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Gardner's 'Metal of Honor' show is worth its weight in gold
From Simone Martini to Kehinde Wiley, the new exhibition examines how artists past and present have molded the precious metal

Murray Whyte



"Metal of Honor: Gold from Simone Martini to Contemporary Art," installation view, 2022, at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. COURTESY OF ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON

If the one and only accomplishment of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's new exhibition is to bring its shimmering 14th-century, five-panel altarpiece by Simone Martini down from its permanent perch high on the wall in the museum's Italian room to eye level and table height, it wins. For maybe the first time, you can really see it — up close and from all sides — for the astonishing, gilded masterpiece that it is.

But the show does a lot more, matching that feat with powerful intent. Depending on your point of view, that makes "Metal of Honor: Gold from Simone Martini to Contemporary Art" either a

deeply thoughtful and provocative rumination on the fractures of art history, or a clouding of the sublime with wearying complication. I'm with the former. Feel free to disagree.

Like it or not, museum-going in recent years has been at least partly about choosing sides. At the Gardner, Martini's work anchors us to a moment in the early Renaissance in Italy, but gives us insight to the nascent forces of empire, and its inherent ugliness that would give the contemporary world its shape. That's why contemporaneity is important to "Metal of Honor," and why Martini is joined by three American artists — Titus Kaphar, Stacey Lynn Waddell, and Kehinde Wiley — who share his fascination with gold as an artistic medium, set to very different purpose. It all comes together powerfully, beautifully. We'll get there. But first, let's put some pieces in place.



From left: Works by Simone Martini, Titus Kaphar, and Kehinde Wiley in "Metal of Honor: Gold from Simone Martini to Contemporary Art," 2022. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. COURTESY OF ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON

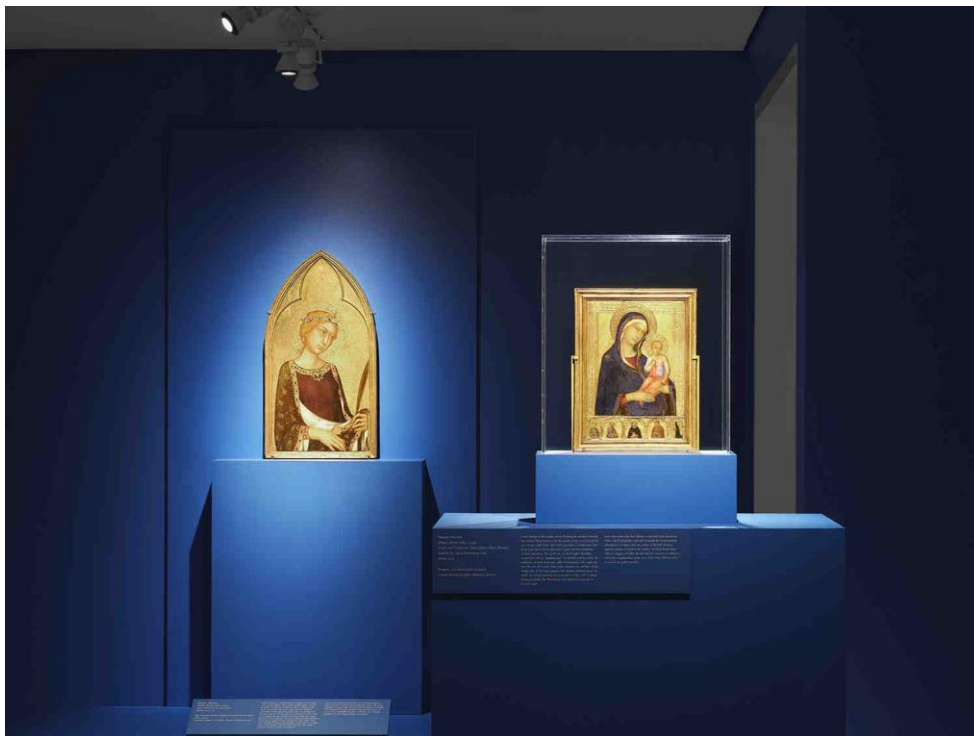
In Martini's day, trade had begun to range further across the Mediterranean Sea. Exotic materials from Africa and the Middle East were helping to expand an enterprising artist's toolbox with new potential. Gold, of course, was coveted, both as currency and as a creative medium; gold leaf in particular, hammered paper-thin and delicate to the touch, had an otherworldly sheen, and an air of the divine.

Martini, a pioneer in its use, put gold to its most obvious purpose: honoring the glory of God in devotional paintings depicting saints, disciples, the virgin, and Christ. Martini had devotional down pat: The show opens with a small hallway gallery enveloped in lush shadow, with a handful of small gilded devotional portraits spot-lit like tiny suns shimmering in the darkness.

I'm not much for holy, but when I think of what a sacred space might look like, I might imagine this.

Martini's "The Virgin and Child," circa 1325-1330, is unearthly, Mary wreathed in a halo of geometric patterns scored into a golden surface. Miniature figures occupy rondelles in the upper corners; one, of John the Baptist, reaches for Christ's hand, presaging his later baptism. The entire scene is haunting, fiery, mesmerizing. If I were one to pray, I might have.

