

## 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 art 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, taking a great leap in 1961 when First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy helped establish the White House as a museum. Known officially as the White House Collection, exhibited art and sculpture tell uniquely American stories with a growing number of different perspectives presented by many diverse and innovative artists. Through the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the modern art holdings of the White House Collection have steadily grown.

## CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

**Georgia O’Keeffe** (1887-1986) (**Image 1**) was a famous American artist and one of the most well-known women painters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, known for her impactful paintings of flowers, New Mexico landscapes, and New York buildings. O’Keeffe’s art took on a unique personal style, reflecting her interpretations of objects in a way that became more and more abstract over her career. In 1929, O’Keeffe began visiting New Mexico and this was heavily reflected in her work. The arid natural beauty inspired her paintings of desert flowers, sandy landscapes, strong mountains, and sun-bleached animal bones. O’Keeffe was very successful throughout her life. In 1977, she received the



Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Gerald Ford, and in 1985 she received the National Medal of the Arts from President Ronald Reagan.

O’Keeffe’s 1930 painting, *Mountain at Bear Lake – Taos* (**Image 2**) was gifted to the White House Collection in 1997 by the Georgia O’Keeffe Foundation and William D. Rollnick and Nancy Ellison Rollnick. Bear Lake is

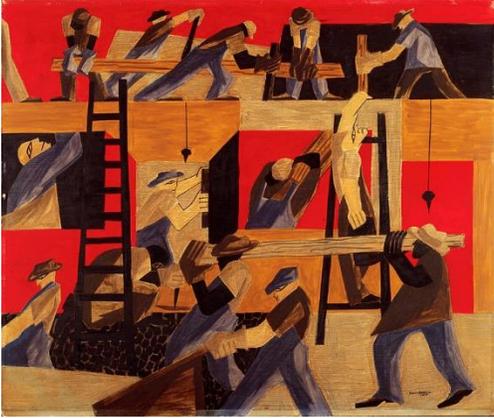


located on Taos Pueblo land in New Mexico. Like many other paintings in the White House, this landscape celebrates the natural beauty of North America. O’Keeffe takes a minimalist approach to painting the mountains, but still emphasizes their immense size by allowing them to take up most of the canvas. The waters of Bear Lake are visible below the mountain. The literal and figurative enormity of the mountains is highlighted by the way they interact with O’Keeffe’s orange sky. This painting currently hangs in the Library on the Ground Floor of the White House. **(Image 3)**

Another O’Keeffe painting, *Jimson Weed/White Flower No. 1* hung in the White House for 6 years on loan from the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe. This 1932 painting was loaned to the White House at request of First Lady Laura Bush and hung in the President’s Dining Room of the White House from 2002 through 2008 **(Image 4)**. The museum sold the piece at auction for \$44 million to bolster their acquisitions fund, making it the most expensive painting by a woman artist ever sold.

**Jacob Lawrence** (1917-2000) **(image 5)** was one of the best known African-American painters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, notable for his portrayals of the Black experience in the Americas. Lawrence was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and studied under Harlem Renaissance painters at the Harlem Art Workshop. He was employed as an artist under the Works Progress Administration, which was established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to alleviate the Great Depression. At the age of 23, Lawrence completed one of his best-known works, *The Migration Series*, a 60-panel set depicting the Great Migration of Black Americans from the rural south to northern cities in order to escape racial segregation and seek better economic opportunities. Lawrence also painted a series of panels celebrating notable Black leaders like Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L’Ouverture.

# MODERN ART AND THE WHITE HOUSE



Lawrence's paintings of contemporary African-American urban life featured crisp shapes and colors. This is evident in Lawrence's 1947 painting, *The Builders*, depicting a group of men working on a busy construction site (**Image 6**).

Lawrence's use of vibrant color and exaggerated postures conveys a sense of activity and energy in the painting. *The Builders* was acquired for the White House in 2007 through the efforts of First Lady Laura Bush and hangs in the Green

Room (**Image 7**). Through his life, Jacob Lawrence continued to use his art as a medium for advocating for racial and social equality.

