

TEMPLON

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KEHINDE WILEY

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GABRIELLA DEMCZUK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A Blend of Paint and Politics

The Obamas' official portraits were unveiled on Monday at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington. Critic's Notebook. Page C1.

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Arts The New York Times

A Blend of Paint, Fact and Fiction

Portraits of the Obamas by Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald reflect their subjects in an unexpected light.

WASHINGTON — With the unveiling here Monday at the National Portrait Gallery of the official presidential likenesses of Barack Obama and the former first lady, Michelle Obama, this city of myriad monuments gets a couple of new ones, each radiating, in its different way, gravitas (his) and glam (hers).

Ordinarily, the event would pass barely noticed in the worlds of politics and art. Yes, the Portrait Gallery, part of the Smithsonian

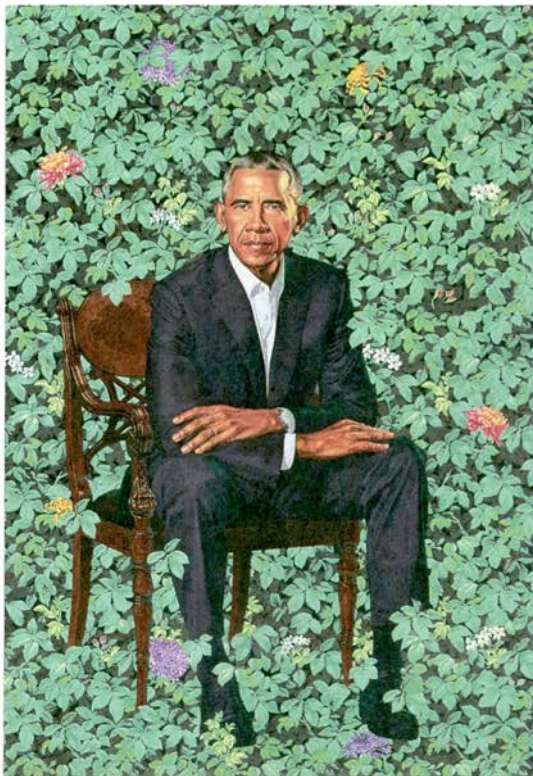
Institution, owns the only readily accessible complete collection of presidential likenesses. But recently commissioned additions to the collection have been so undistinguished that the tradition of installing a new portrait after a leader has left office is now little more than ceremonial routine.

The present debut is strikingly different. Not only are the Obamas the first African-American presidential couple to be enshrined in the collection. The painters they've picked to portray them — Kehinde

Wiley, for Mr. Obama's portrait; Amy Sherald, for Mrs. Obama — are African-American as well. Both artists have addressed the politics of race consistently in their past work, and both have done so in subtly savvy ways in these new commissions. Mr. Wiley depicts Mr. Obama not as a self-assured, standard-issue bureaucrat, but as an alert and troubled thinker. Ms. Sherald's image of Mrs. Obama overemphasizes an element of courtly spectacle, but also projects a rock-

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KEHINDE WILEY



AMY SHERALD

Kehinde Wiley has set Barack Obama against greenery, with flowers that have symbolic meaning for places from his life. Amy Sherald's take on Michelle Obama emphasized an element of courtly spectacle and rock-solid cool. An article about the unveiling of both works at the National Portrait Gallery is on Page 2.

The Everyday and the Extraordinary

The National Portrait Gallery unveils the Obamas' official paintings by two black artists.

By ROBIN POGREBIN

WASHINGTON — For 50 years, the official paintings of the nation's former leaders at the National Portrait Gallery have comprised white presidents painted by white artists. But when the curtains fell Monday from two official portraits, they revealed the first black president and first lady, Barack and Michelle Obama, painted, for the first time in the gallery's history, by black artists, Amy Sherard and Kehinde Wiley.

"I'm also thinking about all the young people — particularly girls and girls of color — who in years ahead will come to this place and they will look up and they will see an image of someone who looks like them hanging on the wall of this great American institution," Mrs. Obama said. "I know the kind of impact that will have on their lives, because I was one of those girls."

