

## INTRODUCTION

Portrait artists have captured the image and personality of presidents and first ladies throughout history, providing a record of their time in the White House and highlighting their accomplishments and leadership. Unlike today, it wasn't always tradition to commission, or order the creation of, a portrait for the president and first lady. Each portrait comes with a unique story, from the symbolism in the portrait to the artist who painted it. Learn more about the history of these portraits, how the White House began to collect them, and the stories they tell.

## CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

Shortly before President John Adams moved into the newly built White House in 1800, Congress purchased famed portrait artist Gilbert Stuart's painting of George Washington for the Residence. Seen in **Image 1**, to the right, the painting cost \$800—a high price for the time. The full-length portrait of George Washington was painted by Stuart in 1797, the final year of his presidency. While other artists had depicted Washington as a military leader, Stuart became the first portraitist to paint an authoritative image of Washington as the country's first president. The larger-than-life painting shows Washington dressed in civilian clothes, emphasizing his role as president rather than a military general. He stands in front of a chair with a stars and stripes shield on it and strikes a pose as if he is addressing Congress or speaking to a crowd of people. He holds a sword in his left hand while a copy of the Constitution and a history of the American Revolution are positioned next to a table leg. Over the president's shoulder, Stuart painted a rainbow to symbolize both the hardship that had passed and the hope for the new nation.



*Image 1. Full-length portrait of President George Washington done by Gilbert Stuart in 1797. The portrait was installed in the White House in November 1800.*

# Presidential Portraits



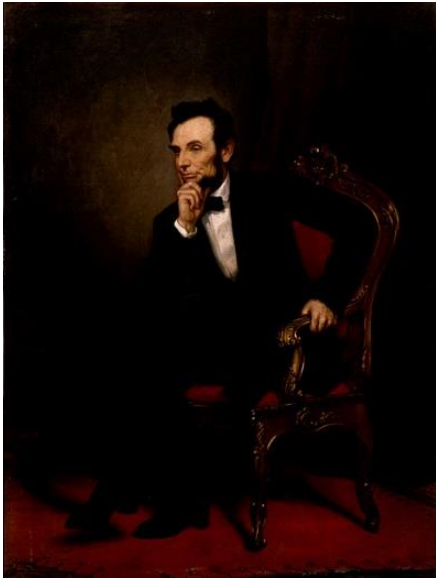
During the War of 1812, the British marched into Washington, D.C. and set fire to the White House. According to popular folklore, First Lady Dolley Madison personally saved the portrait of Washington, cutting it out of its frame and carrying it off as wagons and carts departed the White House. However, it is more likely that Mrs. Madison instructed enslaved and free White House workers including the president's steward, Jean Pierre Sioussat, and gardener, Thomas McGrath to remove the portrait. In his White House memoir, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison*, President Madison's then-enslaved valet, Paul Jennings, stated that the story of Dolley Madison's independent rescue of the painting was "totally false." The portrait returned to the rebuilt White House in 1817. View **Image 2**, in the chart below, to see a portrait of First Lady Dolley Madison, also painted by Gilbert Stuart in 1804.

In the early 1800s, however, presidential portraits were not always commissioned or displayed in the White House. In fact, presidents who did commission portraits typically took the paintings with them when they left office. For example, President James Monroe commissioned artist Samuel F. B. Morse to paint his likeness in 1819. While he was the first president to sit for a portrait in the White House, the painting did not remain at the Residence. Refer to **Image 3**, to the right, to see Morse's depiction of President James Monroe. Over 100 years later, the White House began actively searching for the portraits of previous presidents, sparked by First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy's restoration and preservation initiatives. After being passed down through the Monroe family for generations, the portrait was gifted to the White House in 1965.



*Image 3. Portrait of President James Monroe painted by Samuel F.B. Morse circa 1819.*

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*Image 6. Portrait of President Abraham Lincoln created by George P.A. Healy in 1869, not long after Lincoln's assassination on April 15, 1865.*

In 1857, the United States Congress commissioned artist George P. A. Healy to paint a series of presidential portraits to hang in the White House. Although Healy completed six portraits in a short amount of time, they were not publicly displayed in the White House until after the Civil War. See **Images 4 and 5**, in the chart, to view George P.A. Healy's presidential portraits of Franklin Pierce and John Tyler. In 1869, Healy created a portrait of President Abraham Lincoln, seen in **Image 6**, to the left. Completed after Lincoln's assassination, the painting shows the sixteenth president seated in a chair leaning forward with his legs crossed and holding his chin in a thoughtful manner. President Ulysses S. Grant did not acquire Healy's painting, instead favoring another Lincoln portrait. President Abraham Lincoln's son, Robert Todd Lincoln, purchased Healy's painting and it was donated to the White House in 1939.

In the late 1800s, presidents and first ladies took a more active interest in leaving behind visual records of their time in office. President Rutherford B. Hayes and First Lady Lucy Hayes were the first White House residents to have their portraits incorporated into the official collection while still in office. **Images 7 and 8**, in the chart, show the official portraits of President Rutherford B. Hayes and First Lady Lucy Hayes. While many presidents and first ladies pose for their official portraits while still in office, most paintings are completed after residents leave the White House.

In the 1900s, President Theodore Roosevelt commissioned artist Théobald Chartran to paint his presidential portrait. The president and the Roosevelt family, however, despised Chartran's portrait and later had it destroyed. In 1903, President Roosevelt selected famed artist John Singer Sargent to paint his second presidential portrait. The image depicts the president looking straight ahead and

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*Image 10. Official White House portrait of President John F. Kennedy painted by Aaron Shikler (1970).*

gripping a banister, representing his bold determination. View **Image 9**, in the chart, to see Sargent's depiction of President Theodore Roosevelt.

