

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artsy

The Obama Portraits and the National Portrait Gallery as a Site of Secular Pilgrimage

Kim Sajet

13 February 2020



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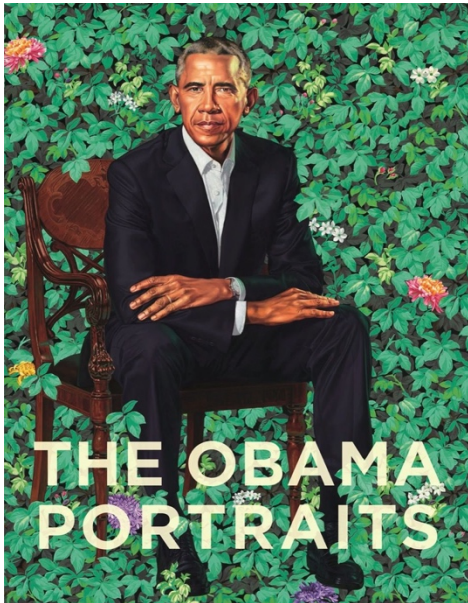


Image: Kehinde Wiley, Barack Obama, 2018. © Kehinde Wiley. Photo by Mark Gulezian, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Courtesy of Princeton University Press.

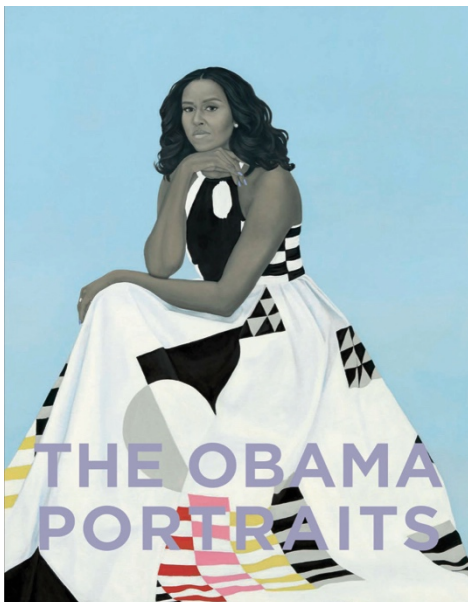


Image: Amy Sherald, Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama, 2018. Photo by Mark Gulezian, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Courtesy of Princeton University Press.

On February 12, 2018, the striking portraits of Barack and Michelle Obama were unveiled at the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in Washington, D.C. Created by artists Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald, respectively, the paintings captivated the assembled audience and quickly became a worldwide social media sensation. Sherald, in particular, encountered newfound fame. Recently, it was announced that the paintings would embark on a multi-state tour to museums across the United States, and this week, a new book, *The Obama Portraits*, was published by Princeton University Press, detailing the impact of these influential paintings. Here, we share an excerpt of NPG director Kim Sajet's essay from the book, titled "The Obama Portraits and the National Portrait Gallery as a Site of Secular Pilgrimage."

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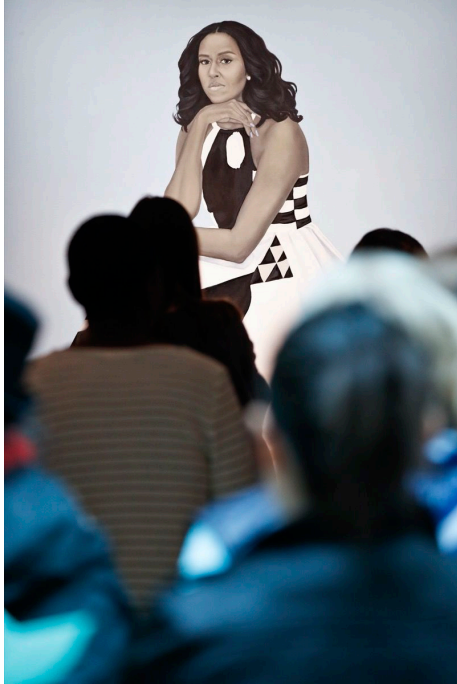


Image: The National Portrait Gallery welcomed more than two million visitors in FY2018, nearly doubling its annual attendance records. Photo by Paul Morigi. Courtesy of Princeton University Press.



Image: Visitors encounter Amy Sherald's portrait of Michelle Obama at the National Portrait Gallery. Photo by Paul Morigi. Courtesy of Princeton University Press.

Following her visit to the National Portrait Gallery in the spring of 2018, the artist Wendy MacNaughton created *Dispatch from DC*, a clever ink-and-watercolor drawing of Rhonda, a museum security guard, standing next to the newly unveiled portrait of President Barack Obama by Kehinde Wiley. In a hand-printed quote that appears in the drawing, Rhonda recounts how an elderly lady got down on her knees and prayed in front of the portrait in the company of other visitors. Summing up the experience, she told MacNaughton, "No other painting gets the same kind of reactions. Ever."

The artist posted a picture of her drawing on Instagram, and the image went viral. This was not entirely surprising because immediately after the unveiling of the Obama portraits, the museum's attendance had tripled. A month before MacNaughton's post, two-year-old Parker Curry had been captured on a smartphone, gazing in awe at First Lady Michelle Obama's portrait, painted by Amy Sherald. The resulting media sensation led the girl's mother to hire a publicist to manage all of the requests for interviews. Mrs. Obama, Parker told Ellen DeGeneres in front of a national audience, was a "queen."

