

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Obamas in hunt for modern art

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CONFIRMING their reputation for stylishness and modernity, Barack and Michelle Obama are searching for paintings by living artists to hang in their private quarters in the White House.

The Sunday Times has learnt that the works that have caught their eye include paintings by Jasper Johns, best known for his iconic 1950s images of the American flag, and Ed Ruscha, one of the originators of pop art, which belong to the National Gallery in Washington.

The final selection has not been made yet, but paintings by the late Robert Rauschenberg, a sometime lover of Jasper Johns who died aged 82 last year, are also under consideration.

President George W Bush described himself as “the Decider”, but Obama is thought to be tempted by Ruscha’s witty 1983 portrayal of indecision, entitled I Think I’ll

The words, “Maybe yes . . . wait a minute . . . maybe I’ll . . . on second thought . . . maybe no . . .” are displayed on a bold red canvas. It could provide useful relief from life in the Oval Office, where Harry Truman kept a plaque saying, “The buck stops here.”

David Ross, a former director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, said he was heartened by the Obamas’ interest in contemporary art.

“I love the idea of Obama having works by living artists in the White House,” Ross said. “These are great artists. If he chooses them, it shows a very high level of taste and discernment.”

Michael Smith, the first couple’s super-chic Los Angeles-based interior decorator, has been quietly asking museum directors across the country to suggest modern works that might be available for loan.

According to Ross, it is no surprise that paintings by Ruscha are favoured. “In Los Angeles, Ruscha is a demigod, so I am sure he is an artist Smith knows well,” he said.

Smith, whose clients include the film director Steven Spielberg and the actor Dustin Hoffman, is known for his blend of modern and traditional furnishings.

The public will not be able to see the paintings, which will be for the Obamas' private rooms only. They will mark a departure from the taste of Bush, who is said to have been fond of the "cowboy sunset school" of western scenes.

Until the 1990s, paintings lent to the president and first lady were supposed to be by artists who had been dead for at least 20 years. Hillary Clinton was the first to break the rule when she hung an abstract by Willem de Kooning in the White House, but the Clintons were not known as great patrons of art.

With \$50m (£35m) allocated to the National Endowment for the Arts in the financial stimulus bill – much to the annoyance of Republicans – artists are hoping for a new golden age of patronage under Obama. Some museum directors would like to see younger artists included in the White House collection. Johns, 78, and Ruscha, 71, are no longer in the first flush of youth. "I'll be disappointed if they only choose blue-chip artists, but we'll see," said Ross.

Michael Govan, the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, has suggested Catherine Opie's series of photographs of American cities would be "perfect".

White House sources said the Obama family hoped to bring a "different perspective" to art in the White House. They were still considering which paintings to borrow and would not announce their choices for some weeks.