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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

U.S. NEWS | MAY 22, 2009

Changing the Art on the White House Walls

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Barack Obama is taking on health care, financial regulation, torture and environmental policy. He's also revamping the White House art collection.

The Obamas are sending ripples through the art world as they put the call out to museums, galleries and private collectors that they'd like to borrow modern art by African-American, Asian, Hispanic and female artists for the White House. In a sharp departure from the 19th-century still lifes, pastorals and portraits that dominate the White House's public rooms, they are choosing bold, abstract art works.

The overhaul is an important event for the art market. The Obamas' art choices could affect the market values of the works and artists they decide to display. Museums and collectors have been moving quickly to offer up works for inclusion in the iconic space.

Their choices also, inevitably, have political implications, and could serve as a savvy tool to drive the ongoing message of a more inclusive administration. The Clintons received political praise after they selected Simmie Knox, an African-American artist from Alabama, to paint their official portraits. The Bush administration garnered approval for acquiring "The Builders," a painting by African-American artist Jacob Lawrence, but also some criticism for the picture, which depicts black men doing menial labor.

Last week the first family installed seven works on loan from the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington in the White House's private residence, including "Sky Light" and "Watusi (Hard Edge)," a pair of blue and yellow abstracts by lesser-known African-American abstract artist Alma Thomas, acclaimed for her post-war paintings of geometric shapes in cheery colors.

The National Gallery of Art has loaned the family at least five works this year, including "Numerals, 0 through 9," a lead relief sculpture by Jasper Johns, "Berkeley No. 52," a splashy large-scale painting by Richard Diebenkorn, and a blood-red Edward Ruscha canvas featuring the words, "I think maybe I'll..." fitting for a president known for lengthy bouts of contemplation. The Jasper Johns sculpture was installed in the residence on Inauguration Day, along with modern works by Robert Rauschenberg and Louise Nevelson, also on loan from the National Gallery.

Collectors say the art picks by the Obamas will likely affect the artists' market values—or at least raise their profiles. After George W. Bush displayed El Paso, Texas-born artist Tom Lea's "Rio Grande," a photorealistic view of a cactus set against gray clouds, in the Oval Office, the price of the artist's paintings shot up roughly 300%, says Adair Margo, owner of an El Paso gallery that sells Mr. Lea's work. (Mr. Lea passed away in 2001, which also boosted the value of his work.)

The Obamas' interest in modern art began before they moved to Washington. The couple's Hyde Park home featured modern art and black-and-white photographs, according to several Chicago friends. On one of their first dates, Mr. Obama took Michelle Robinson to the Art Institute of Chicago.

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A White House spokeswoman says the Obamas enjoy all types of art but want to “round out the permanent collection” and “give new voices” to modern American artists of all races and backgrounds.

The changes in White House art come as the Obama administration seeks to boost arts funding. Mr. Obama included \$50 million in his economic stimulus package for the National Endowment for the Arts and on Monday Mrs. Obama delivered remarks at the reopening of the American wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



National Gallery of Art, Washington

The Obamas have borrowed Ed Ruscha's 'I Think I'll...' (1983) from the National Gallery.

The Obamas began their art hunt shortly after the November election, says White House curator William Allman. Michael Smith, a Los Angeles-based decorator hired by the Obamas to redo their private quarters, worked with Mr. Allman, White House social secretary Desirée Rogers and others on the Obama transition team to determine which works would make the Obamas feel at home in Washington.

Mr. Smith and Mrs. Obama made a wish list of about 40 artists and asked for potential loans in a letter to the Hirshhorn, according to Kerry Brougher, the museum's deputy director and chief curator. Mr. Brougher says Mr. Smith insisted any loans be plucked from the museum's storage collection and not pulled off gallery walls.

“The White House’s permanent collection is a wonderful record of America’s 18th- and 19th-century classical artistic strengths,” Mr. Smith says. “The pieces of art selected for loan act as a bridge between this historic legacy and the diverse voices of artists from the 20th and 21st century.”

Last week the Obamas decided to borrow “Nice,” a 1954 abstract by Russian-born painter Nicolas de Staël containing red, black and moss-green rectangles; a couple of boxy paintings from German-born Josef Albers’s famed “Homage to the Square” series in shades of gold, red and lavender; and “Dancer Putting on Stocking” and “The Bow,” two table-top bronzes by Edgar Degas. The museum also sent over New York artist Glenn Ligon’s “Black Like Me,” a stenciled work about the segregated South, among others that the Obamas are still considering, according to a White House spokeswoman.

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The White House Historical Association/White House Collection

Existing works in the Oval Office include Thomas Moran's 1895 landscape, 'The Three Tetons,' and 'The Bronco Buster' (1903) by Frederic Remington, below.

The president can hang whatever he wants in the residence and offices, including the Oval Office, but art placed in public rooms, such as the Green Room, must first be approved by the White House curator and the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, an advisory board on which the first lady serves as honorary chair.

Any works intended for the White House permanent collection go through strict and often lengthy vetting before the White House either accepts them as gifts or, on occasion, purchases them using private donations, says Mr. Allman, who has served as chief curator, a permanent White House position, since 2002 and worked in the curator's office since 1976.

