

Design at the White House: the creatives working with US Presidents past and present

Interior designers, fashion designers and artists, whose collaborators have included the White House and its residents, with commissions that range from interior refits to presidential portraits

[Pei-Ru Keh](#) 7 days ago



As part of our ongoing celebration of the creative talent in America, which takes shape as the [Wallpaper* USA 300](#), we're throwing the spotlight on the creatives who have found themselves producing work for the most powerful of clients – namely, the White House and the American presidency. Ranging from fashion to art, interior design and architecture, this illustrious group of names is united by their proximity to politics, and have come to represent control, greatness and authority through their work.

Designers, artists and the White House

Tod Williams and Billie Tsien

A render of the Obama Presidential Centre in Jackson Park, Chicago, designed by Tod Williams and Billie Tsien

(Image credit: Obama Foundation)

As the lead architects behind the Obama Presidential Center, the impending home base for the Obama Foundation located on the South Side of Chicago, Tod Williams and Billie Tsien have bucked the tradition of enshrining past achievements and are instead focused on creating a space for story-making. The campus, which is currently under construction and expected to be completed in 2025, encompasses a museum tower, forum building, a library, a public plaza and surrounding landscape that will all be connected below

ground and are individually accessible on the plaza level. The project is realised in partnership with IDEA Architects.

In their own words, the husband and wife duo say: 'We believe that architecture is the coming together of art and use, and can bring a sense of grace to life. The greatest buildings are places, which contribute to more than their particular task by elevating and improving the world. We are deeply moved by the mission of the Obama Foundation and the role the Center can play in empowering that mission. It is a joy, an honour, and a responsibility to create a place that reflects the optimism and integrity of the President and the First Lady.'

Sheila Bridges

(Image credit: Nick Carter)

Interior designer Sheila Bridges has long been known as a creative visionary and design tastemaker. Famed for her Harlem toile, which fuses Black cultural representation with the traditional pastoral themes and illustrative style of toile, Bridges has lived, worked and collaborated with artists, writers, musicians and activists in Harlem, New York for the last 30 years.

It was only apt that she was selected by Vice President Kamala Harris and Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff to

design their official residence, a 33-room home located at One Observatory Circle in Washington D.C. In addition to a neutral colour palette with bold accents sprinkled throughout, a pink library is amongst the key highlights. It's not the first time Bridges has dabbled in politics either. She previously worked on President Bill Clinton's Harlem offices and the Washington D.C. home of a state supreme court justice.

Gabriela Hearst

(Image credit: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

Born in Uruguay, the fashion designer Gabriela Hearst has come to stand for sustainable luxury. Since founding her eponymous label in 2015, Hearst has blazed a trail with her slower-paced, process-driven collections that often take into account the wellbeing of both the individual wearer and the earth as a whole when being conceived. From using innovative materials, like aloe-treated linen because it absorbs less water than cotton, and deadstock fabrics, to partnering with non-profit organisations like Save the Children and pledging substantive funds in disaster relief, Hearst's ethical stance has only solidified over the years.

For President Joe Biden's inauguration in 2021, Dr Jill Biden donned a sleek, ivory coat dress by Hearst for the evening festivities. Embroidered with an organic pattern of flowers,

representing each state and territory within the country, along the hemline and side seams, the cashmere coat was designed as a symbol of unity. The First Lady has continued to wear Hearst's designs ever since.

Christopher John Rogers

(Image credit: @christopherjohnrogers)

Much has been made of [Christopher John Rogers](#)' ascent. In 2018, while still working full-time at Diane von Furstenberg, Rogers secured a slot on the official New York Fashion Week calendar under his own name. His S/S 2020 runway debut garnered him the 2019 CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund prize and a mentorship with Tory Burch CEO Pierre-Yves Roussel, and the rest, as can be said, is history.

Rogers' aesthetic is rooted in his childhood in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and the pride and self-respect that's synonymous with donning your Sunday best for church. Those sentiments have been translated into an iridescent cyan pantsuit worn by Michelle Obama in 2019 while promoting her book 'Becoming', and most recently in a vibrant all-purple coat and dress for Vice President Kamala Harris for the presidential inauguration of Joe Biden in 2021. Fun and flamboyant, yet exuding a composure that puts the 'p' back into power-dressing, Rogers effortlessly proves the point that you can show off personality while still commanding the

room.

