

Official Obama Portraits Are Finally Unveiled at the White House

In a break with tradition, there was no ceremony while former President Donald J. Trump held office. President Biden unveiled the Obama portraits: his by Robert McCurdy, hers by Sharon Sprung.



By Robin Pogrebin

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WASHINGTON — In recent decades former presidents and first ladies have had their official White House portraits unveiled by their successors. But that did not happen for the portraits of Barack and Michelle Obama while Donald J. Trump was in power.

The official portraits of the Obamas were finally unveiled in the East Room of the White House on Wednesday by Mr. Trump’s successor, President Biden.

“It is great to be back,” Mr. Obama said at the ceremony, which drew many members of his administration back to the White House in what felt like a reunion.

The portraits, commissioned by the White House Historical Association, have been a well-kept secret, along with the identity of their artists: Robert McCurdy, who painted the former president, and Sharon Sprung, who painted the former first lady.

While not necessarily household names, these artists join a storied tradition of painting former first couples. Past presidents all get represented somewhere on the White House walls, though the paintings themselves move around to various rooms.

Mr. Obama praised the artists. “I want to thank Sharon Sprung for capturing everything I love about Michelle: her grace, her intelligence, and the fact that she’s fine,” he said, to cheers. “And I want to thank Robert McCurdy for taking on a much more difficult subject.”

President Biden was joined by his wife, Jill, for the formal unveiling in the East Room, where they made clear their affection for the Obamas. “Welcome home!” Mr. Biden, who had served as Mr. Obama’s vice president, told the Obama family in a warm greeting.

The portraits are typically unveiled during the first term of a president’s immediate successor. In Mr. Obama’s case, that would have been Mr. Trump. But Mr. Trump did not schedule the ceremony.

The break from tradition was a remarkable reflection of the antipathy between the two men. When Mr. Obama was president, he hosted former President George W. Bush to unveil his portrait in 2012. Mr. Obama noted that, despite their very different political ideologies, “the presidency transcends those differences.”



The official White House portrait of former President Barack Obama, by Robert McCurdy. White House Historical Association/White House Collection

It is not clear whether Mr. Biden will decide to host an event for Mr. Trump when his portrait is ready. Karine Jean-Pierre, the White House press secretary, dodged the question at a briefing on Tuesday.

“We defer those questions to the White House Historical Association,” she said. “They lead the process on official portraits for both presidents and their spouses. So that question lies with them.”

The animosity between Mr. Biden and Mr. Trump is deep and very public, and the two men could still face off against each other again in the 2024 elections, making it unlikely that they would agree to participate in a cheerful ceremony putting Mr. Trump's portrait in its place in history.

Many confuse the official White House portraits with the ones commissioned by the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, which were unveiled in 2018; Kehinde Wiley painted President Obama, Amy Sherald Mrs. Obama. Those widely acclaimed paintings have toured the nation.

But the White House portraits form a collection all their own, and they tend toward more traditional, realistic oil paintings, as do the new ones of the Obamas.

"It's a new addition to White House history," said Stewart McLaurin, the president of the White House Historical Association. "These portraits are now invited into this gallery."

Each artist was selected by the Obamas.

Mr. McCurdy, 60, is known for his hyper-realistic portraits of famous figures that could almost be mistaken for photographs.

Having earned his bachelor's in fine arts at the Maryland Institute College of Art, and received an arts fellowship from Yale University, Mr. McCurdy went on to paint the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela and Toni Morrison as well as figures like Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffett and Muhammad Ali.

In working with Mr. Obama — someone he said he had always wanted to portray — Mr. McCurdy employed his usual process, in which he carefully lights a photograph (taking about 100 in a session) that he then works from to create his painting.

"This is the speech that everybody gets when they sit for me," he said in an interview for a podcast with Mr. McLaurin, of the association. "To look directly into the lens. To not smile. Not gesture. And just hold into that moment."

"We're trying to extend time rather than slice it like a photograph," he went on. "We're not looking for a gestural moment. We're looking for a more meditative or transcendent moment."

Mr. Obama said that Mr. McCurdy's realistic approach had appealed to him.

"Presidents so often get airbrushed, they even take on a mythical status, especially after you've gone and people forget all the stuff they didn't like about you," he said. "But what you realize when you're sitting behind that desk — and what I want people to remember about Michelle and me — is that presidents and first ladies are human beings like everyone else."



The White House portrait of Michelle Obama, by Sharon Sprung. White House Historical Association/White House Collection

Ms. Sprung, 69, who comes from Glen Cove, N.Y., studied at the Art Students League, where she has taught since 2004. Her portrait subjects have ranged from members of Congress to headmasters to historical figures.

Ms. Sprung, in her interview with Mr. McLaurin, described her first meeting with the Obamas in the Oval Office. “I went to sit on this couch and I’m much shorter than either of the Obamas,” she said. “I just kept sinking into this couch thinking, Oh, this is not good, I hope they can see me.”

Ms. Sprung said she suggested having Mrs. Obama sit rather than stand, in part so that the former first lady could be at the artist’s eye level. “I was going to do her standing to give it a certain dignity,” Ms. Sprung said. “But she doesn’t need dignity. She has so much dignity that I decided to do it sitting.”

Mrs. Obama — who drew laughs when thanking her husband for delivering “such spicy remarks” — spoke of the symbolism of the moment.

“A girl like me, she was never supposed to be up there next to Jacqueline Kennedy and Dolley Madison,” she said. “She was never supposed to live in this house and she definitely wasn’t supposed to serve as first lady.”

“But what we’re looking at today — a portrait of a biracial kid with an unusual name and the daughter of a water pump operator and a stay-at-home mom — what we are seeing is a reminder that there’s a place for everyone in this country,” she said. “Because as Barack said, if the two of us can end up on the walls of the most famous address in the world, then again it is so important for every young kid who is doubting themselves to believe that they can, too. That is what this country is about.”

The confidentiality required of the artists would ordinarily not be onerous. But this particular delay of six years was especially challenging. “That was definitely new,” Mr. McCurdy told Mr. McLaurin.

There are no props or other background elements in Mr. McCurdy’s image of Obama, which Mr. McLaurin said is unusual for White House portraits. Mr. McCurdy said that this was conscious and deliberate, adding that he works on his portraits for 12 to 18 months.

“We’re here to create an encounter between the viewer and the sitter,” he told Mr. McLaurin. “The viewer will bring their emotional and historical package to that moment, and it will be different for every single one.”

Mrs. Obama said that as she sees it, the day is not really about her and Mr. Obama, or the paintings. “It’s about telling that fuller story,” she said. “A story that includes every single American.”

Michael D. Shear contributed reporting.