As the director of the National Portrait Gallery, I had a front-row seat to this "Obama effect" and had to manage my dream scenario of watching thousands of visitors pouring through the doors. The question I asked myself, given that we have hundreds of portraits of notable Americans on display, from George Washington to Beyoncé, was why? What was really happening? MacNaughton's illustration confirmed what I had begun to suspect:

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viewing these paintings was turning into a form of secular pilgrimage, and the museum was becoming even more popular as a communal gathering place. [...]



Image: President Barack Obama and Kehinde Wiley at the unveiling ceremony on February 12, 2018. © Pete Souza. Courtesy of Princeton University Press.

The date of the Obama portraits' unveiling, deliberately chosen by Barack Obama, was February 12, Lincoln's birthday. The 44th president made no secret that he admired the 16th. He launched his presidential campaign in Lincoln's hometown of Springfield, Illinois; held the Lincoln Bible at his swearing-in; and often remarked that Lincoln's abolition of slavery had made his presidency possible. Like Lincoln, the first president

to savvily use photography of himself to connect with the American people, Obama's presidency had been marked by an understanding of the power of portraiture.

Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald, the artists the Obamas chose, were the first African Americans to paint the portraits of a president or first lady for the National Portrait Gallery, and from the moment of the unveiling, it was clear that the two had both borrowed from and broken with the canon of traditional portraiture. Wiley chose to seat the president in a chair, wearing a suit but no tie, looking directly out of the canvas at the viewer. The pose is similar to that of George Peter Alexander Healy's Abraham Lincoln, Elaine de Kooning's John F. Kennedy, and Robert Anderson's George W. Bush, all portraits Wiley had seen on walks through the galleries. But it was the background of rampant foliage and flowers symbolizing periods of the president's life—chrysanthemums for Chicago, jasmine for Hawai'i and Indonesia, African lilies for Kenya, and rosebuds for love—that was so extraordinary, making Obama appear at once timeless and contemporary.

The portrait of Michelle Obama elicited more commentary. Attired in a geometrically patterned dress by the designer Michelle Smith, which reminded the artist of modernist art and Gee's Bend quilts created by the descendants of enslaved people, the former first lady was presented as both modern and historical. The rendering of her skin as gray, as the New York Times art critic Roberta Smith wrote, "introduces the notion of double consciousness, the phrase coined by W.E.B. Du Bois to describe the condition of anyone living with social and economic inequality." Or, as the critic Antwaun Sargent noted more succinctly in *W* magazine, what viewers were witnessing were "visions of black power [shaking] up a gallery of white history."



Image: Michelle Obama and Amy Sherald stand alongside the newly unveiled portrait of the former first lady at the ceremony on February 12, 2018. © Pete Souza. Courtesy of Princeton University Press.

Watching viewers in front of the portraits, it is clear that the celebrity of the Obamas cannot be underestimated. As Michael Dyson of Georgetown University has remarked, Barack Obama, as the first African American president, "shocked the symbol system of American politics." In the

gallery, his black body palpably ruptured America's white ruling class and served as a poignant expansion of what blackness and presidential power could be in America—and maybe, in the eyes of the museum's new pilgrims, what America could be, too. Michelle Obama's portrait, meanwhile, shares resonance with the former first lady's instant best seller of an autobiography, which, as the writer Emily Lordi noted in *The New Yorker*,

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“draws on the literature of black women’s self-making.” In her depiction of Obama, Sherald turned traditional portraiture on its head; for both women, being “seen” via portraiture appears to be an important step in claiming their space. Certainly when Parker Curry and another little girl called Raegan Waddy dressed for Halloween as Michelle Obama and Amy Sherald, respectively, and posted their costumes on Instagram, the elitist tradition of portraiture was transformed by their joyful faith that they, too, could grow up to become such strong women.

The portraits themselves have become a pop-culture reference, replicated in Peeps dioramas, children’s clothes, lunch bags, a host of online memes, and even on television. This level of cultural impact and ubiquity forces us to consider the “Obama effect” in relation to the 50-year history of the National Portrait Gallery—or, more broadly, the history of the United States. Given America’s “original sin” of slavery by the congregation of the Founding Fathers in 1787, there is significance in the fact that it took the portraits of the first black president and first lady to rekindle a sense of pilgrimage within a space originally intended to elevate secular America.

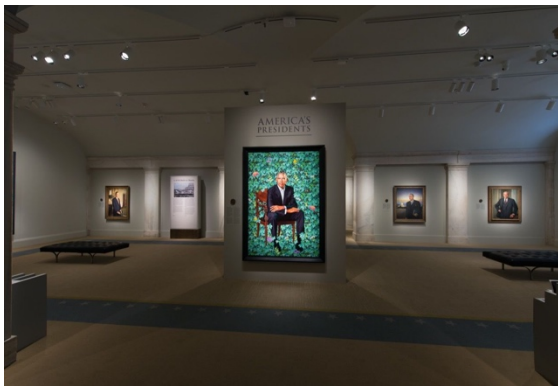


Image: Kehinde Wiley’s portrait of President Barack Obama was installed on February 13, 2018, the day after the unveiling ceremony. Photo by Mark Gulezian, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Courtesy of Princeton University Press.

Today, the lines continue, with people of all backgrounds queuing up to take a photo in front of the portraits and buy bespoke merchandise in the store. And for most, the gallery offers something more—a site where visitors can engage in a special social bond, each sharing in a liminal space that is heavy with meaning and wonder. As Savannah, one of our visitors, said, “To me [the Obama portraits] are period icons, and it remains to be seen if they are documents of a fleeting moment, or a new century.” Whatever the outcome may be, this much remains true: Whoever chooses to visit these paintings can claim a special moment for themselves that is not only about transition but also about potentiality—a pilgrimage from the past and into the future, with a brief opportunity to reflect on how far we have come and how much further we still have to go.