

Black, White, and Pastel Portraits

Time: 45 minutes

Difficulty level: Medium

Messy level: Low



The Obama Portraits Tour
Featuring artworks by Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald
April 3–May 30, 2022,
at the MFAH

From the moment of their unveiling at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in February 2018, the official portraits of President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama have become iconic. Kehinde Wiley's portrait of Barack Obama and Amy Sherald's portrait of Michelle Obama have inspired unprecedented responses from the public.

The two paintings present a striking contrast to the formality of earlier presidential portraits and images of first ladies. Through the presentation of these now-iconic works by Wiley and Sherald, the exhibition contemplates how portraiture has given visual form to ideas of power, identity, status, and legacy throughout history.

To view a hi-res image of the work, visit mfah.org/art and enter the artwork's title in the search bar.

This activity will guide you in creating a black, white, and pastel portrait of someone you admire, inspired by Amy Sherald's portrait of Michelle Obama.

Investigate the Work of Art!

1. In this painting, Michelle Obama, the first Black First Lady, is wearing an abundant gown designed by one of her favorite fashion designers, Michelle Smith. How is she posed? How would the dress look different if she were standing?
2. The artist, Amy Sherald, said that the shapes reminded her of the paintings of Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), and the diligent quilt-making of the Black women artisans of Gee's Bend, Alabama. Let your eyes follow the outline of her dress. What colors and shapes do you see in her dress? What outfit would you wear if an artist were making a portrait of you?
3. Painted using Sherald's signature grayscale for Michelle Obama's skin tone, how does this color palette help establish a connection to past artistic traditions like photography?

Let's Make Some Art!

Gather These Art Materials

- HB, 4B, 6B pencils
- Eraser
- Glue
- Piece of fabric
- Blending stomp
- White 8 1/2 x 11-inch paper
- Pastel colored 8 1/2 x 11-inch paper

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Front: Amy Sherald, *Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama*, 2018, oil on linen, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution / The National Portrait Gallery is grateful to the generous donors who made these commissions possible and proudly recognizes them at npg.si.edu/obamaportraitstour.



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Step-by-Step Artist Instructions

1. Find a black-and-white photo of someone you would like to draw.
2. Place a white paper over the photo, hold it up against a window, and trace it. This will help you get the correct proportions. If you feel confident drawing without tracing, then please go ahead and draw the outline of the person on the white paper.
3. Fill in the face of the sketch in black and white by using the darker pencils to add shadows and the lighter pencils to add shading.
4. Use the blending stomp to soften the features of your drawing of the face.
5. Now, think about what this person will be wearing. Will it be a fancy dress, like the one Michelle Obama wears in her portrait, or will it be a more casual outfit? Use the fabric swatches provided to design your fashion, then glue the fabric in place on the portrait.
6. After the glue has dried from the attached fabric, use the sketching pencils and blending stomp to add a grayscale skin tone.
7. Finally, cut out your sketch and glue it onto the pastel paper provided, or find another paper you think is better suited for your portrait.