Classroom Resource Packet

Fine Arts and the White House

THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

INTRODUCTION

The White House is the president's office and the home of the first family, but it is also a museum. The Executive Mansion, as it's also called, contains a large fine arts collection that includes various American paintings and sculptures. The collection of fine art at the White House has evolved and grown over time. The collection began with mostly presidential portraits, purchased, or commissioned—meaning specially created—by Congress, or donated by presidential descendants. Some presidents even invited painters to set up studios in the White House to record significant events and paint their likeness. In the late 1800s, a few landscape paintings were acquired—or bought—for the White House, but it was not until the John F. Kennedy administration in the 1960s, that the first curator was hired. Curators care for museum objects and develop guidelines for that care as well as guidelines for adding objects to a collection. Explore the history behind the Executive Mansion's fine art collection to gain an understanding of how the White House became a museum of American history and culture.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

Image 1. Painting of President George Washington by Gilbert Stuart (1797).

President John Adams and First Lady Abigail Adams were the first residents of the White House. Because construction in many of the rooms and hallways was incomplete, they did not dedicate time and attention to collecting fine arts—with one exception. In July 1800, the United States government purchased a full-length painting of President George Washington. Painted by Gilbert Stuart in 1797, the portrait was installed in the unfinished White House by that November. The only time the painting left the building was in 1814—before the British set fire to the White House during the War of 1812. Rescued by enslaved and free White Houser workers, the portrait returned to the reconstructed White House in 1817 and became the foundation for the fine arts collection that grew over the next 200 years. View **Image 1**, to the left, to see the famous portrait of President George Washington.

In the years following the addition of the Washington portrait to the White House, presidents and first ladies redecorated and refurbished the building. The U.S. government, however, did not yet show an interest in obtaining an official fine art collection. In 1857, Congress commissioned George P. A. Healy to paint a series of presidential portraits to create a visual record of previous White House residents. The works were intended to serve a historical, rather than visual, purpose. The idea that paintings can function as historical documents dominated the early phase of White House art collection. **Image 2**, to the right, is a painting of President Millard Fillmore done by George P.A. Healy in 1857. Refer to **Image 3**, in the chart, to see Healy's 1858 portrait of President John Quincy Adams.

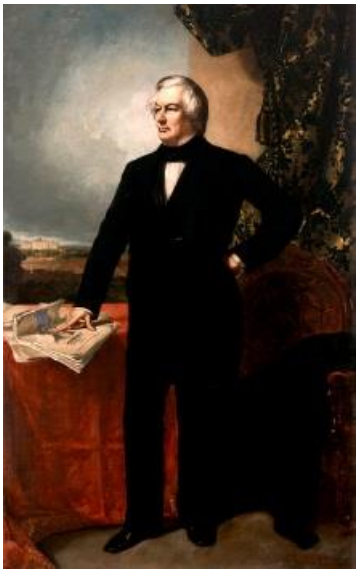


Image 2. Painting of President Millard Fillmore by George P.A. Millar Fillmore (1857).

President Abraham Lincoln's administration took a different approach to commissioning art. The White House granted painter Francis B. Carpenter immense access to the president and his cabinet for his 1864 painting, *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln.* Seen in **Image 4**, in the chart, the painting features President Abraham Lincoln and his Cabinet members reading over the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862. Rather than depicting the past, Carpenter's painting shed light on an important current event. The painting was displayed in the East Room for a short time and eventually found its permanent home in the Senate wing of the United States Capitol.

Image 5. Painting of Julia Gardiner Tyler when she was 26 years old by Francesco Anelli (1846-1848).

In the 1800s, the idea of a first ladies portrait collection—to complement the presidential portraits—gained momentum. After leaving office in 1845, First Lady Julia Tyler donated her portrait, seen in **Image 5** to the left, to the White House. First

Lady Lucy Hayes acquired a full-length portrait of Martha Washington to accompany Gilbert Stuart's painting of George Washington. See Eliphalet Frazer Andrews's portrait of Martha Washington in **Image 6**, in the chart. After the 1902 White House renovations, First Lady Edith Roosevelt created a gallery in the Ground Floor corridor to display the first ladies' paintings collected during the previous century.

The collection of fine art at the White House was heavily influenced by the American Aesthetics movement—an art movement in the late 1800s that supported collecting art for visual appeal rather than purely historic reasons. In 1890, the U.S. government purchased a watercolor by James Henry Moser, the first non-portrait in the White House collection. **Image 7**, in the chart, shows Moser's ocean scene watercolor. In the same year, First Lady Caroline Harrison requested Congress to fund a major White House renovation that included a new art wing, but her request was denied.

Image 8. The Red Room on the State Floor during the Calvin Coolidge administration (1928).

During the Calvin Coolidge administration, Congress appointed an official to accept gifts on behalf of the White House. In the 1920s, First Lady Grace Coolidge oversaw the renovation of the Green Room in the "colonial style," advised by a committee of prominent preservationists, architects, and museum experts. This was the first time that a first lady transformed a room of furnishings and décor with the assistance of trained professionals. **Image 8**, to the right, pictures the Red Room during the Coolidge administration, with the George Washington portrait hanging at left and doors to the Blue Room and further Green Room at right. Soon after, First Lady Lou Henry Hoover initiated the first comprehensive inventory of decorative and fine art pieces at the White House to make the collection

more accessible to researchers and visitors. First Ladies Grace Coolidge and Lou Hoover recognized the value of preserving the White House and increasing its museum-like environment.