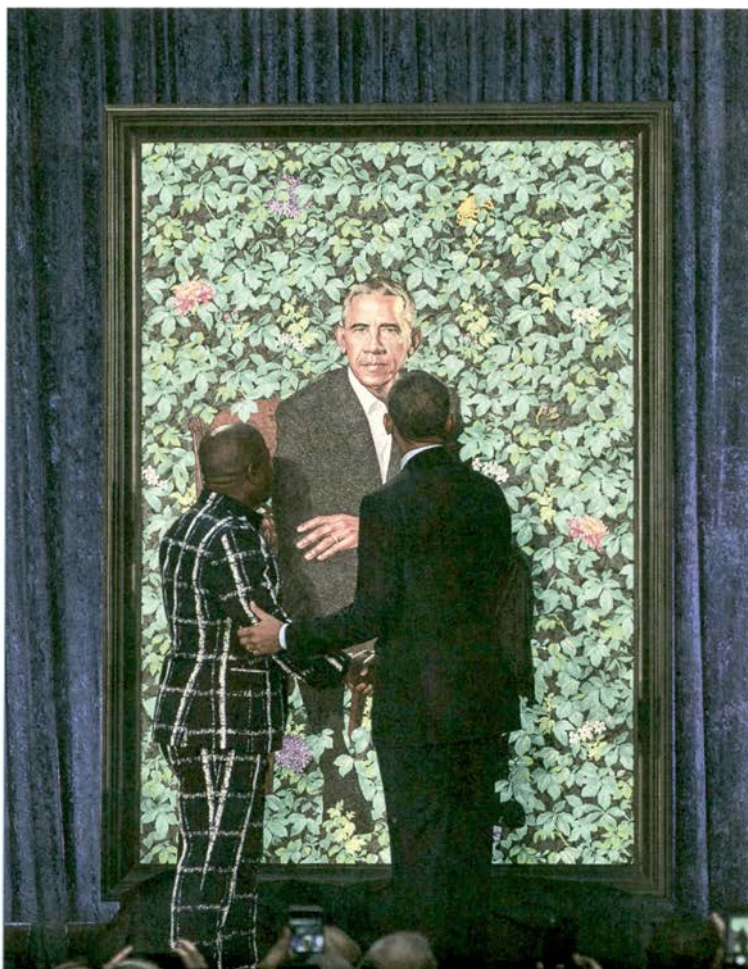
While they were interviewing artists for the portraits, Mrs. Obama said she knew immediately that Ms. Sherard, 44, was the one. "We started talking and Barack kind of faded into the woodwork," the former first lady said. "There was an instant sister-girl connection. That was true all the way through the process."

When Ms. Sherard walked in, "she was fly and poised," Mrs. Obama added. "She had this lightness and freshness of personality."

Mr. Obama, in his remarks, said he, too, bonded with his artist of choice, Kehinde Wiley, 40, though "maybe not in the same way — this whole sister-girl thing."

"He and I make different sartorial decisions," he said, a joking reference to Mr. Wiley's bold clothing choices (he wore a black-and-white patterned suit to the ceremony). "But what we did find was we had certain things in common. Both of us had African mothers who raised us with extraordinary love and support. Both of us had African fathers who were absent in our lives."

Mr. Wiley, whose father is Nigerian, was raised with four siblings in South Central Los Angeles by his African-American mother, who relied on welfare benefits and earnings from the family thrift shop. Mr. Wiley thanked his mother from the stage, with tears in his eyes. "We did not have much but she found a way to get paint," he said. "The ability to picture something bigger than that piece of South Central L.A. — you saw



it, you did it, thank you."

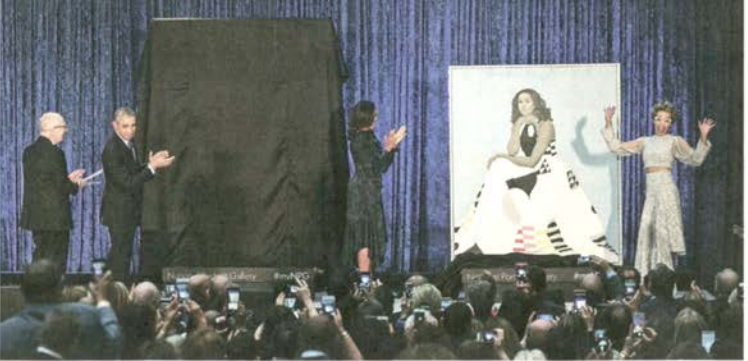
The artist also thanked Mr. Obama "for giving me a chance" and "for giving this nation a chance to experience your splendor."

