

The Obamas Give the White House a Modern Art Makeover

by [Carey Dunne](#) on [October 27, 2015](#)



The Old Family Dining Room of the White House, Feb. 9, 2015, featuring abstract artworks by Robert Rauschenberg and Alma Thomas (Official White House Photo by Amanda Lucidon via [Whitehouse.gov](#))

Since John Adams first took up residence there in 1800, the White House has been adorned with a relatively safe, traditional [collection](#) of art: pastoral landscapes by the likes of [Frederick Childe Hassam](#), [history paintings](#), and, of course, plenty of portraits of dead white men. But the Obamas have shaken it up, adding abstract and modern art to the mix, as the [New York Times](#) reports. Now, the White House art collection includes pieces by Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg, Edward Hopper, Josef Albers, and [Alma Thomas](#).

The Obamas have kept the collection focused on American artists, but updated its aesthetic for the 21st century. Artists that were considered outré just decades ago now have work hanging alongside presidential portraits. “There was discussion about the president and first lady liking more abstract art,” William Allman, the longtime curator of the White House art collection, told the [New York Times](#). “Our collection doesn’t really have any of that.” That the White House collection is just catching up with abstraction is a case study in how long it takes for mainstream establishments to embrace new art movements and styles.

The walls of the Obamas’ private living quarters feature a 1976 painting (“Butterfly”) by Susan Rothenberg that depicts a large, dark painting abstractly depicting a horse, Rothko’s 1955 painting “Red Band,” and a colorful Sam Francis painting titled “White Line.”

In the Old Family Dining Room, used for smaller official dinners, the Obamas removed a couple of stuffy First Lady portraits: A large mirror replaced a portrait of Frances Folsom Cleveland, the wife of President Grover

Cleveland, while a somewhat patriotic 1998 work by Rauschenberg replaced a portrait of a white-gloved Edith Carow Roosevelt, wife of the 26th president. Josef Albers' "Homage to the Square" and "Study for Homage to the Square" now hang on the walls, alongside abstract paintings by African-American expressionist Alma Thomas.

"The recognition of African-American artists is a big piece of [what the Obamas are doing with the White House collection]," Melissa Chiu, the director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, which has lent the Obamas several paintings, told the *Times*. "At many levels, you are seeing a diversification of the selection of artwork and artists that reveals the story of the United States."

Of course, this could all change with the arrival of the next first family. The White House curator's office suggests pieces for display, but POTUS makes the final call on what makes it onto the walls.

h/t [New York Times](#)

[Alma Thomas](#)[Barack Obama](#)[Featured](#)[Mark Rothko](#)[obamas](#)[Robert Rauschenberg](#)[white house art collection](#)