

Michelle Obama redecorated a White House room – and it's much more modern

By [Jura Koncius](#) and [Krissah Thompson](#) February 10

Visitors on the White House public tour Tuesday were surprised to see a side of the mansion previously off limits. The small Old Family Dining Room, just off the State Dining Room, has been refurbished by Michelle Obama in the first major project that will leave her mark on the interiors of the historic building.

Using modern art and design, the first lady has made a bold statement in a room that has been used for private events, including presidential working lunches and special gatherings such as Seders. While retaining many of the Kennedy-era antiques and the glittering 1780 crystal chandelier, the artworks added to the room are contemporary, including original pieces by Robert Rauschenberg, Josef Albers and Anni Albers. One of the most significant additions is a 1966 painting by Alma Thomas, a force in the Washington Color School and the first African-American woman whose art is included in the White House permanent collection.

The room, now a part of the official public tour, “has a more streamlined, cleaner look now,” said William Allman, White House curator. “It’s more like what you would expect at an art gallery.”

Allman said the first lady and the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, which reviews preservation and conservation work at the executive mansion, were comfortable in creating a different style in the room.

The new burgundy window treatments, four gilded bronze sconces, a repainting of the room from yellow to gray, and other refurbishments were paid by the White House Historical Association. One of the major costs was the purchase of Thomas’s piece, “Resurrection,” from a New York gallery last year for \$290,000. According to the White House, no public funds were used for the project, which was five years in the making.

“This is a terrific reflection of what the Obamas are doing in the White House. It is very respectful of the past yet embraces today,” said Margaret Russell, editor-in-chief of Architectural Digest. “The punch of art is just extraordinary. It’s elegant, fresh and full of life.”

Abstract art has always been a favorite of the Obamas. Two paintings by the 20th century modernist Josef Albers — are featured across from a large mirror acquired during a 1902 restoration of the White House by the Roosevelt administration. According to the White House Historical Association, the dining room was probably the space used by newly elected Teddy Roosevelt to host African American educator Booker T. Washington at a landmark 1901 “family dinner” that triggered race-oriented protests.

Other antiques include the 1800 mahogany table and a sideboard that once belonged to Daniel Webster. A hutch is filled with plates from White House china services and the rarely seen collection of 1939 New York World’s Fair china, glassware and a silver tea set.

The historical objects are “mixed in a very appropriate way and a significant way with the 20th century artists,” said White House Historical Association president Stewart McLaurin.

The Obamas are fans of both Thomas and the Albers, whose work they [borrowed in 2010 from the Smithsonian Museums](#) for the White House residence. Now, both artists have a more secure place in the White House collection.

[\[The Obamas' choice of works on loan to White House reflects a discerning eye\]](#)

The three objects by the Albers were gifts of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation. “We decided that if they wanted to borrow two paintings by the Albers, then the White House should own two of the Albers paintings,” said Nicholas Fox Weber, executive director of the foundation. The design of the custom rug is adapted from a 1950 pictorial weaving by Anni Albers, with metallic threads woven in, adding another modern touch to the room.

In recent years, the Old Family Dining Room has been used frequently as a staging area for large-scale entertaining events in the State Dining Room. On those occasions, according to Allman, the table is moved out of the room, the rug is rolled up and the wood floor is covered. It will continue to be used in the same manner.

Until now, Obama’s personal touch on the look of the White House has not been much in evidence. The Obamas, with the help of Michael Smith, their L.A.-based decorator and a member of the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, did give a hint at their sense of style with a [redecoration of the Oval Office in 2010](#), adding cushy sofas, striped wallpaper, a beige palette and a dramatic Oval Office rug, whose design is ringed with weighty quotations.

[\[The Oval Office is redecorated Obama-style\]](#)

Michelle Obama unveiled the newly opened family dining room Tuesday by surprising visitors on the White House tour. In keeping things bipartisan, Jenna Bush Hager — daughter of the White House’s previous occupant, on assignment for the “Today Show” — stood beside the first lady as Obama smiled and said “Surprise!” Both shook hands with visitors.

“It’s a wonderful thing for all the tours and for the building,” said Smith. “It’s great that it really fits in with the whole inclusiveness and the whole inclusive nature of this White House.”

The home and design coverage of Jura Koncius has taken her inside hundreds of homes, from tiny studios in Penn Quarter to country castles in Warrenton. Jura also hosts the Home Front live chat, Thursdays at 11 a.m. ET.

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