

# GUGGENHEIM



■ ■ *Napoleon Bonaparte*, 1999. Gelatin silver print, edition 1/5, 58 3/4 x 47 inches (149.2 x 119.4 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Commissioned by Deutsche Bank AG in consultation with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation for the Deutsche Guggenheim, Berlin 2005.114. © Hiroshi Sugimoto

Hiroshi Sugimoto left his native Japan in 1970 to study art in Los Angeles at a time when Minimalism and Conceptual art—both of which informed his work—dominated. As his technique evolved, Sugimoto came to conceive of subjects in such conceptual depth that they have merited his attention throughout his career. Inspired by the systemic aspects of Minimalist painting and sculpture, he explores his themes through a rigorous use of seriality. Several significant photographic series have dominated Sugimoto's career thus far: *Dioramas* and *Wax Museums* (begun in 1976), *Theaters* (begun in 1978), *Seascapes* (begun in 1980), *Sanjusangendo*, *Hall of Thirty-Three Bays* (created in 1995), and *Architecture* (begun in 1997).

Sugimoto rekindles a dialogue that has existed since photography's invention: the relationship between painting and the medium of mechanical reproduction. In this *Portrait*, Sugimoto has returned to the wax figures he first explored in the *Dioramas* series. Unlike his earlier depictions of dioramic displays found in natural history museums and tableaux of famous persons in wax museums, these images are larger-than-life-size, black-and-white portraits of historical figures past and present. Working in a scale entirely new to his oeuvre, Sugimoto isolated the wax effigies from the staged vignettes in waxworks museums, posed them in three-quarter-length view, and illuminated them so as to create haunting Rembrandtesque portraits. His painterly renditions are lush with detail and recall the various painting sources—such as David, Holbein, Leonardo, and Vermeer—from which the wax figures were originally drawn. Sugimoto's contemporary subjects, individuals who already inhabit our culture's collective unconscious, similarly engage issues of commemoration and the cult of celebrity.

Sugimoto's portraits provide photographic "evidence" of historical subjects and events previously uncaptured on film. Based on the long-standing association of black-and-white photography with the recording of truth, Sugimoto's photo-documents playfully reveal the illusion of this assumption. Through layers of reproduction—from subject to painting to wax statue to photograph—what these images most consciously convey is the collapsing of time and the retelling of history.