

What on Earth Happened With Barack Obama's White House Portrait?
Dan Kois - Slate

Let's start with the nice part: Michelle Obama's official White House portrait is great. I love the blue off-the-shoulder dress and the not-yet-comfortable pose. I love its scale: seemingly just slightly smaller than life, a vibrant person not quite captured inside a gilded frame. I love the gilded frame! And I really love the bifurcated pink-and-red background, which is echoed—in no accident, I'm sure—by the dress she wore to Wednesday's White House unveiling.

"We see presidential portraits as these very traditional, 19th-century-looking-and-feeling portraits," said Stewart McLaurin, president of the White House Historical Association.

"But art and taste in art evolves and changes."

Michelle Obama's portrait, in class and quality, is a leap forward from, say, Hillary Clinton's, with its desperate inclusion of her book, or Laura Bush's, which looks as though it ought to appear on page 148 of Town & Country magazine.

This new painting, by Sharon Sprung, pays tribute to the past while pulling presidential portraiture gently into the 21st century.



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And then there's Barack's portrait. Barack Obama's official White House portrait. Barack Obama's photorealistic, disastrous mistake of a portrait. It looks like the Photoshopped jacket of a dull Obama biography by, like, Walter Isaacson.

It looks like the opening shot of some future Netflix documentary brought to us by Barack Obama's production company. It looks like the Facebook thumbnail advertising Barack Obama's MasterClass on the seven principles of leadership.

I certainly don't blame the artist, Robert McCurdy, who [painted the portrait directly from a photo](#) taken during Obama's presidency. This is McCurdy's style, and it can be overwhelming in its beauty when it really works, as with [his large painting of Toni Morrison](#) hanging in the National Portrait Gallery.

The former president and his team knew exactly what they wanted, and McCurdy executed exactly as he always does. It's just that for this subject, and in this context, it feels exactly wrong. The painting leaps straight from the staid 19th-century tradition to an unpleasantly contemporary, grimly corporate one.

It makes sense why Barack Obama, a president who spent his eight years in office getting yelled at about nearly every single thing he did—[remember the tan suit?!—](#)might have felt drawn to a portrait that resists specificity.

"We're not looking for a gestural moment," McCurdy said in an interview. Boy, he's not kidding.

But it's depressing to see a president who has long prided himself on [his taste](#)—even if that taste feels, as the years go by, [more and more focus-grouped](#)—cede this lasting document of eight years of his life to, basically, [Jony Ive](#). This is lack of style as style, not even normcore but aggressively noncore, an immaculately executed replica of a stock photo as portraiture.

Instead of taking the opportunity to commission a portrait that strives to reveal something surprising inside the subject—something [Kehinde Wiley's National Portrait Gallery painting of Obama](#), by the way, does remarkably well—Obama seems to have chosen silence. It feels shockingly anonymous, considering it's of one of the most famous people in the world.

And maybe that's self-protective, too. After all, he's spent years watching everyone else project their hopes, their dreams, and their prejudices onto him. At least my portrait, I can imagine him thinking, will just be me, unburnished and unencumbered.

Any feeling you have about this painting, Obama's straightforward gaze seems to convey, has more to do with you than it does with him. So: fair! I think this painting is boring. And I think it accidentally confirms the evidence of the past few years, in which Obama has devolved from crucial world figure to just another content creator.

But maybe I'm not giving Obama or his team enough credit. When the portrait was unveiled, the internet instantly set to work memeing it:



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"I'm the Architect. And I, uh, created The Matrix."



2:29 PM · Sep 7, 2022



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The artist deciding to put Obama on a white background is a gift to the internet. Open invite.




philip lewis ✓ @Phil_Lewis_

The Obamas unveil their portraits:





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Concept credit goes to [@obsidianblue](#). 



3:11 PM · Sep 7, 2022



Maybe what Barack Obama wanted to deliver was not a portrait but a gift to the internet.

After all, unlike Wiley's National Portrait Gallery painting, this official White House portrait will not be seen in person by that many people, and so rarely seen at its intended size or in its intended context. The vast majority of viewers of this painting will only see it online. With its hard edges and perfectly white background, it's endlessly remixable, the first presidential portrait that's also a transparent PNG.

Given that we're all just content creators now, I guess: Thanks, Obama.