Small wonders populate the gloom: In "Virgin and Child with Saints," from about 1325, Martini has lined up a miniature portrait array along the bottom of the frame. "Saint Catherine of Alexandria," circa 1320-25, glimmers with uncanny, repressed menace. Catherine, the story goes, was martyred after excruciating torture for protesting the massacre of Christians by Roman emperor Maxentius.



Simone Martini, left: "Saint Catherine of Alexandria" (about 1320-1325); right: "Virgin and Child with Saints" (about 1320), installed in "Metal of Honor: Gold from Simone Martini to Contemporary Art," 2022. COURTESY OF ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON

You get the idea: Devotional painting earned its name, paying fulsome respect and admiration to those elevated from this earthly plane, the nearer to God. In the main gallery here, the form gets a rough update. Helpful wall text explains that gold came to the fiefdoms of the Italian Renaissance in Martini's time largely from the West African kingdom of Mali, which by the early 1300s was the world's leading supplier. African gold transformed European economies, and inevitably, its culture. How that trade was established, never mind how the material was extracted, doesn't tend to feature in art historical discourse about the Renaissance, but opening those trade routes gave Europeans access to the kingdom's practice of enslavement, which they would later duplicate at horrifying scale.

So, there are layers upon layers of meaning in the gilded works that accompany Martini's altarpiece, all of them by Black Americans. A pair of towering paintings by Kaphar flank

Martini's five central panels at the center, with faces of Black men adrift on a field of gold leaf. The paintings are at least 6 feet tall; their sleek surfaces have been dipped in heavy black tar, a thick, indelible residue of colonial history's long arc of injustice. On the left, the tar line rises to his eyes; on the right, just below his nose.

The paintings grew out of a project Kaphar started in 2014, painting small devotional portraits of incarcerated men with the same name as his father (called "The Jerome Project," many of the pieces are now hanging in a small gallery on the museum's lower level). Every portrait was tar-dipped to reflect the proportion of each man's life spent in prison. In some, the tar line rises to the lips, or nose; in at least one, it crests the eyebrows.



Works by Kehinde Wiley in "Metal of Honor: Gold from Simone Martini to Contemporary Art," 2022, at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. COURTESY OF ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON

Kaphar's point is by now obvious: Who, historically, does painting recognize? And why are some lives deemed more important than others? Kaphar uses the convention to bring light to the forgotten, the dismissed, the cast aside; it's a tool to acknowledge the nameless while sullyng the idea of significance itself. In the main gallery, one of the large paintings portrays Reginald Dwayne Betts, a poet and activist imprisoned as a teen for a carjacking; he's now a MacArthur "genius" fellow and a graduate of Yale Law School. Kaphar's painting, at least to me, suggests devotion should come second to redemption.

Similar-minded but not nearly as potent are Wiley's mirror-finish altar paintings hanging close by. Wiley's impossibly slick works always balance precariously between profound and kitsch, a tightrope act I imagine he intends. Wiley, wildly famous — his portrait of President Barack Obama is now on view at the Museum of Fine Arts — made his name with hyper-real paintings that cast everyday Black men and women in grandiose history painting-like scenes: in regal repose; swathed in flowers and finery; and frequently on horseback, a response to stiff hagiographical portraits of history's "great men" by artists like Jacques-Louis David.

I could have guessed he'd have a use for gilding, but this is maximalism even by his standard. Wiley's sin is one brilliant idea, endlessly repeated; the golden altarpieces are its apex. In his work, virgins and saints — see the Martini, arm's length away — are replaced with sly looking young Black men, sainted by his own hand. Bright and blinding as Roman candles, no Wiley is more Wiley than these.



Three works by Stacy Lynn Waddell in "Metal of Honor: Gold from Simone Martini to Contemporary Art," at the Gardner Museum, 2022. COURTESY OF ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON

They made me grateful for the counterpoint of Waddell, whose canvases skinned in gossamer-thin gold leaf are the epitome of spare, minimal, luminous mystery. Painting with texture, not color, she created a portrait of the science-fiction author Octavia Butler, the first author in her genre to receive a MacArthur fellowship, and the first Black woman to win a Hugo Award; her face shifts with the changing light as you move past it. It imbues the piece with spectral energy, and mystery.

It's flanked by two paintings of similar technique, but of nameless women Waddell imagined to live in Mali's golden age. Linking past to present, they're based on the Malian photographer Malick Sidibé's work commemorating Mali's independence from colonial France in 1960. It didn't go at all well, with founding president Modibo Keita aligning closely to the European communist bloc, leading to a 1968 coup. The gold is the point: Scarce, soft, and pliable, the works' delicate, enigmatic beauty feels emblematic of the fragile nature of liberty itself.

METAL OF HONOR: GOLD FROM SIMONE MARTINI TO CONTEMPORARY ART

Through Jan. 16. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 25 Evans Way. 617-566-1401, www.gardnermuseum.org