

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artnet news

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Taylor Dafoe

17 June 2021

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The paintings by Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald are expected to draw large crowds at each of the five museums on the tour.



Image: At left, Kehinde Wiley's portrait of Barack Obama. At right, Amy Sherald's portrait of Michelle Obama.

This week, the Obama Presidential Portraits go on view at the Art Institute of Chicago—the first stop on a 11-month-long, five venue tour. And the museum, which is now operating at full capacity, is expecting big crowds.

With the exception of two days, tickets to see the paintings by artists Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald are already sold out for the rest of June, a spokesperson for the Art Institute told Artnet News.

For the remainder of the portraits' two-month stint, general admission tickets will be released in batches. Lines are expected to be long, and the institution will implement a virtual queuing system to manage crowds, allowing ticket holders to explore the museum while they wait.

Visitors will find the artworks on the ground floor of the Art Institute's contemporary wing, where the paintings will be displayed side-by-side for the first time since they were unveiled in February of 2018. (As is tradition, portraits of former presidents and their respective spouses live in different exhibition spaces at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.)

It's a fitting spot to kick off the tour: Barack and Michelle Obama had their first date at the museum in the late 1980s. "The Obamas and the museum help define Chicago for people outside Chicago," the Art Institute's president and director James Rondeau told the Washington Post this week.

The portraits, he went on, 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."

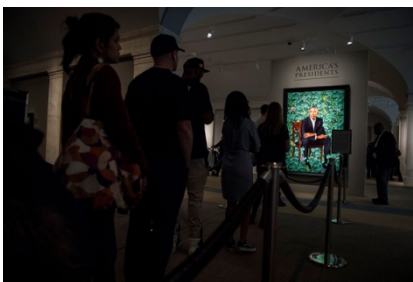


Image: People stand in line to see the commissioned portrait of former President Barack Obama by Kehinde Wiley at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery on February 20, 2018 in Washington, D.C. Photo: Carolyn Van Houten/The Washington Post via Getty Images.

The official portraits of President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama, painted by Wiley and Sherald, respectively, attracted mass crowds upon being installed at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in early 2018, leading to smashed attendance records and stories of gallery-goers breaking into tears.

In the two years and change that the artworks were on view at the museum, well over four million people saw them, a representative from the NPG said—and that's a conservative estimate.

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After Chicago, the portraits will make consecutive two-month stops at the Brooklyn Museum (August 27–October 24, 2021); the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (November 7, 2021–January 2, 2022); the High Museum of Art (January 7, 2022–March 13, 2022); and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (March 27, 2022–May 30, 2022), in that order.

These five tour destinations were chosen for their connection to the artists and the Obamas, the NPG's director, Kim Sajet, told Artnet News upon announcing the tour last year. Wiley was born in L.A. and is now based in Brooklyn, for instance, while Sherald went to college in Atlanta.

“Because of the attention the portraits brought to the museum, so many people discovered the Portrait Gallery for the first time. They came to see the portraits and then stayed to look at everything else,” Sajet said. “I hope that is exactly what will happen at the museums where they'll go on tour.”

“The Obama Portraits” will be on view at the Art Institute of Chicago June 18 through August 15, 2021.