Part of what Mr. Obama saw in Mr. Wiley's work, the former president said, was the capacity to elevate ordinary people to the level of royalty, those "so often out of sight and out of mind."

"Kehinde lifted them up and gave them a platform and said they belong at the center of American life," Mr. Obama said. "That was something that moved me deeply, that's part of what I believe politics should be about — not simply celebrating the high and the mighty and expecting that the country unfolds from the top down but rather that it comes from the bottom up."

On a lighter note, Mr. Obama said that, while he and Mr. Wiley saw eye to eye on most elements of the painting, there were a number of negotiating points during their two sittings. "I tried to negotiate less gray hair, and Kehinde's artistic integrity would

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GABRIELLA DEMCZUK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



The newest additions to the National Portrait Gallery were unveiled on Monday. Former President Barack Obama took a close look at his official portrait with the artist Kehinde Wiley, and Michelle Obama applauded her portraitist, Amy Sherard, far right.

not allow him to do what I asked," Mr. Obama said. "I tried to negotiate smaller ears. Struck out on that as well."

Mr. Wiley tried posing him in settings "with partridges and scepters and thrones," he said, even "mounting me on horses."

"I had to explain that I've got enough political problems without you making me look like Napoleon," Mr. Obama said. "You've got to bring it down just a touch."

Mr. Obama also thanked Ms. Sherard "for so spectacularly capturing the grace and beauty and intelligence and charm and honesty of the woman that I love."

Ms. Sherard, in her remarks, paid tribute to Mrs. Obama. "You exist in our minds and hearts in the way that you do because we can see ourselves in you," she said. "What you represent to this country is an ideal — a human being with integrity, intellect, confidence and compassion. And the paintings I create aspire to express these attributes."

Those who turned out for the ceremony included Steven Spielberg, the filmmaker, and his wife, the actress Kate Capshaw, who helped fund the portraits' commission; and several former members of Mr. Obama's administration, among them Eric H. Holder Jr., the former attorney general; David Axelrod, the former senior strategist; and Jay Carney, the former press secretary. "We miss you guys," Mr. Obama told them.

Mr. Wiley's work often features African-Americans in the regal poses of emperors and kings, his own distinctive riff on historic portraiture. The Obama portrait, too, has its own majesty. But the former president is also depicted in a chair, with his hands crossed and elbows on his knees — a posture of informality and intimacy.

"The narrative had to do with accessibility, the narrative had to do with a language of openness," Mr. Wiley said in an interview. "There were no ties, it's an open collar, it's a much more relaxed body language — the sense of repose yet at the same time a kind of radical vigilance in the eyes."

Ms. Sherard's portrait of Mrs. Obama similarly conveys a certain casualness. But, dressed in a flowing white patterned gown, the former first lady also projects what Ms. Sherard called "a quiet, strong presence," one in keeping with Ms. Sherard's own restrained style.

"You just feel connected to them because they're so much like you. They just happen to be the first black president and the first black first lady. But other than that, they're like your mother or your cousin or your dad," Ms. Sherard said in an interview. "It

was great to walk into the Oval Office and to see these brown faces."

Born in Columbus, Ga., Ms. Sherard waited tables and worked in an unheated studio before having her first solo show in Chicago and becoming the first woman to win the Portrait Gallery's Outwin Boochever competition. She learned she had congestive heart failure at age 30 — just as she was earning her master's degree at the Maryland Institute College of Art and received a transplant at 39.

"She's faced obstacle after obstacle," Mrs. Obama said. "All through it she kept going, she stayed faithful to her gifts, she refused to give up on what she has to offer to the world."

In selecting the artists, the Portrait Gallery worked with three advisers: Thelma Golden, the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem; Bill Allman, the former White House curator; and Michael S. Smith, who decorated the Obama White House.

By choosing two black artists, Ms. Sherard said, the Obamas sent a strong message that people of color and paintings by people of color also belong on museum walls. "Something big happened, something that wasn't supposed to happen happened: We had our first black president and our first black first lady," Ms. Sherard said. "Their choices of Kehinde and I represent that."