

INTRODUCTION

Over time, the White House fine art collection has added portraits of every president and most of the first ladies. Not only do these portraits remind us how a particular president looked, especially important before the invention of photography, but they also offer historical clues through a variety of symbols, props, or backgrounds. While some presidential portraits are more famous than others, each one reveals small details about that president and the legacy they left behind. Explore the history behind the growth of the presidential portraiture collection and discover specifics about select portraits starting with Gilbert Stuart's painting of George Washington.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

Shortly before John Adams moved into the newly built White House in 1800, Congress purchased for the residence famed portrait artist Gilbert Stuart's portrayal of George Washington (**Image 1**). They bought the painting for \$800, a high price for the time. This larger than life painting shows Washington in the simple black coat of a citizen, not the elegant robes of a king. In his hand he holds a sword, a reminder of his time as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army. The first president stands next to a table with a quill pen and paper, a symbol of the rule of law. Books propped against the table refer to important contributions in Washington's career: the American Revolution and the United States Constitution. Over the president's shoulder, Stuart painted a rainbow to

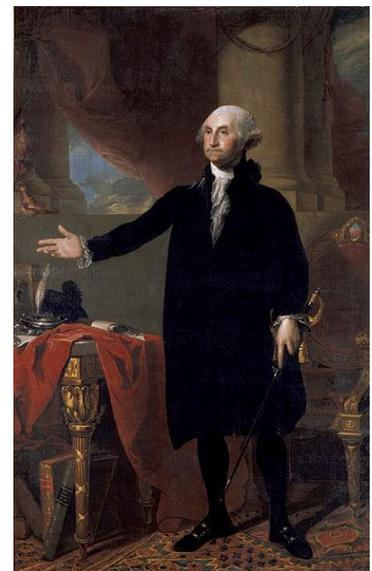


Image 1

represent the peace and hopeful prosperity of the new nation. The portrait was almost destroyed with the rest of the White House interior in 1814 when the British burned the capital city, but it was saved by White House workers, both enslaved and free, at the direction of First Lady Dolley Madison. (**Image 2**). Aside from that brief period during which the White House was being reconstructed, this presidential portrait has been a constant resident of the Executive Mansion. The purchase of the Washington portrait was the exception, not the rule. For much of the early nineteenth century, presidents did not have their likeness painted with the intention of being

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displayed in the White House. In fact, those presidents who commissioned portraits usually took the paintings with them when they left office. One example is the fourth White House resident – and fifth president – James Monroe. When he commissioned artist Samuel F. B. Morse to paint his likeness in 1819, he was the first president to sit for a portrait in the White House, but the painting did not remain at the residence. (**Image 3**). Over a century later, as part of First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy’s initiatives, the White House began to actively acquire past presidents’ portraits. In 1965, after descending through the Monroe family for generations, the portrait was among those gifted to the White House.

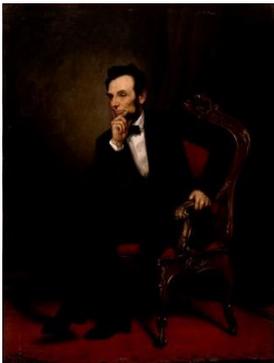


Image 6

In 1857, Congress changed this initial trend when they asked artist George P. A. Healy to undertake a series of presidential portraits to hang in the White House. Healy completed six portraits in a short amount of time, but they would not be publicly displayed in the White House until after the Civil War (**Images 4 & 5**). After this series commission of presidential portraits, Healy painted a likeness of Abraham Lincoln in 1869. Completed after Lincoln’s assassination, the image shows the sixteenth president seated in a chair with his legs crossed, leaning forward, and holding his chin in a thoughtful manner (**Image 6**). President Ulysses S. Grant did not acquire Healy’s painting in favor of another Lincoln portrait, but Abraham Lincoln’s son, Robert Todd, purchased it. Eventually, the portrait was donated to the White House in 1939.

In the late 1800s, presidents and first ladies began to take a more active interest in leaving behind visual reminders of their time in office. Just before the end of his term, President Rutherford B. Hayes and First Lady Lucy Hayes became the first to have their portraits enter the collection while still in the White House (**Images 7 & 8**). Since then, many presidents and first ladies have posed for their official portraits while in office. However, most paintings have been completed after they have left the White House.

