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ARTS | ART

## Obamas Choose Rising Stars to Paint Their Official Portraits

Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald will paint the former president and first lady for the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery



Two rising-star artists will paint the official portraits of President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama for the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

*By Kelly Crow*

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The Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery has commissioned a pair of rising-star artists—New York's Kehinde Wiley and Baltimore's Amy Sherald—to paint its official portraits of the former president and first lady.

Both artists have exhibited widely, but this presidential assignment amounts to a coup as they follow in the footsteps of artists like Gilbert Stuart, whose portraits of George Washington are considered masterpieces. The Obamas also made a point to champion the arts during their time in the White House, which has heightened art-world curiosity over which artists they would choose.

The Smithsonian confirmed Thursday that former President Barack Obama has asked to be painted by Mr. Wiley, a 40-year-old artist who has an art degree from

Yale University and is best known for his vivid portraits of young, black men in imperious, Old-Master poses.



'LL Cool J Artist' by Kehinde Wiley, who will paint President Obama's official portrait. PHOTO: KEHINDE WILEY

Mr. Wiley often depicts his subjects wearing hip-hop attire like hoodies and baggy, blue jeans and arranges them in postures once reserved for European aristocrats—a juxtaposition that helps the artist explore potent issues of race, class and power. Three years ago, Sotheby's sold Mr. Wiley's 2006 double portrait of a pair of men in tank tops, "Charles I and Henrietta Maria (after Anthony Van Dyck)," for \$143,000. The Brooklyn Museum and other institutions have also shown and collected his work.

Ms. Sherald, a 44-year-old artist known for painting surreal portraits of elegant black women, will paint Ms. Obama. Ms. Sherald's signature style is to use a palette of grays instead of skin tones to capture her subjects' faces and hands. Her greyscale women are typically dressed in bright patterns and set against solid swaths of saturated color, a combination that looks like paper dolls or silhouettes from vintage photographs have been set atop children's construction paper.

Ms. Sherald, who studied painting at Georgia's Clark-Atlanta University, is newer

to the international art scene and hasn't seen her work head to auction yet. Last year she won a national painting competition at the Portrait Gallery. Her winning piece, "Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance)," showed a young woman in a navy, polka-dot dress and white gloves, sipping from an oversized tea cup and staring defiantly. She also has a piece in the Smithsonian's new National Museum of African American History and Culture.



A work by Amy Sherald, who will paint the portrait of Michelle Obama, entitled 'Miss Everything (Unsuppressed Deliverance).' PHOTO: AMY SHERALD

A spokeswoman for the National Portrait Gallery said she couldn't disclose details about the Obama portraits until they are unveiled early next year, after which they'll join the museum's collection. Anticipation in art circles is high because the Obamas have chosen artists with major followings—unlike the relatively obscure artists Nelson Shanks and Ginny Stanford who were enlisted to paint former President Bill Clinton and his First Lady, Hillary Clinton. Currently, the museum has stored Mr. Shanks' version and is exhibiting a loaned portrait of Mr. Clinton painted by better-known New York artist Chuck Close. Robert Anderson, another artist who is not that well known, painted his former college classmate, President George W. Bush. The portrait is hanging in the museum's West Gallery.

The Smithsonian's set of presidential and first-lady portraits remains distinct from the White House's own collection of portraits, though. It was the White

House that first enlisted an African-American artist to paint a presidential portrait when it hired Simmie Knox, a self-taught artist from Alabama, in 2000 to paint the Clintons.

Mr. Wiley and Ms. Sherald are the first black artists hired by the Smithsonian to paint a president and his first lady. The Smithsonian said it plans to pay for the works via private donations.

The artists, reached through their galleries, declined to speak about their respective portraits of the Obamas until they are unveiled.

Collector Joy Simmons, who is known for her collection of contemporary African-American artists, said the artist, who often hires painting assistants, told her he plans to handle all the brushwork this time around.

Ms. Simmons, who owns a watercolor by Mr. Wiley, said that Ms. Sherald's profile should get a particular boost from the commission. "I've been coveting one of her works," she added, "but I'm way down the waiting list. Now, that list will get even longer."

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