The biggest leap for the White House fine arts collection came during the Kennedy administration. In 1961, at the urging of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, Congress passed Public Law 87-286 declaring that the furnishings of the White House were the property of the White House, establishing the White House's status as a museum, and extending legal protection to donated furnishings from different periods in White House history and all White House objects. View **Image 9**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of First Lady Jaqueline Kennedy in the State Dining Room while filming a White House television tour for CBS in 1961. The first lady also founded the White House Historical Association to enhance the understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of the Executive Mansion. **Image 10**, in the chart, features David E. Finley, first President of the White House Historical Association, presenting the first edition of "The White House: An Historic Guide" to First Lady Jaqueline Kennedy in June 1962.

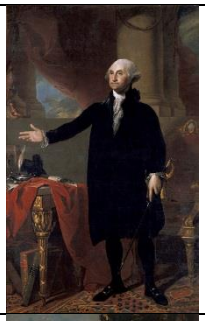
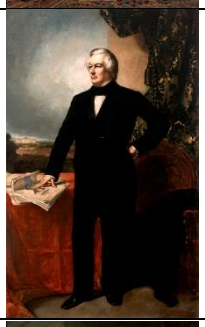
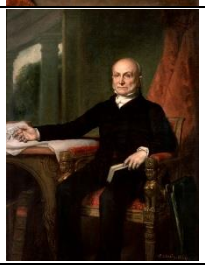
In March of 1961, Mrs. Kennedy hired the first White House Curator, Lorraine Waxman Pearce. As curator, Pearce oversaw White House refurbishment projects and acquisitions, implemented collections policies, and assisted with the creation of the Association's first White House Guidebook. The position of curator, however, was not made permanent until President Lyndon B. Johnson signed Executive Order 11145, formally establishing the position of White House Curator and creating the Committee for the Preservation of the White House. Today, the Committee and the White House Historical Association work closely to advise on preservation projects and acquisitions. Additionally, the White House Office of the Curator maintains the White House and its historic fine and decorative arts collection from their office on the Ground Floor.

Since then, the White House collection has grown exponentially under the guidance of a professional curatorial staff and now includes more than 500 works of art, selected for their cultural and historical significance. Some of these artworks include Mary Cassatt's *Young Mother and Two Children*, Frederic Remington's *The Bronco Buster*, and Alma Thomas' *Resurrection*. Refer to **Images 11** and **12** in the chart, and **Image 13** to the right, to see photographs of these artworks. These works and many more make up the large and varied White House fine arts collection that celebrates work by and about Americans.

Image 13. Painting by Alma Thomas, who was an educator and artist in Washington, D.C. for most of her career. This painting was unveiled as part of the White House Collection during Black History Month 2015 and is the first in this collection by an African American woman (1966).

IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing.

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	George Washington	1797	Gilbert Stuart	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/21.tif.info
2	Millard Fillmore	1857	George P. A. Healy	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/38.tif.info
3	John Quincy Adams	1858	George P. A. Healy	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20Quincy%20Adams/33.tif.info
4	Engraving of *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation*	1866	Francis Carpenter - original, A.H. Ritchie - engraving	Library of Congress		https://www.loc.gov/item/2012648844/

5	Julia Gardiner Tyler	1846 -48	Francesco Anelli	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/160.tif.info
6	Martha Washington	1878	Eliphalet Frazer Andrews, Based on a head and bust oil sketch by Gilbert Stuart	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/163.tif.info
7	A Summer Day at Saulsbury Beach	1889	James Henry Moser	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Artwork/3816.tif.info
8	Red Room, Calvin Coolidge Administration	1928	Ralph Waldo Magee	White House Collection		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/4012.tif.info
9	Jacqueline Kennedy's CBS White House Tour, State Dining Room	1961	United State Informati on Agency	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/6422.tif.info
10	The Kennedys at the Presentation of the First White House Guidebook	1962	Abbie Rowe	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/6451.tif.info

11	Young Mother and Two Children	1908	Created by Mary Cassatt	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association (Acquired 1965)		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Artwork/548.tif.info
12	The Bronco Buster	model 1895, cast c. 1903	Frederic Remington	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association (Acquired 1973)		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Artwork/512.tif.info
13	Resurrection	1966	Alma Thomas	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association (Acquired 2015)		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Artwork/10093.tif.info

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Article

- "Hail to the Chief Curator" by Sarah Fling for the White House Historical Association. Click here.

Collections

- Art in the White House by the White House Historical Association. Click here.
- Diversity in White House Art by the White House Historical Association. Click here.
- The Kennedys and the Arts by the White House Historical Association. Click here.

Podcast

- "The White House 1600 Sessions: The Curator" by the White House Historical Association. Listen here.

Video

- Jacqueline Kennedy's White House Tour. Televised on CBS February 14, 1962. Click here.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- Explore more items in the Fine and Decorative Arts Collection in the White House Historical Association's Digital Library. What White House items interest or surprise you? Click here.

For older learners:

- What new fine art should be included in the White House collection? Research an American artist or American-related artwork. Describe why it should be added to the collection.
- Write a persuasive essay arguing for or against the status of the White House as a museum.

For younger learners:

- Imagine an artist is going to paint your portrait for historic purposes. How would you want to be portrayed, and why? What are you wearing, holding, and doing in your portrait, and why is that important?
- Create your own colorful art by following "The Washington Color School" Anywhere Activity. Click here.