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After the turn of the twentieth century, President Theodore Roosevelt commissioned a presidential portrait by artist Théobald Chartran. The president and the Roosevelt family despised the portrait so much that they later had it destroyed. Then in 1903, Roosevelt selected famed artist John Singer Sargent to paint his second presidential portrait. This timeless image, which depicts the president looking straight ahead and gripping a banister, represents the bold determination of Theodore Roosevelt (**Image 9**).

The first woman to paint an official White House portrait was Austrian-American artist Martha Greta Kempton. Kempton painted portraits for many famous American officials and luminaries, eventually painting the official portrait of President Harry S. Truman (**Image 10**) as well as First Lady Bess Truman.



Deviating slightly from the traditional style, Aaron Shikler painted the John F. Kennedy portrait (**Image 11**). This portrait depicts the young president with his head down and arms crossed, the only portrait in this stance. Like the Lincoln painting, this likeness was completed after Kennedy's assassination. It 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 (**Image 12**).

Image 10

More recent portraits include Ronald Reagan, painted in 1991 by Everett Raymond Kinstler (**Image 13**). Noted for showing teeth through a broad smile, the artist was trying to convey Reagan's friendly demeanor. Bill Clinton chose Simmie Knox, the first African-American artist to paint a presidential portrait (**Image 14**). Knox depicted 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.

These portraits give modern viewers an idea of each president's appearance and, in some instances, symbolize the ideas or decisions that were important during their time in office. Through their portraits, each president has the chance to teach new generations about the legacies they left behind.

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 | Dolley Madison | 1804 | Gilbert Stuart | White House Collection/ White House Historical Association |  | https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/123.tif.info |
| 3 | James Monroe | 1819 | Samuel F.B. Morse | White House Collection/ White House Historical Association |  | https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/31.tif.info |
| 4 | Franklin Pierce | 1858 | George P.A. Healy | White House Collection/ White House Historical Association |  | https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/14.tif.info |
| 5 | John Tyler | 1859 | George P.A. Healy | White House Collection/ White House Historical Association |  | https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20Tyler/659.tif.info |
| 6 | Abraham Lincoln | 1869 | George P.A. Healy | White House Collection/ White House Historical Association |  | https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/5.tif.info |

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| 7 | Rutherford B. Hayes | 1884 | Daniel Huntington | White House Collection/ White House Historical Association |  | https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/45.tif.info |
| 8 | Lucy Webb Hayes | 1881 | Daniel Huntington | White House Collection/ White House Historical Association |  | https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/172.tif.info |
| 9 | Theodore Roosevelt | 1903 | John Singer Sargent | White House Collection/ White House Historical Association |  | https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/56.tif.info |
| 10 | Harry S. Truman | 1947 | Martha Greta Kempton | White House Collection/ White House Historical Association |  | https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5006-Digital-Library-WHHA/Main%20Index/Portraits/23.tif.info |
| 11 | John F. Kennedy | 1970 | Aaron Shikler | White House Collection/ White House Historical Association |  | https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/29.tif.info |

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| 12 | Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy | 1970 | Aaron Shikler | White House Collection/ White House Historical Association |  | https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/154.tif.info |
| 13 | Ronald Wilson Reagan | 1991 | Everett Raymond Kintler | White House Collection/ White House Historical Association |  | https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/48.tif.info |
| 14 | Bill Clinton | 2002 | Simmie Knox | White House Collection/ White House Historical Association |  | https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/6196.tif.info |

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Podcast: Episode 2 – “Presidential Portraits” from the *1600 Sessions*, presented by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Article: ‘...For the People’: The Presidential Portraits at the National Portrait Gallery by David C. Ward. [Click here.](#)
- Article: “Artists’ Life Studies for White House Portraits” by Lydia Tederick for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Article: “Diversity in the White House Collection: Greta Kempton” by Lina Mann for the White House Historical Association. [Read here.](#)
- Article: “Diversity in the White House Collection: Simmie Knox” by Sarah Fling for the White House Historical Association. [Read here.](#)



SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For All Learners:

- Create your own portrait. Think about the portraits of presidents and first ladies that hang in the White House. How are they positioned? What symbols did the artist include? Encourage students to think about what they would want viewers to know about them and to include those things in their portrait. See the “Anywhere Activity: Presidential Portraits” to analyze the George Washington portrait and then create your own unique portrait.

For Older Learners:

- Select one (or more) presidential portrait(s) from the resource 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 happening in history and the symbols in the image? Share your findings with a 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.