiley

New series Kehinde Wiley: Memling debuts February 20, 2013 in Phoenix, Arizona

PHOENIX (February 20, 2013) – Phoenix Art Museum now presents the world premier of a new series of paintings by acclaimed artist Kehinde Wiley (American, b. 1977). The exhibition, Kehinde Wiley: Memling, features eight new, never-before-exhibited paintings by Wiley, all portraits based on works by 15th-century Flemish master, Hans Memling. The new works are a significant departure from the large-scale, brilliantly-toned works that made Wiley famous. The exhibition, which is organized by Sara Cochran, Ph.D., curator of modern and contemporary art at Phoenix Art Museum, also includes a catalog of works.

“It is a tremendous honor to Phoenix Art Museum to be the museum selected by Kehinde Wiley to premier his new series of works,” said James K. Ballinger, the Museum’s Sybil Harrington Director. “The Museum is proud to support the work of living artists who are making a profound impact on art today.” Phoenix Art Museum is currently home to two works by Wiley in its permanent collection: Marechal Floriano Peixoto (2008), and Vagner Rodrigues Gomes (2008), both gifts to the Museum in honor of its 50th anniversary in 2009.

Wiley has gained critical acclaim internationally for his large-scale works featuring young, streetwise black men in hop-hop gear against brilliantly colored floral and elaborately designed backgrounds and flourishes. Revisiting poses and compositions from historical works, Wiley recasts the subjects with these young figures representative of marginalized populations, their arresting, intense gazes meeting the viewer head-on, shifting our perceptions of them to figures of power, heroism, strength and nobility. Enormous in scale, often dwarfing the viewers as they stare up at dynamic figures that are both literally and figuratively larger than life, Wiley’s works have always been captivating displays of both skill and message.

“Referencing the visual codes of power, wealth and prestige elaborated over centuries of art history and applying them to contemporary sitters, Kehinde’s work draws upon a clash of cultures that seeks to challenge the way we perceive and define young men of color often from disenfranchised and anonymous backgrounds,” Cochran notes.

As a master of the unexpected, however, Wiley’s new series shifts from his previous, celebrated style to newer, more simplified and intimate portraits. Wiley borrows from the framework of Memling’s portraiture, which, like the work of Wiley today, was revolutionary and innovative in its own time. During the Northern Renaissance in the mid-15th century, Memling pioneered new techniques in oil painting and new approaches to portraits, which had a lasting effect on art. Prior to the 15th century, portraiture was reserved for nobility. The enrichment of a new merchant class created new demands for portraits. Memling’s subjects were depicted in front of windows, featuring the lush, verdant landscape of Flanders, a realism that brought the works to life.

In addition to the composition of these works, Wiley’s new series also appears on wood instead of canvas, a first for the artist. The new works are also significantly smaller in size, measuring between 11 x 15” and 15 x 20.” These eight paintings, complete with custom designed, hand-fabricated frames, are now powerful in a different way: beckoning us near, demanding a closer perspective.

“Despite the intimate size of his new series, Wiley’s portraits lose none of their impact and power,” Cochran explains. “The smaller scale demands close inspection and commands a personal engagement. The active gaze of his sitters—a
departure from Memling’s work—leads the viewer to think more carefully about the individual lives and experience behind the young men depicted in the images.”

Kehinde Wiley: Memling will be on view beginning February 20 through June 23, 2013, in the Museum’s Marshall Gallery. The exhibition will include a full color catalog Kehinde Wiley: Memling, authored by Dr. Cochran.

About Kehinde Wiley
Kehinde Wiley was born in South Central Los Angeles in 1977. One of two sets of fraternal twins in his family, Wiley grew up in Southern California, spending his time in galleries and museums, as well as participating in an art exchange program in the then Soviet Union. He graduated with a MFA from Yale University School of Art in 2001 and rocketed to fame for his images of young African-American males depicted in poses drawn from portraits of rich and powerful men in art history by renowned painters like Reynolds, Gainsborough, Titian, Ingres and Tiepolo. In 2005, VH1 Hip Hop Honors Awards commissioned Kehinde Wiley to paint portraits of the hip-hop honorees, which resulted in a compelling mix of popular culture and Old Master tropes and styles. Since then Wiley has embarked on a series of works that explore other cultures. His 2007 series The World Stage: China showed young African American men appropriating the attitudes, facial expression and poses of Chinese Communist propaganda. His 2008 series The World Stage: Africa, Dakar-Lagos took him to Africa and saw him working with young men from local slums to explore the forms and symbols of African tribal art and post-colonial liberation. One year later, he went to Brazil and worked with young men from the favelas in Rio de Janeiro in order to produce the series The World Stage: Brazil. His recent exhibitions include: The World Stage: Israel (Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco and The Jewish Museum, New York, 2012-2013); Smile (Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, Salt Lake City, 2012); Kehinde Wiley: Selected Works (SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA, 2011); The World Stage: Africa, Lagos-Dakar, artspace and The Studio Museum (San Antonio and Harlem, 2008-2009); Focus: Kehinde Wiley, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (2008); Kehinde Wiley, Portland Art Museum (2007); Redefined: Modern and Contemporary Art from the Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC (2006) and Passing/Posing: The Paintings of Kehinde Wiley, The Brooklyn Museum of Art (2004).

About Hans Memling
Hans Memling, the Flemish painter, was the leading artist of his time. Born in 1430, he resided in Bruges beginning in 1465. The city, known as the Venice of the North, became the birthplace of the Northern Renaissance, introducing new oil painting techniques developed in part by Memling, Jan Van Eyck, and Rogier van der Weyden. Memling is most known for compelling works of a religious theme and his innovative approaches to portraiture. Nearly 500 years after his death in 1494, the artist continues to inspire, intrigue and influence art today.

About Phoenix Art Museum
Phoenix Art Museum has provided access to visual arts and educational programs in Arizona for more than 50 years and is the largest art museum in the Southwestern United States. Critically acclaimed national and international exhibitions are shown alongside the Museum’s permanent collection of more than 17,000 works of American, Asian, European, Latin American, Western American, modern and contemporary art, and fashion design. Visitors also enjoy vibrant photography exhibitions through the Museum’s landmark partnership with the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. To learn more about Phoenix Art Museum, visit PhxArt.org.

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