

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Washington Post
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Peggy McGlone
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Image: Former president Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama have their portraits unveiled at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in 2018 in Washington. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

Kehinde Wiley's portrait of Barack Obama and Amy Sherald's painting of Michelle Obama attracted record crowds to the National Portrait Gallery after they were unveiled in early 2018, a testament to the celebrity status of the former president and first lady and the artists' groundbreaking representation of Black power and achievement.

Starting this week, the portraits will bring their star power to five American art museums, where they will be featured in exhibitions on portraiture, representation, power and race. The year-long tour of museums in Chicago, Brooklyn, Los Angeles, Atlanta and Houston will allow millions more to view the paintings, which have been celebrated for their vibrant colors and tradition-breaking style. The paintings made history, too, because Wiley and Sherald are the first African American artists commissioned by the Smithsonian museum for its portraits of a president or first lady.

"[The Obamas] are celebrities in ways previous presidents and first ladies are not. And Kehinde and Amy are absolutely rock stars. They are on equal footing," Art Institute of Chicago President James Rondeau said. "And that combination has produced a kind of image and a kind of poetry we haven't seen before."

The critical and popular reception of the paintings resulted in long lines to see them and a dramatic increase in attendance at the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture, the historic home to the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery. A record 2.3 million visitors were reported in 2018 — a million more than in 2017. Attendance was 1.7 million in 2019.

The paintings sparked a resurgence of interest in representational painting, said National Portrait Gallery Director Kim Sajet. "The Obama portraits represent so many important things: Who gets to be portrayed and why, and why does representation matter? These portraits are building traditions and breaking traditions," Sajet said.



Image: Artists Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald during the unveiling of the official portraits of former president Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

The tour was announced last year, before the pandemic closed many museums across the country, and it opens on schedule at the Art Institute of Chicago (June 18-Aug. 15) before moving to the Brooklyn Museum (Aug. 27-Oct. 24), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Nov. 7-Jan. 2, 2022), the High Museum of Art in Atlanta (Jan. 14-March 13, 2022) and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (March 27-May 30, 2022). Most of the cities share a connection with the Obamas or the artists. In addition to the Obamas' well-known ties to Chicago, Sherald grew up in Georgia, and Wiley was born in Los Angeles and has a studio in Brooklyn.

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While on tour, the paintings will be displayed side-by-side, unlike their presentation in Washington. With the exception of their unveiling, Wiley's work had been on view in the "America's Presidents" exhibition, which was recently updated with a portrait of former president Donald Trump. Sherald's painting has been displayed in several galleries, most recently in "Every Eye Is Upon Me: First Ladies of the United States," an exhibition that closed May 23. Shepard Fairey's "Hope" collage, acquired by the gallery in 2008, is on display in the presidents' gallery until next June, when Wiley's work returns.

The Art Institute of Chicago's exhibition focuses on the personal ties the couple has with the city, where the Obama Presidential Center is set to be built, and with the museum itself, where the couple famously spent part of their first date. "The Obamas and the museum help define Chicago for people outside Chicago," Rondeau said. The paintings tell a story of "a president and a first lady, a narrative of all the firsts they represent. But seeing them on the wall together, they are perhaps a little more Michelle and Barack Obama. They carry all of the historical precedents, and they carry some of their humanity."

The exhibition also focuses on Wiley and Sherald and their artistic processes, said associate curator Jordan Carter said. "You will get a sense of the nuance of their practices and how they approach their subjects," he said. "The fact that these are the first two Black artists shows how pioneering these artists are and at the same time it speaks to how far we have to go. They are the first, but they won't be the last."

LACMA's exhibition looks at the long history of Black portraiture, placing the historic nature of the Obama portraits within the legacy of two centuries of Black representational art. "Yes, it does matter that the first Black president and first lady have chosen to be portrayed through the eyes, through the hands, of Black artists," LACMA curator Liz Andrews said. "But this is not a new thing. It builds on history of using imaging as a tool for self-actualization."

The LACMA exhibition will display some 150 paintings, sculpture, drawings and photographs, predominantly by Black artists, from the museum's permanent collection. "It's not just about Black portraits, but centering Black joy, Black abundance, Black nuance, Black family," curator Christine Y. Kim said. "There are portraits of political figures, portraits of celebrities, portraits of athletes, but also of community and family, of domesticity."

With the paintings of the first couple at its core, the exhibition offers a much-needed antidote to the violent images of Black Americans that have dominated our culture in the past year, Kim said. "This type of centering can counter and challenge a lot of the imagery that we've seen in 2020, and prior to 2020 and into 2021 as well, around this kind of spectacle of isolation and, frankly, commodification of Black pain and trauma," she said.

The Brooklyn Museum will display the the portraits together and encourage visitors to compare them to other portraits in its collection, including Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington from 1796 and Wiley's "Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps" from 2005, to examine the symbolic language of portraiture and diverse representations of power.

The High Museum is still planning its exhibition, while MFA Houston curator Alison de Lima Greene said the museum will focus on portraiture and celebrity from ancient times to modern-day selfies. Both will place the paintings in prominent galleries. The portraits will return to Washington next summer. "We will miss them. We know people were booking their holidays to Washington to see [them]," Sajet said. "We'll have a big welcome-back party in June 2022."