**Alma Thomas (1891-1978) Image 8)** was born in Georgia, but moved to Washington, D.C. with her parents as a young adult to escape the racial violence of the American South and pursue better educational opportunities. In 1924, Thomas became the first graduate of the art department at Howard University, a historically Black university in D.C. After graduation, Thomas taught art at Shaw Junior High School for 35 years, not far from Howard University. While teaching, Thomas helped found art galleries and continued her studies at American University in D.C.

It was during this time later in her life that Alma Thomas became involved with the Washington Color School, a group of artists who focused their work on abstract shapes in solid colors. In her late seventies, Thomas began painting regularly. She exhibited her art at American University and Howard University, as well as the Corcoran Gallery in D.C. and the Whitey Museum in New York. One of her most notable works, *Resurrection*, completed 1966 (**Image 9**), was added to the White House Collection in 2015 where it was hung in First Lady Michelle Obama's renovated Family Dining Room on the State



Floor (**Image 10**). The addition of *Resurrection* made Alma Thomas the first African-American woman to have her art featured in the White House.

**Isamu Noguchi** (1904-1988) (**Image 11**) was one of the most prolific and acclaimed sculptors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Noguchi was born in Los Angeles, California to an American mother and Japanese father. Noguchi lived in Japan until he was thirteen, moving to the United States and eventually studying pre-medicine at Columbia University. In his spare time, Noguchi studied sculpture, eventually leaving Columbia to pursue sculpture as a career. He traveled the world extensively, and the artistic styles of many cultures began to shape Noguchi's own unique style. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Noguchi voluntarily entered a Japanese incarceration camp in Arizona, remaining there for six months and advocating for the patriotism of Japanese Americans.

Noguchi's work in sculpture and design, was, to say the very least, prolific. He collaborated with artists across many different disciplines. Noguchi created stage sets for noted American dancer and choreographer Martha Graham (**Image 12**), designed public gardens and large public sculptures worldwide, worked with Zenith Radio Corporation to produce an intercom, worked with Herman Miller to produce a glass-topped table line, and even created his own line of *Akari* light sculptures using traditional Japanese materials, still produced today.



In 1987, Noguchi was presented with the National Medal of the Arts by President Ronald Reagan at the White House. In 2020, Noguchi's 1962 bronze sculpture *Floor Frame* (**Image 13**), the first in an edition of six from a larger series sharing the same name, was acquired for the White House Collection with the assistance of the White House Historical Association. Noguchi described the sculpture as “a twist to the experience of Japan, where it is

# MODERN ART AND THE WHITE HOUSE



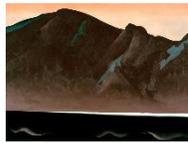
on the floor that the ceremony of life takes place.” The sculpture is proposed to be added to the western edge of the Rose Garden (**Image 14**) in late 2020 and makes Isamu Noguchi the first Asian-American artist to be represented in the White House Collection.

## CONCLUSION

The designation of the White House as a museum in 1961 has enabled presidents and first ladies to continue to add items of artistic, historical, or cultural significance to the White House Collection. The White House, with the assistance of the White House Historical Association and the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, can obtain, exhibit, interpret, and share art that explores the American story.

