

Cultural Experience: National Portrait Gallery

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The [National Portrait Gallery](#) “the NPG” or “the museum”) is a historic art museum located in Washington, DC and among the 19 world-class museums, galleries, gardens, and zoo affiliated with the [Smithsonian Institution](#) (the world’s largest museum, education, and research complex established in 1846 by the U.S. Congress) in the greater National Capital Area (Smithsonian, 2018). The museum was founded in 1962 and opened to the public in 1968. Andrew Mellon, a wealthy banker and “Secretary of the Treasury in the administrations of Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Herbert Hoover” (Cole, 2016) largely funded the museum. The museum appeals to my long-time affinity for art and holds some of the most fascinating exhibits I have ever seen. For this reason, I decided to write a cultural experience report on the NPG.

The museum holds more than 200,000 portraits of American subjects or portraits by American artists, including more than 1,600 portraits of “America’s Presidents,” 5,450 glass-plate negatives from the studios of Mathew Brady, and original artwork from 2,139 Time magazine covers (Smithsonian, 2018). The museum opens from 11:30am – 7:00pm daily. Admission is free. According to Cole (2015), “until 2006, no portrait could be displayed in the NPG until the sitter had been dead for at least ten years, which at least gave the museum a little breathing room to assess his or her importance.” The museum is housed in the historic Old Patent Office Building, built in the early 1880s and renovated several times to include restoring the porticos modeled after the Parthenon in Athens. The NPG rotunda separates the West building from the East building, and with over 200,000 exhibits, last month, I decided to return to the NPG and document my third visit.

I took a friend along on my third visit, who was as excited as me during my first visit to see the portraits of “America’s Presidents.” We took the staircase to the second floor and stopped to gaze at the huge portrait of the female supreme court justices titled, “The Four Justices” (Sandra Day O’Connor, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan) at the top of the staircase. As we entered the West hall, numerous visitors were viewing the portraits of the forty-four presidents. The exhibit consists of paintings, sculptures, and archival videos of the presidents in the order they served, beginning with the 1st President, George Washington, and ending with the 44th President, Barack Obama. Visitors moved smoothly through the chronology of presidents; however, when we got to Barack Obama, there was a red carpet, velvet ropes, and a long line of visitors waiting to get photos of the portrait of Barack Obama. Two things I observed with this exhibit was, the portraits of all presidents from President Harry Truman and before were traditionally painted using acrylic paints showing balance—symmetrical and mathematical proportions of images, art, music, society and all living aspects that are harmonious, aesthetically pleasing, and considered perfect. The other portraits were either more contemporary or eccentric, utilizing different painting techniques such as watercolors, charcoals, and a conglomerate of artistic pieces that made up the face of President, William J. Clinton. The second thing I observed was, the portrait of Barack Obama always had museum security standing beside it, the same for the portrait of First Lady, Michelle Obama.



Former President "Barack Obama" by Kehinde Wiley, 2018, photo credit: Denrique Preudhomme



Former President "William Jefferson Clinton" by Chuck Close, oil on canvas, 2006, photo credit: Denrique Preudhomme

Mrs. Obama's portrait was on the third floor, in the "Twentieth-Century Americans" exhibit. Like her husband, Barack, Mrs. Obama's portrait had a red carpet, velvet ropes, and a long line of visitors waiting to get photos. The exhibit also included people from a wide range of

backgrounds—Bill and Melinda Gates, Toni Morrison, Michael Jackson, Beyonce, Jane Addams and Douglas MacArthur, among others.



Former First Lady Michelle Obama by Amy Sherald, 2018, photo credit: Denrique Preudhomme

Later, during my tour, I was mesmerized by the “Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now.” Silhouettes of profiles using cut paper, wood, or metal objects featured likenesses of everyone from presidents to those who were enslaved. I was particularly captivated by the pieces from the artist Kumi Yamashita, a Japanese artist who used Japanese paper and a single light source to create different faces on the wall, and various wooden letters and numbers using a single light source to create a face. I was in awe of such brilliant conceptualization to create perfect art. These two exhibits complemented those in the “Digital Age” exhibit. Another piece I found equally captivating was in the exhibit “The Struggle for Justice which”, “showcases the determined men and women—from key nineteenth-century historical figures to contemporary leaders—who struggled to achieve civil rights for disenfranchised or marginalized groups” (Exhibition: The Struggle of Justice, 2018). The Oil and acrylic on canvas piece, shows Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Special Olympics founder in her advocacy for children with special needs. The faces of the children depict their realities, as well as the support from Shriver who is hugging the children in the painting. The lighting, strategic use of light to create an effect or to enhance an image on stage, film, print, etc., enhances the hue and depth of the painting while illuminating the expressions on the faces in the painting. Both “Black Out: Silhouettes Then and Now” and “The Struggle for Justice” exhibits appealed to me because of my creative arts studies in high school, and my current practice in photography and photojournalism. I also studied Architecture in college many years ago; therefore, the culmination of scientific and artistic expressions was tremendously appealing to me.



Origami by Kumi Yamashita, 2017, Japanese paper, single light source, and cast shadow, photo credit: Denrique Preudhomme



Profile (new version) by Kumi Yamashita, Wood, single light source, and cast shadow, photo credit: Denrique Preudhomme



*Eunice Kennedy Shriver (detail) by David Lenz, 2009, Oil and acrylic on canvas,
photo credit: Denrique Preudhomme*

As I exited the museum, I realized I had spent over two hours at the museum and still did not see several significant exhibits I wanted to see—although it was my third visit to the museum. I also realized how much art is a culmination of scientific, artistic, and digital expressions. Today, digital technology consisting of videos, lighting techniques, image effects and more, combine to create digital art. The advent of digital technology has revolutionized society, making it easy for artists to create brilliant art using digital techniques. This tells me that art truly has no boundaries and will continue to revolutionize and globalize humanity. With NASA’s recent discovery of the sounds of wind on planet Mars, digital technology is now positioned to capture and depict art and humanities on earth and other galaxies.

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