Obama portraits coming to Chicago

Art Institute will have them during the summer of 2021

By Steve Johnson

The official portraits of President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama are coming to Chicago.

The hugely popular paintings will leave the National Portrait Gallery for the first time since they were unveiled almost two years ago, beginning their yearlong, five-city tour at the Art Institute in June 2021, the Washington, D.C., institution announced Thursday.

Calling the portraits’ scheduled two-month visit “a narrative homecoming that we’re excited about,” Art Institute President and Eloise W. Martin Director James Rondeau cited the couple’s first official date to the Art Institute and the 2008 presidential election night celebration “in our backyard” in Grant Park as key moments linking the couple to the institution and the city.

“There’s a very special relationship between not only the City of Chicago, but between our museum and the president and the first lady,” he said. “We’re still, especially in Chicago, very much in the present tense with the president and Mrs. Obama. So, yes, this notion of kind of (a) living history feels very powerful to me.”

To give visitors a taste of the Art Institute’s treasures, the museum plans to hang the portraits in the first gallery beyond the Grand Staircase in view of the institution’s iconic, and enormous, “A Sunday on La Grande Jatte — 1884” by the French artist Georges Seurat.

“We very much wanted to embed them within a uniquely Chicago, uniquely Art Institute context,” Rondeau said. “You’ll see them in all of their individual, autonomous glory, but they’ll be ... surrounded by Renoir and Monet and Pissarro, et cetera, some of our institutional DNA. And then with absolutely the iconic sight lines to ‘La Grand Jatte.’”

The nontraditional official portraits by Kehinde Wiley (Barack) and Amy Sherald (Michelle) have stood out amid the more standard tradition of presidential portraiture on view in the Smithsonian Institution’s National Portrait Gallery, and have been key factors in roughly doubling the gallery’s attendance since their unveiling in February 2018, the gallery director said.

Barack Obama was, of course, the United States’ first African-American president, and Wiley and Sherald are the first African-American artists chosen for the gallery’s official president and first lady portraits.

“We’re excited that it’s coming to Chicago,” said Kim Sajet, director of the museum, where images not only of American presidents but American artists, activists, rogues and heroes hang and tell aspects of the nation’s story.

When the NPG began organizing the tour, “the Art Institute was one of our first calls, and they were like, ‘Absolutely. We are there,’” she said.

Well ahead of the portraits’ tour, both artists are scheduled to be in Chicago for the Feb. 13 launch of a new NPG book about the paintings called “The Obama Portraits,” at the Stony Island Arts Bank, Sajet said.

Barack Obama, president from 2009 to 2017, began his political career in Chicago, and the couple met and began their family here. They lived in the South Side Kenwood neighborhood when he was elected to the U.S.
Senate in 2004, and the Obama Presidential Center is planned for near that neighborhood, in Jackson Park.

The popularity of the paintings speaks to the couple's personal popularity but also to the treatment of them by the artists, said Sajet.

"The (Barack) Obama portrait is hung in the gallery of America's presidents," she said. "It's pretty stark how different it is compared to some of the traditional portraits."

Wiley painted the 44th president against and amid a vibrant backdrop of green leaves and symbolic flowers. Sherald painted Michelle Obama in a gray skin tone that references "the first egalitarian portrait of African Americans," in black-and-white photos, Sajet said.

"There are so many hints in those portraits that lead to other conversations about where we are at this particular time in history," she said.

The paintings were a sensation when they were unveiled and even last year, their first full year on view, the portrait gallery drew 2.3 million visitors, compared to 1.2 million in her first year, 2013, said Sajet. "We call it 'the Obama effect,' but I think it was a little bit more than just those pictures," she said. "I think what happened was there was so much interest in them, but there was also an awakening across the country that the portrait gallery exists" — as well as, she said, something of a renaissance taking place in interest in portraiture.

After leaving the Art Institute in August 2021, the portraits will visit the Brooklyn Museum in New York City (August-October), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (November-January 2022), the High Museum of Art in Atlanta (January-March) and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (March-May).

The portrait gallery is still contemplating what to hang in their absence, the director said.

sajohnson@chicagotribune.com
Twitter @StevenKJohnson

Barack and Michelle Obama attend the unveiling of their official portraits at the National Portrait Gallery in 2018.
The official portraits of former President Barack Obama and former first lady Michelle Obama were painted by Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald, respectively, and unveiled in 2018.