

Discussion: Kehinde Wiley's Portrait of Barack Obama

About the Piece

Kehinde Wiley was the first African-American artist commissioned to paint an official presidential portrait. He painted the first African-American president of the United States. In fact, there were many firsts about Wiley's portrait of Barack Obama. To appreciate this, let's first look at the legacy of presidential portraits that go all the way back to the country's founding father, President George Washington.

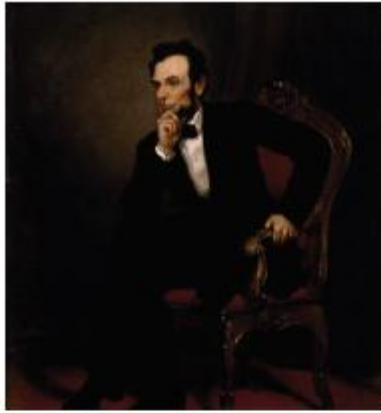
A portrait is a painting, drawing, photograph, or engraving of a person, especially one depicting only the face or head and shoulders.

[Click here
for the
link!](#)

Every president of the United States has an official presidential portrait. Follow the link to view the [White House Historical Association's collection](#). Notice the colors used in each of the portraits. Do you notice similar colors across them? Pay attention to the varying poses and positioning of the presidents in each portrait. How do their expressions and positioning make you feel about them? Look at the backgrounds of each portrait, what do you see?



George Washington
by Gilbert Stuart 1797



Abraham Lincoln
1861-1865



William Howard Taft
1909-1913



John F. Kennedy
1961-1963



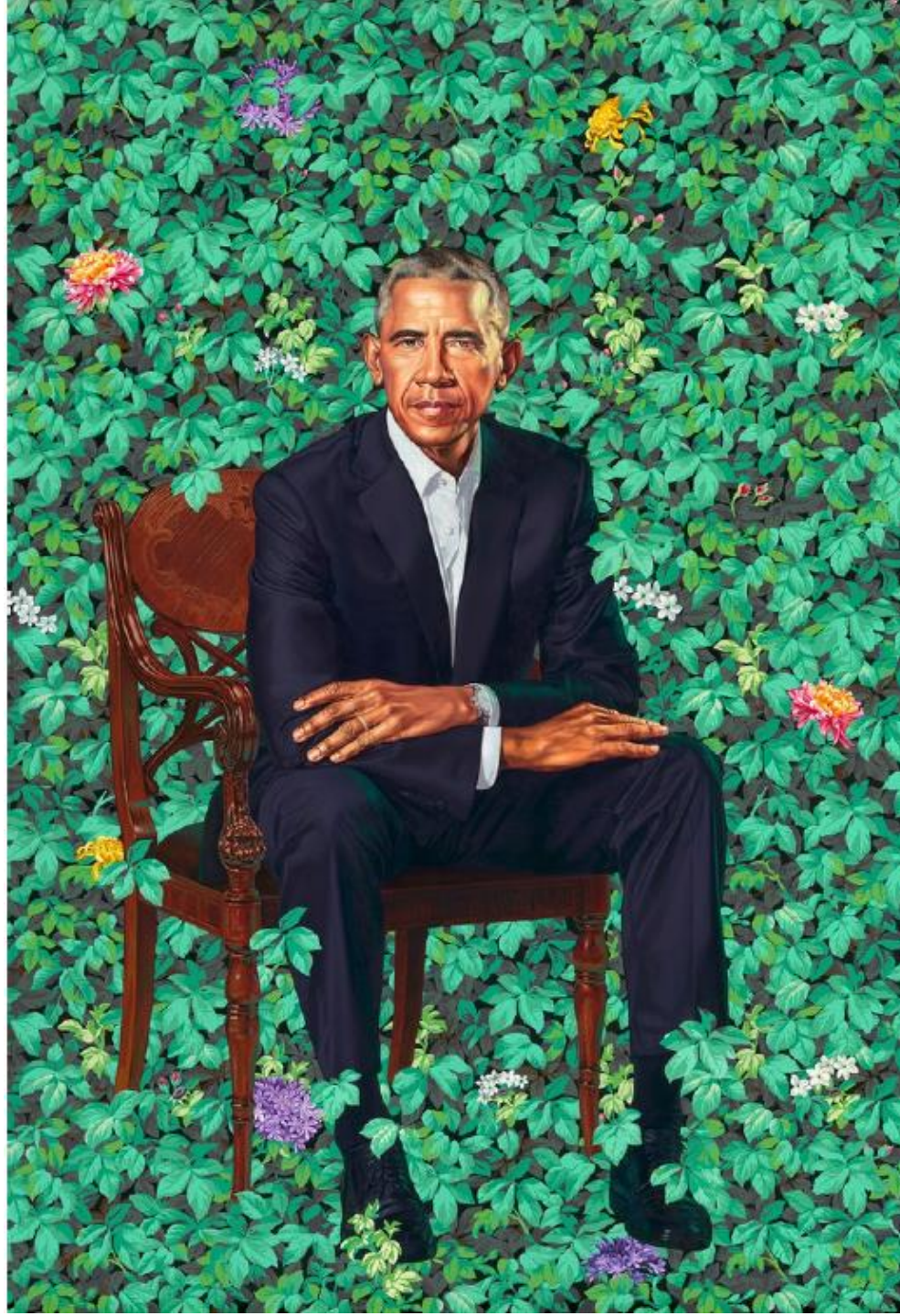
George W. Bush
2001-2009

Scroll through the **portraits** again and let's take a closer look at the objects in the paintings. We are observing symbolism. What symbols can you find? What might these symbols mean?



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With the end of his term at the close of 2017, President Barack Obama's presidential portrait was unveiled Monday 12th February 2018 at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. Take a look at the portrait and again think about colours, expressions and posturing, with special attention to the background of the portrait.



What do you find surprising about this portrait?

Are there elements that are similar to the other presidential portraits we just observed?

What do you notice about the colors that Wiley used?

What about the expression and positioning of the president?

What symbols do you see? What might they mean?

How does the portrait make you feel?

What about it makes you feel that way?

What kind of person does the portrait make the president appear to be?

What about it makes you think this?