Potential additions to the permanent collection must be at least 25 years old, and the White House does not typically accept pieces by living artists for its collection, because inclusion could impact an artist's market value. As a result, there aren't many modern art choices in the collection, Mr. Allman says.

"We're not a gallery," Mr. Allman says. "We're not a museum. People come to the White House once in their lifetime and have a certain perception of what they're going to see."

Currently, the roughly 450-piece permanent collection includes five works by black artists: the Clinton portraits by Mr. Knox; "The Builders" by Lawrence ; "Sand Dunes at Sunset, Atlantic City" by Henry Ossawa Tanner, which hangs in the Green Room and was purchased at Hillary Clinton's urging in 1995; and "The Farm Landing," a tranquil landscape painted in 1892 by Rhode Island artist Edward Bannister, purchased with donations in 2006.

The White House may also temporarily cull works from museums, galleries and collectors to display in either the private residence or public rooms. Presidents must return loans at the end of their final term.

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The White House Historical Association (White House Collection)

Many of the same deep-pocketed collectors who helped Mr. Obama fund his presidential campaign are now offering works. E.T. Williams, a New York collector of African-American art who has sat on museum boards including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is among the would-be donors.

Earlier this month, Mr. Williams, a retired banker and real estate investor, strolled through his Manhattan apartment and stopped in front of the jewel of his collection, a smoky-hued portrait of a man in a fedora by Lois Mailou Jones. The painting is appraised at \$150,000 but he says he would happily donate it to the White House permanent collection. He also says the Obamas can “borrow anything they like” from his collection, which includes works by Romare Bearden and Hale Woodruff.

Mr. Williams says that although a loan or donation to the White House could boost his collection’s profile, his offer is motivated by a desire to support the president. A White House spokeswoman says that any potential donations to the permanent collection must go through the curator’s office.

African-American collectors, in particular, snapped to attention when word spread that Mr. Obama might want to borrow art, says Bridgette McCullough Alexander, a Chicago art advisor who went to high school with the first lady. She says some of her collector clients have expressed interest in loaning works to the White House.

“For collectors, it was as if a call went out that the Obamas needed to fill their fridge. The grocery list of artists just rolled out,” she says.

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The White House has long been a revolving door of artistic preferences. Dolley Madison famously saved Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington during the War of 1812. Jacqueline Kennedy was credited with elevating the profile of White House art when she pulled out of storage eight Cézanne paintings from the permanent collection.

Subsequent administrations have tried to fill gaps in the permanent collection of American art. Hillary Clinton successfully urged the Committee for the Preservation of the White House to accept Georgia O'Keeffe's 1930 abstract, "Mountain at Bear Lake, Taos." Critics said it didn't fit the 19th-century elegance of the Green Room.

Laura Bush convinced the preservation committee to accept an Andrew Wyeth painting donated by the artist, in a rare exception to the prohibition on works by living artists. "Thank God they did accept it because then he died and they'd never be able to afford it," says art historian William Kloss, who has served on the preservation committee since 1990.



The Estate of Richard Diebenkorn

The Obamas have borrowed Richard Diebenkorn's abstract 'Berkeley No. 52.'

In 2007, the White House Acquisition Trust, a nonprofit which funds art acquisitions approved by the preservation committee, paid \$2.5 million for Jacob Lawrence's rust-colored collage of workers at a building site, four times its high estimate and far surpassing the artist's \$968,000 auction record at the time, says Eric Widing, head of Christie's American paintings department. The purchase may have given the Lawrence market a boost. The next spring, a collector paid Christie's \$881,000 for a different Lawrence, the third highest price ever paid for one of his works.

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The 1995 acquisition of Henry Ossawa Tanner's Atlantic City beach scene had the reverse effect. The White House purchased the work from the artist's grandniece for \$100,000, significantly below the \$1 million asking price of similar Tanners. The modest price of the highly publicized purchase sent the price of Tanners plummeting, several gallery owners say.

Mrs. Bush hung a modern work by Helen Frankenthaler in the private residence and pushed for the acquisition of the Lawrence, while Mr. Bush lined his office with at least six Texas landscapes.

"He [Mr. Bush] liked things that reminded him of Texas and said he wanted the Oval Office to look like an optimistic person works there," says Anita McBride, Mrs. Bush's former chief of staff. She says the paintings the Bushes borrowed have been returned.

Weeks into his presidency, Mr. Obama caused a stir when he removed a bronze bust of Winston Churchill, loaned by the British Embassy, from the Oval Office and replaced it with a bust of Martin Luther King Jr. by African-American sculptor Charles Alston, on loan from the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery.

Next month, the Obamas will consider borrowing four works by African-American artist William H. Johnson including his "Booker T. Washington Legend," a colorful oil on plywood depiction of the former slave educating a group of black students, from the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The Art Institute of Chicago plans to send as many as 10 works for the first family's consideration, including pieces by African-American modernist Beauford Delaney and abstract expressionist Franz Kline.

Steve Stuart, an amateur historian who has been studying the White House for three decades, thinks the Obamas needn't be overly bound by tradition. "You shouldn't have to look at Mrs. Hoover's face over your bed for four years if you don't want to," he says.

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