## RESOURCES

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

	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Portrait of Georgia O'Keeffe	1950	Carl Van Vechten	Library of Congress		<a href="https://www.loc.gov/item/2004663416">https://www.loc.gov/item/2004663416</a>
2	<i>Mountain at Bear Lake - Taos</i>	1930	Georgia O'Keeffe	White House Collection/White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Artwork/191.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Artwork/191.tif.info</a>
3	Library, George W. Bush Administration	2007	Peter Vitale	White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Rooms/9444.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Rooms/9444.tif.info</a>
4	President's Dining Room, George W. Bush Administration	2003	Peter Vitale	White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Rooms/6048.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Rooms/6048.tif.info</a>

# MODERN ART AND THE WHITE HOUSE



5	Portrait of Jacob Lawrence	1941	Carl Van Vechten	Library of Congress		<a href="https://www.loc.gov/item/200466319/">https://www.loc.gov/item/200466319/</a>
6	<i>The Builders</i>	1947	Jacob Lawrence	White House Collection/White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Artwork/8447.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Artwork/8447.tif.info</a>
7	Green Room, George W. Bush Administration	2007	Peter Vitale	White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Rooms/8767.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Rooms/8767.tif.info</a>
8	Photograph of Alma Thomas in her studio	c. 1968	Ida Jervis	Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution		<a href="https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/items/detail/photograph-alma-thomas-her-studio-5764">https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/items/detail/photograph-alma-thomas-her-studio-5764</a>
9	<i>Resurrection</i>	1966	Alma Thomas	White House Collection/White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Artwork/10093.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Artwork/10093.tif.info</a>

# MODERN ART AND THE WHITE HOUSE



10	Family Dining Room, Barack Obama Administration	2015	Matthew D'Agostino	White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Rooms/1116033.dng.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Rooms/1116033.dng.info</a>
11	Portrait of Isamu Noguchi	1955	Louise Dahl-Wolfe	The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS		<a href="https://archive.noguchi.org/Detail/archival/33909">https://archive.noguchi.org/Detail/archival/33909</a>
12	<i>Martha Graham</i>	1929	Isamu Noguchi	The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS		<a href="https://archive.noguchi.org/Detail/archival/32662">https://archive.noguchi.org/Detail/archival/32662</a>
13	<i>Floor Frame</i>	1962	Isamu Noguchi	The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, New York/ARS		<a href="https://archive.noguchi.org/Detail/archival/33894">https://archive.noguchi.org/Detail/archival/33894</a>
14	Rose Garden, Obama Administration	2015	Matthew D'Agostino	White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Views/124069.jpg.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Views/124069.jpg.info</a>



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Resource: The White House Historical Association Digital Library. [Create a free account and explore here.](#)
- Article: “Diversity in White House Art: Georgia O’Keeffe” by Sarah Fling for the White House Historical Association. [Read here.](#)
- Article: “Diversity in White House Art: Jacob Lawrence” by Sarah Fling for the White House Historical Association. [Read here.](#)
- Article: "Diversity in White House Art: Alma Thomas” by Lina Mann for the White House Historical Association. [Read here.](#)
- Gallery: The White House Collection. [View here.](#)
- Gallery: The Family Dining Room. [View here.](#)
- Book: *Art in the White House* by William Kloss for the White House Historical Association. [Available here.](#)
- Website: The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum. [Click here.](#)
- News Article: “Color, Full: A Timeline of the Washington Color School” from the *Washington City Paper*, June 2, 2017. [Read the article and view art examples here.](#)



## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

### For All Ages

- 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: Colorful Modern Art* and create your own Washington Color School-inspired artwork.

### For Younger Learners

- Collect whatever art supplies you may find around your house like paper, crayons, markers, and paints. Find other “every day” items that you might be able to use in your art like newspaper, beads, or pasta. Set up an art space with help from an adult and create your own masterpiece!
- Pick two of the artworks listed above in the CRP. Create a Venn diagram and identify what makes the artworks similar and what makes them different.

### For Older Learners

- Think of other works of modern art you are familiar with. Research an American artist or American-related piece of modern art and that you think could be a fit for the White House Collection and explain why.
- Explore the White House Collection using the [WHHA Digital Library](#). Are there art items in the collection that you find surprising or interesting? Create an album of art you enjoy and see if there is a theme or concept that unites your chosen collection items.
- Further explore the White House Collection with the other Classroom Resource Packets, “Fine Art and the White House” and “Presidential Portraiture.”