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Why the Obamas' Portrait Choices Matter



The painter Kehinde Wiley, in 2015, depicts his subjects with flamboyance and historical sweep. Barack and Michelle Obama have chosen him to create Mr. Obama's official portrait for the National Portrait Gallery. Chad Batka for The New York Times

Barack and Michelle Obama don't like to waste an opportunity, in word or action, to make larger points about contemporary life and culture. In that vein, their choices of artists for their official portraits in the collection of the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery shine a spotlight on the state of American art. One is an established figurative painter, the other is relatively unknown and a possible rising art-world star. Both are African-American. In their selection of Kehinde Wiley, for Mr. Obama's likeness, and Amy Sherald, for Mrs. Obama's, announced Friday, the Obamas continue to highlight the work of contemporary and modern African-American artists, as they so often did with the artworks they chose to live with in the White House, by Glenn Ligon, Alma Thomas and William H. Johnson, among others. Their choices then and now reflect the Obamas' instincts for balancing the expected and the surprising, and for being alert to painting's pertinence to the moment.



Amy Sherald, the first woman to win the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition, in 2016, is painting Michelle Obama's official likeness. She is shown with her prizewinning oil, "Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance)" from 2013.

Paul Morigi/Associated Press for National Portrait Gallery

Mr. Wiley, who is 40 and known for his art-historically savvy portraits of young black men and women, has been on collectors' must-have lists for more than a decade. His visibility expanded exponentially when his work was featured in 2015 on the Fox television series "Empire," in the art collection of Lucious Lyon, the record label founder played by Terrence Howard.

The choice of Ms. Sherald adds a tantalizing element of risk to the commissions by virtue of her relative obscurity. She was unknown to the National Portrait Gallery curators when the selection process began, Kim Sajet, the museum's director, said in an interview Sunday.



"A clear, unspoken, granted magic," by Amy Sherald, from 2017. Credit Courtesy of the Artist and Monique Meloche Gallery

The Obamas' choices come at a time when figurative painting and portraiture are growing in popularity among young painters interested in exploring race, gender and identity or in simply correcting the historic lack of nonwhites in Western painting.

The current landscape for figurative painting includes scores of talented artists — some established, like Kerry James Marshall, Mickalene Thomas and Henry Taylor, and others emerging, including Jordan Casteel, Aliza Nisenbaum and Louis Fratino, as well as Njideka Akunyili-Crosby, who was just awarded a MacArthur genius grant. The added prominence of Ms. Sberald and Mr. Wiley can only push this lively conversation forward. The first step in the process began during the last year of Mr. Obama's presidency and was finalized before he left the White House, Ms. Sberald said. The Obamas saw the work of about 20 artists submitted by the Portrait Gallery, with each portfolio presented in a thick notebook.

The artworks will be unveiled in early 2018, when they will go on view at the Gallery. Since the presidency of George H.W. Bush, official portraits have been paid for with private funds, mostly from big donors who will be acknowledged in media materials and credited in labels, said Linda St. Thomas, a spokeswoman at the Smithsonian Institution. The Obama portraits will cost \$500,000 (including the unveiling event and a reserve for future care). About \$300,000 has been raised. Ms. Sberald declined to say whether the artists were paid the same for the commissions.



A woman has her picture taken in front of a diptych of President Barack Obama by Chuck Close at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, two days before Mr. Obama's second inauguration. It is a placeholder until the official museum's portrait is installed in early 2018. Credit Nicholas Kamm/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Mr. Wiley, who was born in Los Angeles in 1977, is adept at heroicizing his subjects — some of whom he found through open calls or simply by approaching people on the street. He endows them with the poses and gestures of kings and nobles borrowed from portraits by Velázquez, Holbein, Manet and Titian and also sets them against bold, sometimes jarring patterns of rich brocades, Dutch wax fabrics or Liberty's wallpaper. One of his most reproduced works is an equestrian portrait of Michael Jackson that recycles Velázquez's portrait of King Philip II mounted on a white charger while a battle rages in the distance.

Mr. Wiley's flamboyant portraits of men, in particular, give them a worldly power and often a gravitas that they don't necessarily possess in real life. That is part of his work's irreverent, perspective-altering force. It will be fascinating to see if Mr. Wiley rises to the occasion of painting a world leader like former President Obama, who already has a big place in history and plenty of dignity.



“After Memling’s Portrait of Man with a Coin of the Emperor Nero” (2013), by Kehinde Wiley. Credit Byron Smith for The New York Times

If flamboyance is not the best way to go, Mr. Wiley certainly has alternatives, as exemplified by his more restrained half-portraits based on the work of the Northern Renaissance painter Hans Memling, including “After Memling’s Portrait of a Man With a Coin of the Emperor Nero,” now in the collection of the Phoenix Art Museum. Mr. Wiley has at times delegated painting to assistants in the manner of a Renaissance master. It seems safe to assume that this is one commission he will tackle himself.

Ms. Sherald is far less known. Born in Columbus, Ga., in 1973, she now lives in Baltimore, where she earned an M.F.A. from the Maryland Institute College of Art. She decided at an early age to become a painter. In a profile in The Washington Post last year, she cited as the beginning of that journey catching sight, on a sixth-grade museum trip, of “Object Permanence,” a family portrait by the painter Bo Bartlett (also Georgia-born, but now Maine-based) in which the artist, who is white, painted himself as a black man. Her career has been interrupted by three years spent nursing ailing family members and another year to recover from her own heart transplant, in her early 30s.



The artist Kadir Nelson, in 2014. His portrait of Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to Congress, is in the collection of the House of Representatives. David Walter Banks for The New York Times

In 2016 Ms. Sherald became the first woman to win the National Portrait Gallery’s Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition. Curators added Ms. Sherald to the list for the Obamas “at the very last minute,” Ms. Sajat said. Like Mr. Wiley, Ms. Sherald paints portraits of African-Americans by working both from photographs and live models, and feeding off painting’s traditions, if in a more straightforward way.

Her figures appear before solid fields of color reminiscent of Manet and also Barkley L. Hendricks (1945-2017), who silhouetted his tall, thin, stylishly dressed African-Americans against bright backgrounds.

Ms. Sherald's subjects, on the other hand, are mostly young and come in all shapes and sizes. Her images play black and white against color in different ways, most obviously in the skin tones, which are painted on the gray scale. This recalls old photographs but mainly gives the figures a slight remove from the rest of the painting, one that also signals their awareness of the obstacles to their full participation in American life. This simple device introduces the notion of double consciousness, the phrase coined by W.E.B. DuBois to describe the condition of anyone living with social and economic inequality.

Double consciousness may be inevitable in portraits of people outside the power structure. It is certainly present in Mr. Wiley's portraits and it is a likely bet that it will figure in official portraits of groundbreaking leaders like the Obamas.

A precedent for such portrayals can be found in the proud sardonic oil portrait of Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to the United States Congress, from New York's 12th Congressional District. It is by the African-American artist and illustrator Kadir Nelson and is in the collection of the House of Representatives. Rest assured there will be more such official portraits in the years to come.