



The Obama Portraits Tour
Presented by the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery
Fact Sheet

#ObamaPortraitsTour

Creating the Obamas Portraits:

- Before their departure from the White House, President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama selected artists Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald to paint their portraits for the collection of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. The artists were selected from a portfolio of recommendations made by the Portrait Gallery's curators.
- Both paintings were commissioned by the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery and acquired for the museum's permanent collection.
- Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald are the first African American artists to receive this National Portrait Gallery commission.
 - Note: Simmie Knox was the first African American artist to paint an official portrait of a president. He painted Bill and Hillary Clinton's official portrait for the White House. Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald are the first African Americans artists to receive commissions for portraits of a president and first lady for the National Portrait Gallery's collection.
- The Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery started commissioning their own portraits for the presidency in 1994 and role of First Lady in 2006.
- Both Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald began their portraits of the Obamas from life. They each took several photographs of their subjects and then referenced those photographs as they worked on their paintings.
- The commissioning process for the portraits was overseen by the National Portrait Gallery's curators: Brandon Brame Fortune, chief curator, Dorothy Moss, curator of painting and sculpture, and Taína Caragol, curator of painting and sculpture and Latino art and history.
- The portraits were unveiled at a special ceremony, which was held at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery on Monday, Feb. 12, 2018, and they have been on view to the public at the Portrait Gallery since Tuesday, Feb. 13, 2018.

- The National Portrait Gallery is part of the Smithsonian Institution and is a non-partisan institution.

Tour dates and venues:

- Art Institute of Chicago; Chicago—June 18, 2021–Aug. 15, 2021
- Brooklyn Museum; Brooklyn, New York—Aug. 27, 2021–Oct. 24, 2021
- Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Los Angeles—Nov. 5, 2021–Jan. 2, 2022
- High Art Museum; Atlanta—Jan. 14, 2022–March 13, 2022
- The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Houston—March 25, 2022–May 30, 2022

About the artists:**Kehinde Wiley**

Kehinde Wiley (b. 1977, Los Angeles) is a New York-based artist well known for creating vibrant, large-scale paintings of contemporary African Americans in the tradition of European portraiture. He earned a Master of Fine Arts from Yale University School of Art in 2001 and gained national recognition when he was still in his 20s. The Brooklyn Museum presented Wiley's first major museum exhibition in 2004, and in 2015, organized "Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic," a mid-career retrospective that traveled to six cities nationwide. Wiley typically portrays people of color posing as famous figures in Western art. Through this practice, he challenges the visual rhetoric of power that is dominated by elite white men.

Amy Sherald

Now based in the New York City area, Amy Sherald (b. 1973, Columbus, Ga.) documents contemporary African American experience in the United States through arresting, otherworldly portraits. Sherald subverts the medium of portraiture to tease out unexpected narratives, inviting viewers to engage in a more complex debate about accepted notions of race and representation, and to situate black heritage centrally in the story of American art. Sherald was the first woman and first African American to receive first prize in the 2016 Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition held by the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. Sherald has also received a 2019 Smithsonian Ingenuity Award. In addition to her painting practice, Sherald has worked for almost two decades alongside socially committed creative initiatives. In this capacity, she has taught art in prisons and developed art projects with teenagers.

Presidential portrait collections at the Portrait Gallery and the White House:

- There are only two complete collections of official presidential portraits—one is held by the White House, and the other is open to the public at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.
- The White House and the Portrait Gallery have complete sets of presidential portraits. Not all of these portraits, however, were created as official portraits. Rather, many of the works in both collections were acquired so that both institutions could represent the history of this nation’s presidents and their presidencies.
- The National Portrait Gallery, which was founded as part of the Smithsonian Institution and opened in 1968, acquired many of the presidential portraits in its collection during its formative stages. These works were not, “official” portraits in the sense that they were commissioned by the museum. Rather, they were the best of the portraits that were made available to the museum to at that time. But having this collection of presidential portraits on display at the Portrait Gallery has given them a de-facto “official” status.
- The museum now commissions official portraits for its collection, as does the White House. There are two sets of official portraits—one for the White House and one for the Portrait Gallery. Today, the same also holds true for the portraits of First Ladies. National Portrait Gallery curators work with the White House to suggest artists for the portraits that will enter into museum’s collection.
- The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery holds 1,692 works associated with the U.S. Presidents, many of which are exhibited as part of the museum’s “America’s Presidents” gallery.
- The National Portrait Gallery began commissioning portraits of the Presidents with George H.W. Bush in 1994. Past commissions are:
 - George H.W. Bush by Ronald Sherr (1994–1995)
 - Bill Clinton by Nelson Shanks (2005)
 - George W. Bush by Robert A. Anderson (2008)
 - Barack Obama by Kehinde Wiley (2018)
- The Portrait Gallery has 232 portraits in its collection associated with the First Ladies.
- The National Portrait Gallery began to commission portraits of the First Ladies with Hillary Clinton in 2006. Past commissions are:
 - Hillary Clinton by Ginny Stanford (2006)

- Laura Bush by Aleksander Titovets (2008)
- Michelle Obama by Amy Sherald (2018)