

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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A Bold and Modern White House

By CAROL VOGEL

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The Obamas' taste in art is as broad as abstract canvases by Josef Albers, American Indian scenes by George Catlin and paintings by little-known figures like Alma Thomas, the African-American Expressionist painter. Works by those artists were among some 45 pieces that the first couple borrowed from several Washington museums to decorate their private White House residence and the West and East Wings, the White House press office announced on Tuesday.



Courtesy of Ed Ruscha

"I think I'll ... " by the California artist Ed Ruscha. It deals with the subject of indecision.

It is a big, wide selection of mostly modern and contemporary paintings and sculptures that also includes works by Mark Rothko, a lead relief titled "0 Through 9" by Jasper Johns, bronze sculptures by Degas and still-life canvases by Giorgio Morandi.

In the weeks before the inauguration, Michael Smith, the Obamas' decorator, paid a visit to Harry Cooper, curator of modern and contemporary art at the National Gallery in Washington. Mr. Smith was not there to see the latest exhibition, but rather to talk about what art he could borrow.

"We have one rule: We won't take anything off public display," Mr. Cooper said in a telephone interview. Nor will the museum lend a work likely to be requested for an exhibition anytime soon. "That limited us to looking at things in storage," Mr. Cooper added. "But there's quite a bit."

Mr. Smith, working with Michelle Obama and the White House curator, William Allman, made choices for the first family's living quarters and office areas after perusing the Web sites of three Washington museums: the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the National Gallery of Art and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

"Michael Smith came to us with a long list of artists and asked me what was available," Kerry Brougher, chief curator at the Hirshhorn Museum, said in a telephone interview. "There are some very interesting figures. It's more interesting and shows a greater diversity of art than I've seen."

While Jacqueline Kennedy was known for her love of Cézanne and Hillary Rodham Clinton for living with paintings by Kandinsky and de Kooning as well as glass by Dale Chihuly, the Obamas have made a wider selection.

While there are only a few women represented — Louise Nevelson, Susan Rothenberg and Ms. Thomas — there are several contemporary African-American painters like William H. Johnson and Glenn Ligon, whose "Black Like Me No. 2," a paint-stick-on-canvas work from 1992, was among the works chosen. The painting's title echoes John Howard Griffin's 1961 memoir, "Black Like Me," in which Griffin, who was white, artificially darkened his skin to travel in the South as a black man.

But the collection is also not without humor. Another contemporary work chosen by the Obamas is a word painting by the California artist Ed Ruscha. Called "I Think I'll ... " it deals with the subject of indecision. The work depicts a brilliant red sunset against which Mr. Ruscha has painted phrases like "Maybe ... Yes ... " and "Maybe ... No ... " and "On Second Thought."

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