

INTRODUCTION

The White House is known as an office for the president and the home of the first family, but it can also be considered a museum. The Executive Mansion contains a large fine arts collection that includes some of the best American paintings and sculptures. The desire to collect fine arts for the White House developed over 200 years, and White House visitors have a chance to see pieces from the collection during tours and events. Understanding the history behind the collection helps to illuminate how the White House has become a museum for American culture.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

The first residents of the Executive Mansion, John and Abigail Adams, did not focus on the collection of fine arts, since construction in many of the rooms and hallways was incomplete. The one exception was the portrait of George Washington, painted by Gilbert Stuart. This famous, full-length painting was purchased by the United States government in July 1800 (**Image 1**). By November of that year, the painting was installed in the still unfinished White House. The only time the painting left the building was in 1814 before the British burned the building. The portrait returned to the reconstructed White House in 1817 and became the foundation from which the fine arts collection would grow over the next 200 years.

In the years after the acquisition of the Washington painting, presidents and first ladies redecorated and refurbished the White House, but the government 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 prior White House inhabitants. These works would serve a historical, rather than aesthetic, purpose, and the idea that paintings could function as historical documents would dominate the early phase of White House art collection (**Images 2 & 3**).

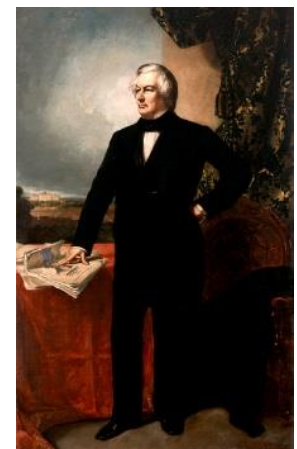


Image 2

Abraham Lincoln's administration made an adjustment to this collection practice by providing White House access to painter Francis B. Carpenter to capture the first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation (**Image 4**). Carpenter's painting moved away from the idea of depicting the past, instead focusing on an important current event. The painting was displayed briefly in the East Room



Image 5

and eventually found its permanent place in the Senate wing of the United States Capitol.

To complement the presidents' portraits, the idea of a first ladies portrait collection gained momentum in the nineteenth century. After leaving office, Julia Tyler donated her portrait to the White House (**Image 5**), and Lucy Hayes acquired a full-length portrait of Martha Washington to pair with Gilbert Stuart's George Washington (**Image 6**). After the 1902 renovations, Edith Roosevelt established a gallery in the Ground Floor corridor to display the first ladies' paintings collected during the previous century.

In addition to the growing portraiture collection, the fine arts collection at the White House grew through the influence of the American Aesthetics movement, collecting art for visual appeal rather than purely historic reasons. A watercolor by James Henry Moser would become the first non-portrait purchased by the U.S. government for the White House collection in 1890 (**Image 7**). At that same time, First Lady Caroline Harrison asked Congress to fund major White House renovations that would have included a new art wing addition, but her request was denied.

During the Calvin Coolidge administration, Congress appointed an official who could accept gifts on behalf of the White House. In addition, Grace Coolidge worked to provide a sense of history in the

rooms of the State Floor through some redecoration, moving in the direction of creating a museum-like environment (**Image 8**). First Lady Lou Henry Hoover took another step forward by approving the documentation of the furnishings and portraits in the White House.

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 legislating a permanent collection of items owned by the White House and establishing the White House's status as a museum. In the same year, the White House Historical Association was created to enhance the understanding and appreciation of the Executive Mansion, including its collections (**Images 9 & 10**). Soon after, the creation of the Office of the Curator brought additional standards and professional expertise to the fine arts collection, and the Committee for the Preservation of the White House helped provide guidance starting in 1964. This brief period transformed how the White House identified, obtained, and preserved fine arts and catapulted the collection to new heights.


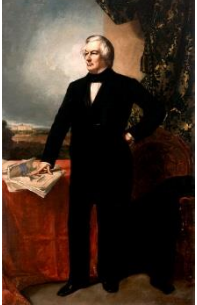
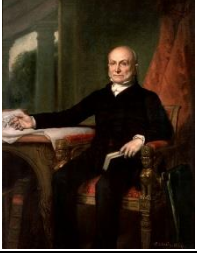


Following the professionalization of the White House fine arts collection, presidents and first ladies continued to add items of historical and artistic significance. Some of these artworks include Mary Cassatt's *Young Mother and Two Children*, Frederic Remington's *The Bronco Buster*, and Alma Thomas' *Resurrection* (**Images 11-13**). 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

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 <i>First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation</i>	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



FINE ARTS AND THE WHITE HOUSE



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 Information 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

FINE ARTS AND THE WHITE HOUSE



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

Collection: Decorative Arts and the White House from the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

Collection: Art in the White House from the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

Gallery: The White House Collection from the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

Video: First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy’s White House Tour. Televised on CBS February 14, 1962. [Watch here.](#)

Article: "Diversity in White House Art: Alma Thomas" by Lina Mann for the White House Historical Association. [Read here.](#)

Short Video: “Preserving the Legacy of the White House” by the White House Historical Association. [Watch here.](#)

Resource: The White House Collection on the WHHA Digital Library. [Explore here.](#)



SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For All Learners

- Alma Thomas’s *Resurrection* is an example of artwork influenced by the Washington Color School, an art movement that began in Washington, D.C. in the 1950s. The movement was defined by making an image using large solid areas of paint. See the associated *Anywhere Activity: The Washington Color School* and create your own Washington Color School-inspired artwork.

For Older Learners

- Discuss with friends, family, or classmates (or write a short persuasive essay) about whether the White House should be considered a museum. Why or why not?
- In 1864, Francis Carpenter painted a current event, *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation*. **Image 4** is an engraving copy of the painting. Look at the image and debate the accuracy of this painting. What artistic licenses did the painter take? How is this painting different than a photograph of a recent executive decision?
 - Closely examine Lincoln’s cabinet members featured in **Image 4**. Study their facial expressions and body language. How do you think each cabinet member reacted to the Proclamation? Provide observational evidence.
- Explore more items in the White House art collection on the [White House Historical Association’s website](#) and [Digital Library](#). What White House items surprise or interest you?
- 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.
- Continue learning more about the White House art collection in the [Classroom Resource Packet “Presidential Portraits”](#).