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Unveiling the Unconventional

Kehinde Wiley's Portrait of Barack Obama

On February 12, 2018, the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery unveiled the portraits of President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama. The White House and the museum had worked together to commission the paintings, and, in many ways, the lead-up to the ceremony had followed tradition. But this time something was different. The atmosphere was infused with the coolness of the there-present Obamas, and the event, which was made memorable with speeches from the sitters, the artists, and Smithsonian officials, erupted with applause at the first glimpse of these two highly unconventional portraits. Kehinde Wiley's portrait of the president portrays a man of extraordinary presence, sitting on an ornate chair in the midst of a lush botanical setting (p. ix). Amy Sherald's portrait presents a statuesque and contemplative first lady, posed in front of a sky-blue background (p. xi).

As a true marker of our era of connectedness, those watching the unveiling were invited to post their impressions on social media. While some criticized the paintings as being too distant from traditional presidential portraiture and debated the likeness of Sherald's depiction, the critical and public responses were overwhelmingly positive. During the first two weeks that the portraits were on view, over 4,100 press articles covering the unveiling reached an estimated 1.25 billion people worldwide.¹ Meanwhile, visitors waited in line for up to ninety minutes to see the portraits (see pp. 84–85).² In October 2018, the museum's calculations confirmed that the Obama portraits had produced a blockbuster, increasing annual attendance from 1.1 to 2.1 million.³ The impact



Fig. 1 Gilbert Stuart's "Lansdowne" portrait of George Washington, painted in 1796, when Washington was nearing the end of his presidency, welcomes visitors to *America's Presidents*, the National Portrait Gallery's signature exhibition.

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that these paintings have had on art, on the National Portrait Gallery, and on American society is unprecedented, particularly when thinking about them as a pair.

The day after the unveiling, President Obama’s portrait was installed in the museum’s hallmark exhibition *America’s Presidents*, bookending the chronological display that opens with Gilbert Stuart’s “Lansdowne” portrait of George Washington (figs. 1–2). With the exception of a handful of paintings—including the dramatic full-body portrait of Abraham Lincoln by George Peter Alexander Healy (see p. 69); the portrait of Grover Cleveland by Swedish artist Anders Zorn, with its painterly brushstrokes and sumptuous reds (fig. 3); and the Abstract Expressionist portrait of John F. Kennedy (fig. 4) by Elaine de Kooning, with its fast, vivid green brushwork—presidential portraiture is a genre characterized by an elegant modesty that facilitates a sense of shared identity and image. Most often these portraits are realistic representations that contain a reference to the office by way of interior setting and an air of



Fig. 2 Kehinde Wiley’s portrait of President Barack Obama was installed in *America’s Presidents* on February 13, 2018, the day after the unveiling ceremony.



Fig. 3 Anders Zorn, *Grover Cleveland*, 1899. Oil on canvas, 47¹⁵/₁₆ × 36 in. (121.8 × 91.4 cm). National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of the Reverend Thomas G. Cleveland

reasonable authority. It should be noted that while walking through the exhibition and passing one presidential countenance after another, it is impossible to ignore that viewers are in the exclusive company of older white men. Both Wiley's and Sherald's re-envisioning of State portraiture to represent the first African American president and first lady has captured the public imagination in a way that would not have been possible had the artists followed a more academic template.⁴

In order to fully grasp the impact of these paintings, it is necessary to familiarize oneself with the symbolic place they inhabit. Although the National Portrait Gallery's large collection comprises portraits of



Fig. 4 Elaine de Kooning, *John F. Kennedy*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 102½ × 44 in. (260.4 × 111.8 cm). National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Americans who have contributed to history in myriad ways, the museum is best known for its complete collection of presidential portraits—the only one of its kind outside the White House. The permanent exhibition *America's Presidents* presents oil-on-canvas portraits of each former chief executive. The medium “oil on canvas” is highly significant because it carries a sense of tradition, formality, elegance, and permanence.⁵ Nevertheless, the museum also displays drawings, prints, photographs, and sculptures in its hall of presidents to offer further insight into each leader's historical context and public image.⁶

Millions of Americans travel to Washington, DC, each year, often as part of a patriotic journey, and many of those who visit the National Portrait Gallery have told us, through comment cards, that they see *America's Presidents* as symbolic of this country's democracy. One can, after all, rely on this singular collection of paintings to frame a larger story of the United States. With the addition of each new portrait, the exhibition keeps time—not only in terms of the office but also in terms of American history. And once each presidential portrait is completed, it joins the others to set the tone and expectations for those to come in the future.⁷

The Obama portraits came slowly into existence, in accordance with the National Portrait Gallery's tradition of commissioning portraits of the departing president and first lady.⁸ The process took over two years from the initial conversations to the final unveiling. First, the museum's curators submitted approximately fifteen portfolios of possible artists to the White House. After months of deliberation with advisors, including the official Curator of the White House, William “Bill” G. Allman, and other fine art consultants, the Obamas created a shortlist of artists whom they interviewed in the Oval Office. They reached a decision by January 2017, and for the next ten months, their selection of Wiley and Sherald was kept secret, as it had been for past presidents. But the news leaked that October, and the *Wall Street Journal* issued a story entitled “Obamas Choose Rising Stars to Paint Their Official Portraits,” instantly provoking excitement and triggering speculation as to what the portraits would look like.⁹ The museum's prior presidential portrait commissions had never been so highly anticipated, and none had been widely publicized before their unveiling. The tradition was viewed as a national

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