

ART

# Meet the artists who painted the Obama White House portraits

Robert McCurdy's and Sharon Sprung's portrayals of Barack and Michelle Obama reflect strong artistic visions developed over long careers

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The official White House portraits of former president Barack Obama, by artist Robert McCurdy, and former first lady Michelle Obama, by artist Sharon Sprung. (Andrew Harnik/Associated Press)

When Robert McCurdy's and Sharon Sprung's official White House portraits of Barack and Michelle Obama were unveiled Wednesday, they looked like the buttoned-up cousins of the bold portraits the National Portrait Gallery debuted in 2018. McCurdy's painting of Barack Obama is hyperrealistic and no frills. Sprung's first lady is straightforward and simple.

But as you look more closely, it's clear that the relatively conventional styles belie strong artistic visions. Informed by McCurdy's meticulous process, which he likens to "directing the world's shortest movie," and Sprung's passion for painting, which she has called "pushing around puddles of this almost living substance," these portraits aspire to more than faithful representations for posterity's sake. They aim to make the former president and first lady feel present — to make their likenesses as approachable as the Obamas themselves.

Their public debut is a long time coming — the commissions have been a secret for six years. Handpicked by the Obamas with the help of Thelma Golden, who is director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, McCurdy and Sprung were hired in 2016 after a months-long interview process.



Here's what President Biden, former president Barack Obama and his wife Michelle said at the unveiling of their official White House portraits. (Video: Michael Cadenhead/The Washington Post, Photo: Demetrius Freeman/The Washington Post)

Stewart McLaurin, president of the White House Historical Association, said the portraits are especially expressive. "With our earliest presidents, Americans didn't know what they looked like, so they depended on paintings," he said. "Now, we are saturated with images," so these portraits don't just show the Obamas, "they're a snapshot of how the president and first lady see themselves."

For McCurdy, 69, Barack Obama's portrait isn't actually a "portrait" at all. It's a meeting place. His subject, he said, is not the sitter, but his gaze.

"I don't even call them portraits," McCurdy, who is based in New York, said in a phone interview. "My paintings are about creating an encounter between two people. We're trying to achieve a moment where there is a personal connection between him and the person looking at him."

Anyone who has visited the National Portrait Gallery will be familiar with that kind of encounter. The museum has several McCurdy works in its collection — of Toni Morrison, Jeff Bezos, the Dalai Lama and others posing mostly expressionless in front of stark white backdrops.

McCurdy's artistic training goes back to high school. He attended Cedar Cliff High School in Camp Hill, Pa., which allows students to major in art, and he went on to study at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. McCurdy said he was influenced by minimalism, the predominant art movement during his formative years, and for two decades, he painted in an abstract style.

Then one day, he said, "I felt like figuration [paintings of people] was right outside the door saying, 'Whatever you're doing in there, I could do it better.' "

In the stripped-down portraits McCurdy creates today, those early influences are evident. His works have a mechanical quality and are aligned in spirit with the industrial minimalism of Donald Judd and simplicity of Ellsworth Kelly, who is one of his favorite artists. "If I start to make gestural lines and create motion in the piece, then I'm starting to tell the viewer how to think," McCurdy said. "I try to create as much opportunity for this to be an interactive experience for the viewer."

When McCurdy met with Obama in 2016, they spoke about the artist's strict process. He spends just a couple of hours with his subjects, during which he takes dozens of photos of them staring directly into the camera without gesture or emotion. All the photos are destroyed, he said, except one that McCurdy feels captures a timeless moment, with no before and no after. He works from that photo for 12 to 18 months, nine hours a day, rendering every hair and pore to painful perfection.

Obama sought McCurdy out for the portrait, which McCurdy said is rare. His only other commission is the portrait of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. (Bezos owns The Washington Post.) When he reaches out to subjects he wants to paint, they sometimes say no.

"We're in a Photoshop age where we make everything look nice. We're not used to having all of our flaws out there and being an actual human being," he said. "The people who have chosen to do it are enormously courageous."

As for why Obama wanted such an honest rendering? "My impression is he never tries to be anything but what he is. He's always tried to make a genuine connection with people," McCurdy said.

That was surely Sprung's experience. When the artist visited the White House in 2016 as a candidate for the official commission (she was considered for both portraits), she brought printed talking points. Obama flicked them away. He just wanted to have a conversation, she said in a phone interview.



"Resting but Complicated" by Sharon Sprung. (Gallery Henoch)



Sharon Sprung at the portrait unveiling ceremony at the White House. (Andrew Harnik/Associated Press)

What ensued was perhaps more emotional and honest than Sprung, 69, was prepared for. When Golden asked her why she paints, Sprung began crying and told the curator and the Obamas about losing her father when she was just 6 years old — a tragedy that led her to art.

After his death, she didn't speak for a year. "From then on, I think my orientation was to observe things and try to figure out what was going around me," she said.

"When you live in a family with a lot of stress and trauma, people don't tell the truth, so reading people's faces became necessary for me to function."

Sprung has been an artist since those difficult childhood days in Glen Cove, N.Y. She recalls making illustrations of her mother getting ready to go on dates. At 16, Sprung started going to Manhattan on Saturdays to attend the Art Students League, where she now teaches. She recalls being inspired by the diverse faces she saw in the city — a stark contrast to her homogenous hometown.

"Where I grew up, every house was the same. The lawns were the same. It was just a repeat, repeat, repeat," she said. "Getting into the city was this wonderful world where you saw all these faces and everybody was different."

At 19, Sprung dropped out of Cornell University to pursue art full-time, a decision that isolated her from her family. "I really had no choice at that point but to succeed, and I had to do it quickly because I had no money and no support," she said. She wrote to artists she admired and developed an acquaintance with Aaron Shikler, who, coincidentally, had painted official portraits of Jacqueline Kennedy, Nancy Reagan and former president John F. Kennedy.

Sprung describes her career as a "slow rise." The same gallery — New York's Gallery Henoch — has shown her work for four decades (she has a solo show there in October). She didn't start feeling like she had really "made it" until she was hired to paint portraits honoring congresswomen — first, Jeannette Rankin, whom she painted in the early 2000s, and, later, Patsy Mink.

“I felt very empowered by that,” she said. “I was painting women that I admired, who took chances, had guts, who made it the hard way.”

Sprung is an evocative painter, and her rich, gestural work reflects her love of oil paint, which she describes as “sensual” and “almost living.” She has painted brooding, solitary women and bright-eyed children. Her portrait of Rankin, the first woman elected to Congress, was so striking that it made Rankin’s nephew cry.



Jeannette Rankin by Sharon Sprung. (Gallery Henoch)



Sharon Sprung. (Max Burkhalter/Art Students League of New York)

For nine months, Sprung toiled over Michelle Obama’s portrait. She began by sketching the first lady at the White House and then worked on the painting at her Brooklyn studio. Obama visited Sprung’s home to approve the final piece.

The portrait became so real to her that she caught herself saying good morning and good night to the first lady’s likeness, even asking it for help with the painting.

Sprung said she felt an artistic freedom while working because it was clear the first lady trusted her. Obama didn’t ask for reference photos or offer feedback throughout the process. “I could express myself because I didn’t have somebody looking over my shoulder going, ‘Oh, I don’t like my eyebrows,’ ” Sprung said.

The final portrait shows Obama in a blue dress on a red couch and is rendered in a style Sprung calls “contemporary realism” for its bright, modern colors. “I think I have a sense of who she is,” Sprung said of the former first lady. “Not in words. I couldn’t describe it. It’s different, intimate kind of knowing.”