Aaron Shikler's famous portrait of President John F. Kennedy deviates slightly from the traditional style of previous paintings. Seen in **Image 10**, to the left, the portrait depicts the young president with his head down and arms crossed. Like President Lincoln's portrait, Kennedy's portrait was completed in 1970, after his assassination. The portrait was added to the White House collection in 1971. Shikler also painted the portrait of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy that hangs in the White House—seen in **Image 11**, in the chart.

More recent presidential portraits include Everett Raymond Kinstler's depiction of President Ronald Reagan. See Kinstler's likeness of President Reagan, completed in 1991, in **Image 12** below. To convey the fortieth president's friendly demeanor, the artist pictures President Reagan showing teeth through a broad smile. Simmie Knox, who painted portraits of President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton, became the first African American selected to complete an official White House portrait. Knox painted the president in the Oval Office, looking straight ahead and standing next to a collection of challenge coins given to the president by military officials. See Knox's depiction of President Bill Clinton in **Image 13**, below.

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Most recently, the official portraits of President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama were unveiled during a ceremony in the East Room of the White House on September 7, 2022. President Obama's portrait, seen in **Image 14** to the right, was painted by Robert McCurdy in 2018 and offers a photorealistic likeness of the president against a minimalist background. The first lady's portrait was painted by Sharon Sprung, also in 2018, and features Mrs. Obama in a blue gown seated on a sofa in the Red Room of the White House. See First Lady Michelle Obama's official White House portrait in **Image 15** in the chart below.



*Image 14. Official White House portrait of President Barack Obama painted by Robert McCurdy in 2018.*

Presidential portraits provide modern viewers with a visual of each president and first lady's appearance. In many instances, portraits include intricate details that symbolize important ideas and decisions during each president's time in office. Through their portraits, presidents have the opportunity teach new generations about the legacies they left behind.

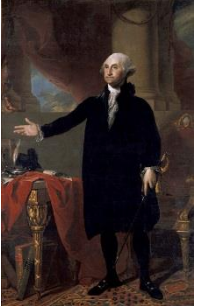


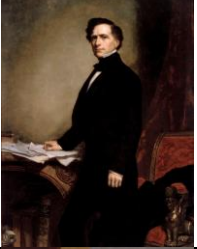



# Presidential Portraits



## 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		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/21.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/21.tif.info</a>
2	Dolley Madison	1804	Gilbert Stuart	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/123.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/123.tif.info</a>
3	James Monroe	1819	Samuel F.B. Morse	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/31.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/31.tif.info</a>
4	Franklin Pierce	1858	George P.A. Healy	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/14.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/14.tif.info</a>
5	John Tyler	1859	George P.A. Healy	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20Tyler/659.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20Tyler/659.tif.info</a>





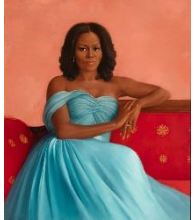
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6	Abraham Lincoln	1869	George P.A. Healy	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/5.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/5.tif.info</a>
7	Rutherford B. Hayes	1884	Daniel Huntington	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/45.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/45.tif.info</a>
8	Lucy Webb Hayes	1881	Daniel Huntington	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/172.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/172.tif.info</a>
9	Theodore Roosevelt	1903	John Singer Sargent	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/56.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/56.tif.info</a>
10	John F. Kennedy	1970	Aaron Shikler	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/29.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/29.tif.info</a>

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11	Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy	1970	Aaron Shikler	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/154.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/154.tif.info</a>
12	Ronald Wilson Reagan	1991	Everett Raymond Kintler	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/48.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/48.tif.info</a>
13	Bill Clinton	2002	Simmie Knox	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/6196.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/6196.tif.info</a>
14	Barack Obama	2018	Robert McCurdy	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/1135359.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/1135359.tif.info</a>
15	Michelle Obama	2018	Sharon Sprung	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/1135360.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/1135360.tif.info</a>





## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Article: “Artists’ Life Studies for White House Portraits” by Lydia Tederick for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Collection: “Presidential and First Lady Portraits” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Podcast: “The White House 1600 Sessions: The Obama White House Portraits: The Artists” by the White House Historical Association. [Listen here.](#)
- Podcast: “The White House 1600 Sessions: Presidential Portraits” by the White House Historical Association. [Listen here.](#)
- Video: “The Burning of the White House” by the White House Historical Association in partnership with UNTOLD. [Watch here.](#)

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

### For all learners:

- Create your own portrait of a president or first lady. Use the [360-degree tour of the public spaces to the White House](#) to explore portraits of presidents and first ladies displayed in the building. Think about each portrait you see: How are they positioned? What symbols did the artist include? Consider what your subject would want viewers to know about them and include those things in their portrait.

### For older learners:

- Select one (or more) presidential portrait(s) from the images list above. Divide that portrait into halves, thirds, or quadrants and identify and discuss the symbols and colors within a small area. What do you think the artist is trying to tell us? Can you make a connection between what was

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happening in history and the symbols in the image? Share your findings with a classmate, friend, or family member.

- Use the resource images to observe change over time. Take one of the earlier presidential portraits and compare it to a more recent portrait. Consider clothing, painting style, and background. What do these differences or similarities tell us about how the presidency has changed over time? Create a timeline documenting what you feel to be major changes in the style and composition of portraits over time.

## For younger learners:

- Complete the “Presidential Portraits” Anywhere Activity by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)