

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Washington Post
A peek into the process behind the popular Obama portraits
Reagan Upshaw
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Image: The National Portrait Gallery welcomed more than 2 million visitors in 2018, nearly doubling its annual attendance record. (Paul Morigi)

In the past two decades, it has become a rite of passage for soon-to-be-former presidents and first ladies to have their portraits commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery in Washington. Given the glamour of Barack and Michelle Obama and the historic nature of their tenure, gallery officials anticipated a healthy interest in their portraits.

Little did they know. The two weeks after the paintings' public unveiling in February 2018 saw more than 4,100 articles about them published in the domestic and international press. Annual attendance at the museum almost doubled over the next year.

With copious photos, the book "The Obama Portraits" details the creation of the paintings while delving into the significance of their unprecedented popularity.

The choice of artists, both African American, was leaked while the portraits were being executed. Kehinde Wiley, known for his large-scale depictions of African American men in poses and trappings inspired by famous paintings from art history, was painting the president. Amy Sherald had been commissioned to paint the first lady. Sherald had received attention for paintings of African Americans that included many she had met on the streets of her native Baltimore.



Image: In the days, weeks and months after the unveiling, lines snaked around the National Portrait Gallery's Robert and Arlene Kogod Courtyard. Some visitors waited hours to catch a glimpse of the portraits. (© 2018, The Washington Post)

Any portrait painter can expect to enter into a struggle with the sitter, as the artist's vision is unlikely to match exactly the sitter's self-image. Wiley initially intended to pose the president in a royal manner. In Obama's comments at the unveiling ceremony — reprinted in the book in full — he explained that the artist's plan was to "elevate me and put me in these settings with partridges and scepters and thrones and shift robes and mounting me on horses. And I had to explain that I've got enough political problems without you making me look like Napoleon. We've gotta bring it down just a touch."

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Image: Michelle Obama and Amy Sherald stand alongside the newly unveiled portrait of the former first lady at a ceremony on Feb. 12, 2018. (Pete Souza)

Sherald chose to paint the first lady in a dress designed by Michelle Smith. The choice was a nod both to art history and African American heritage. The geometric designs, Sherald said, call to mind the paintings of Piet Mondrian and the patchwork creations of the now-famous quiltmakers of Gee's Bend, Ala. Sherald aroused comment with the gray tones of the first lady's skin in

the portrait. She explained that the skin tones were reminiscent of and paid homage to the humble black-and-white photographs of African American women a century ago, women who were not the subjects of large-scale painted portraits.

In an essay in the book, the Portrait Gallery's director, Kim Sajet, writes that large crowds still make the trip specifically to see the Obama portraits.

"Where religious pilgrims once carried guidebooks and devotional texts to direct their journey, visitors today carry museum guides and mobile phones," Sajet writes. "Leaving the familiarities of their daily lives, they travel into these temple-like spaces to experience something emotional, something bigger than themselves."

The selfies taken with the portraits must surely number in the hundreds of thousands by now, a mark of their cultural significance. To reach an even larger audience, the paintings will go on a year-long tour, beginning in June 2021, to five cities across the country.