Amy Sherald

(Image credit: SAUL LOEB/AFP via Getty Images)

The American painter Amy Sherald was born in Columbus, Georgia. Through her intimate portraits and captivating depictions of Black American life, Sherald has challenged the conventional depictions of skin colour and race, while engaging in the history of photography and portraiture, thus inviting viewers to engage in a complex debate about race and representation.

There have been many firsts in Sherald's career – in 2016, she was the first woman and African American to ever receive the grand prize in the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition from the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. She also received the 2017 Anonymous Was A Woman award and the 2019 Smithsonian Ingenuity Award. Sherald is best known for her portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama for the National Portrait Gallery. In 2018, Sherald was selected by First Lady Michelle Obama to paint her portrait as an official commission for the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. Realised in her signature grayscale, Sherald's depiction of Obama is a symbol of success for generations of Black women to come.

Kehinde Wiley

(Image credit: Scott Olson/Getty Images)

Born in Los Angeles and based in New York City, Kehinde Wiley's unique approach to portraiture stems from co-opting the traditions and tropes of historical portraits and subverting them with references to the Black experience. In 2018, Wiley (along with Amy Sherald) became the first African-American artist to paint the official U.S. Presidential portrait of President Barack Obama for the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery.

Selected by Obama himself, Wiley's depiction of the president intentionally portrays him accessibly positioned leaning forward, dressed with an unbuttoned collar and set against a vibrant, floral backdrop festooned with jasmine flowers that nod to Obama's Hawaiian roots, chrysanthemums which are the official flower of Chicago where he served as Illinois state senator, and African blue lilies that pay homage to his father's Kenyan heritage.

A major exhibition of new work '[An Archaeology of Silence](#)', in which Wiley conveys the brutality, humanity, injustice, grief and grace that the Black community has endured, is currently on view at the de Young Museum, San Francisco, and set to travel around the United States to Miami, Houston and Minneapolis over the next two years.

Michael S. Smith

The Oval Office at the White House, photographed in 2010 after Michael S. Smith's redesign

(Image credit: JEWEL SAMAD/AFP via Getty Images)

The interior designer Michael S. Smith is known for championing a seamless blend of European classicism and American modernism. Since launching his namesake design firm in 1990, he has crafted residential, commercial and hospitality spaces across the country and helmed his own line of furniture and fabrics, Jasper, which is available through multi-line showrooms around the world.

In 2010, Smith was selected by President Barack Obama to renovate the Oval Office and White House, which he did over the next eight years. Charged with balancing the building's rich history with the tastes of a progressive couple and young family, Smith deployed a palette of neutrals in the Oval Office while adding objects of significance, such as Native American pottery and a rug embroidered with quotes from five celebrated Americans, including Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Lincoln. He also worked with the Obamas to bring in art works by pioneering Black artists like Jacob Lawrence, Alma Thomas and Glen Ligon, displayed throughout the house, while making its interiors hospitable to the Obamas young children.

Jason Wu

U.S. President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama (wearing Jason Wu) dance at the Commander in Chief Inaugural Ball at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center on January 21, 2013 in Washington, DC. President Obama was sworn in for his second term earlier in the day

(Image credit: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

When the Taiwanese-American fashion designer Jason Wu began dressing the then-First Lady Michelle Obama in 2009, little did he know that it was to turn into a lasting relationship. Obama had been a customer of Wu's for a few years before he was asked to create custom pieces for her. That led to a call to design her dress for President Barack Obama's inaugural ball in 2009; he created a white, one-shouldered gown covered in organza flowers, and a slew of equally memorable looks ever since.

During Obama's presidency, Mrs Obama returned to Wu time and time again - a ruby red chiffon and velvet gown for Obama's second inauguration, a navy lace dress for his farewell speech and a light blue off-the-shoulder confection for her portrait in the White House, painted by artist Sharon Sprung.