



National Portrait Gallery Unveils Portraits of The Obamas by Artists Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald

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by Pat Rogers

The Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery unveiled commissioned portraits of former President Barack Obama and Mrs. Michelle Obama by artists Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald, respectively. Both portraits went on view on Tuesday, February 13, 2018, the same date of the unveiling.

The paintings were first revealed in a private ceremony in the museum's Robert and Arlene Kogod Courtyard as part of the Portrait Gallery's 50th anniversary celebrations. Past President Obama and former First Lady Michelle Obama delivered remarks along with both artists and Smithsonian Secretary David Skorton and National Portrait Gallery Director Kim Sajet.

"For 50 years, the National Portrait Gallery has told the story of America through the people who have impacted this country's history and culture," Sajet said. "We are thrilled to present to the nation these remarkable portraits of our 44th president, Barack Obama, and former First Lady, Michelle Obama, painted by two of the country's most dynamic contemporary artists, Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald.

"As a museum of history and art, we have learned over the past half-century that the best portraiture has the power to bring world leaders into dialogue with everyday Americans," Sajet continued. "These two paintings fall into that category, and we believe they will serve as an inspiration for generations to come."



Artists Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald with Barack and Michelle Obama. © 2018
Pete Souza.

Before President Obama's departure from office, he and Michelle Obama selected Wiley and Sherald to paint their likenesses for the Portrait Gallery's collection. This is the first time that African American artists have been commissioned for the National Portrait Gallery's official portraits of a President or First Lady, according to the museum.

[Kehinde Wiley](#) (b. Los Angeles, 1977) has garnered international recognition for his large-scale

paintings of African Americans in poses resembling famous figures in the history of Western art. His rich, highly saturated color palette and his use of decorative patterns complement his realistic, yet expressive, likenesses.

This new oil-on-canvas likeness pays tribute to President Obama, who in 2009 made history by becoming the first African American President of the United States. References to the sitter's life are made in the decorative background with chrysanthemums (the official flower of Chicago), jasmine (symbolic of Hawaii where the President spent most of his childhood) and African blue lilies (alluding to the President's late Kenyan father).



"Barack Obama" by Kehinde Wiley, 2018. Oil on canvas. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. The National Portrait Gallery is grateful to the following lead donors for their support of the Obama portraits: Kate Capshaw and Steven Spielberg; Judith Kern and Kent Whealy; Tommie L. Pegues and Donald A. Capoccia. © 2018 Kehinde Wiley.

Wiley earned a Master of Fine Arts from the Yale University School of Art in 2001. In 2008, the Portrait Gallery presented Wiley's work as a featured artist in the museum's "RECOGNIZE! Hip Hop and Contemporary Portraiture" exhibition.

His art was widely seen through the traveling retrospective "[Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic](#)" that presented 14 years of work, starting with early paintings made around the time of his 2001 residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The exhibition was presented at the Brooklyn Museum (February 20 to May 24, 2015) and traveled to the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (Texas); Seattle Art Museum (Washington); Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (Richmond, Virginia); Phoenix Museum of Art (Arizona); Toledo Museum of Art (Ohio) and Oklahoma City Museum of Art (Oklahoma).

[Amy Sherald](#) (b. Columbus, Ga., 1973) is known for her stylized, archetypal portrayals of African Americans. A personification of resilience herself amidst challenges from a heart condition, Sherald conveys the inner strength of her subjects through a combination of calm expressions and confrontational poses. In this oil-on-linen painting, Sherald depicts the former First Lady as both confident and approachable in a dress by Michelle Smith's label Milly.



"Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama" by Amy Sherald, 2018. Oil on linen. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian

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Sherald earned a Master of Fine Arts from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2004 and became the first woman to win the National Portrait Gallery's Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition. The accompanying exhibition "[The Outwin 2016](#)" has been on tour since 2016 with spots at Tacoma Art Museum (Washington); Art Museum of South Texas (Corpus Christi, TX); Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art (Kansas City, MO) and upcoming at Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill, NC) from June 1 to August 26, 2018. Also in 2018, Sherald's work will be the subject of a solo show at Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis, MO, opening in May 2018.

Sherald's work is included in several U.S. museum collections including the National Museum of Women in the Arts, the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, all in Washington, DC, as well as the Nasher Museum of Art (Durham, NC) and others. Sherald is based in Baltimore.

The National Portrait Gallery is the only place, outside the White House, where visitors can view a complete collection of U.S. presidential portraits. The Portrait Gallery holds more than 1,600 portraits of U.S. Presidents and possesses numerous portraits of the country's First Ladies. They began commissioning portraits of the President with George H.W. Bush in 1994 and added commissions of the First Lady beginning with Hillary Clinton in 2006.

Wiley's painting of President Obama will be permanently installed in the Portrait Gallery's "America's Presidents" exhibition, which features key portraits of past Presidents from the collection, including the world-renowned "Lansdowne" portrait of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart.

Sherald's painting of Mrs. Obama will be on view in the museum's "Recent Acquisitions" corridor and will remain on view through early November 2018.

BASIC FACTS: The National Portrait Gallery is located at 8th and F Streets NW, Washington, DC 20001. It is open 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. www.npg.si.edu.

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