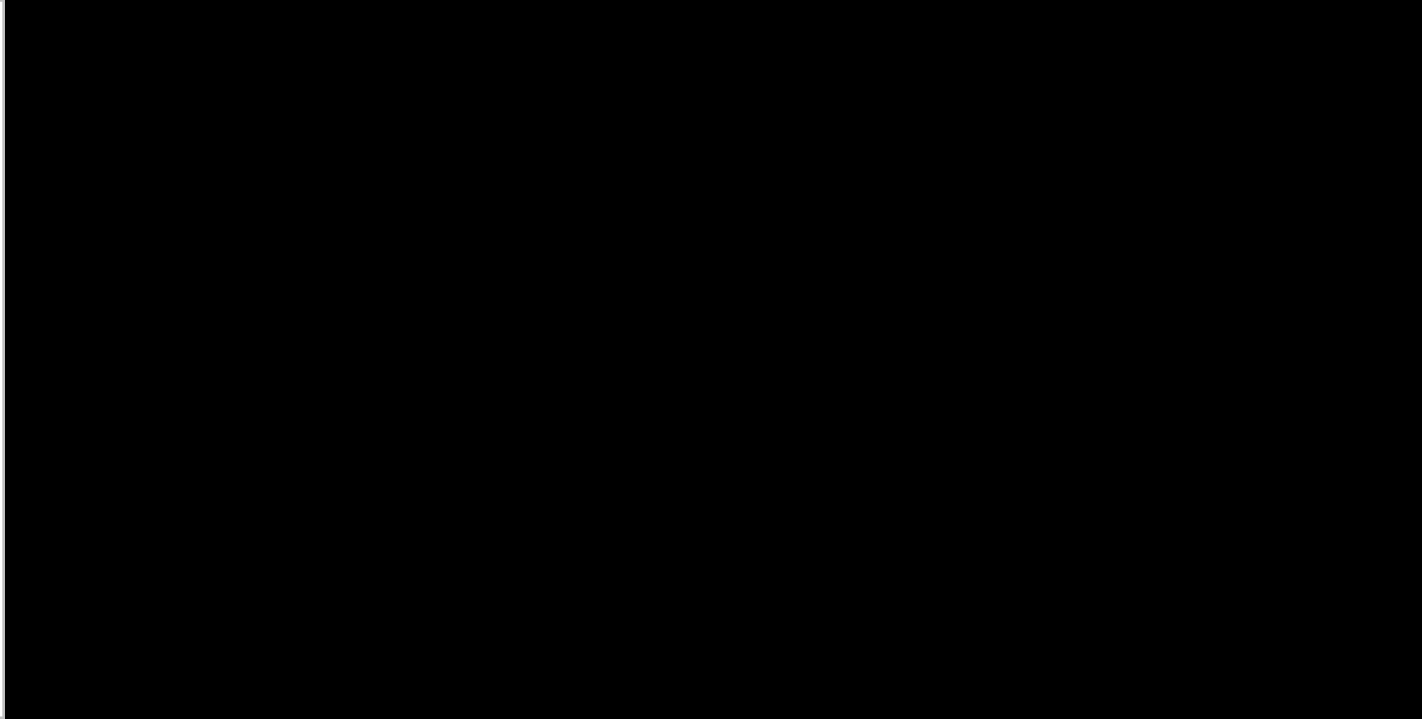
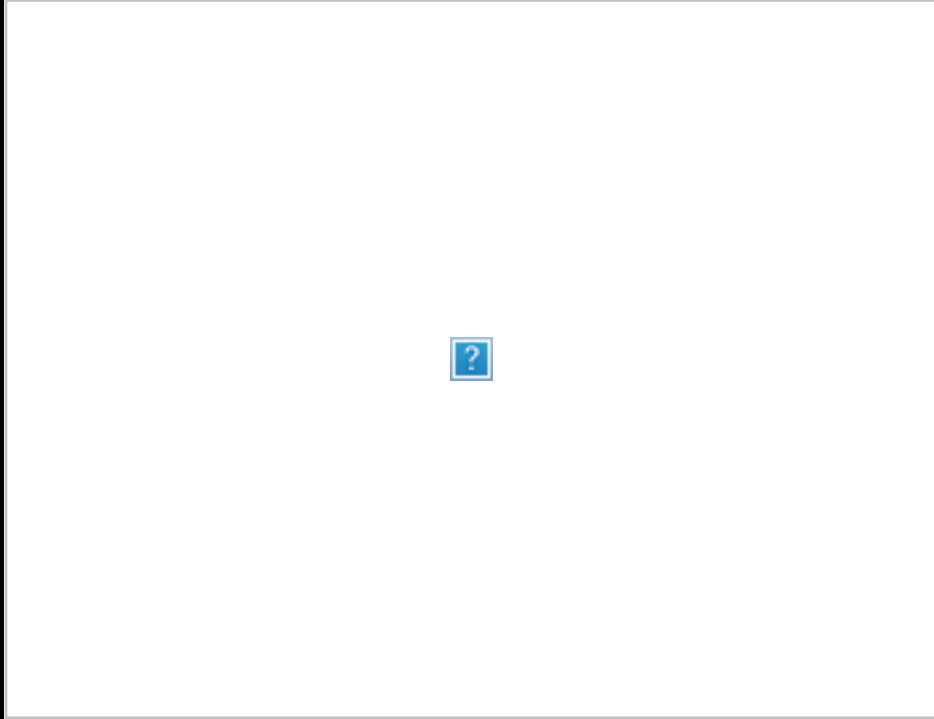
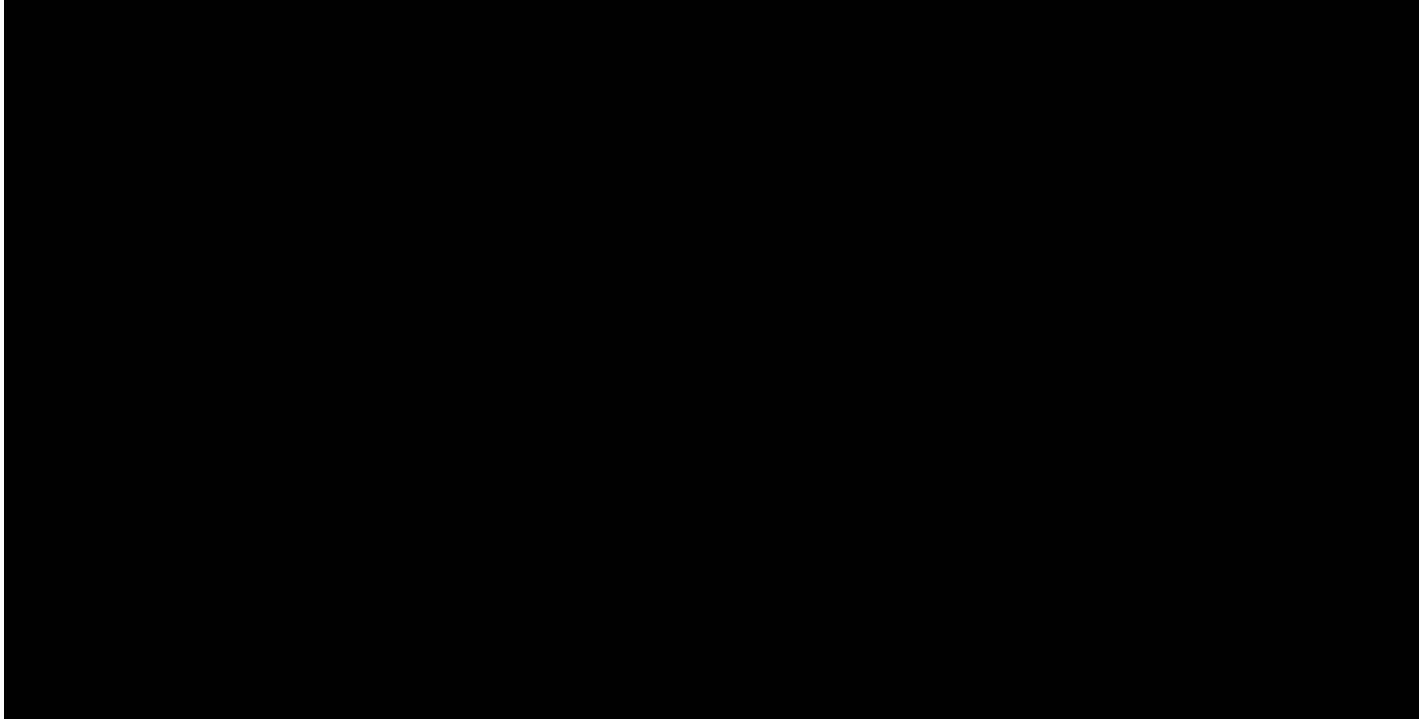


ART

## On Loan to the White House: Art to Ponder



Gallery



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With the help of museum curators, first lady Michelle Obama has chosen 45 pieces of art to grace the walls of the White House private residence and offices.

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By Blake Gopnik  
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Wednesday, October 7, 2009

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Any decent art historian would tell you that politics lurk just beneath the surface of most art, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting owners and viewers. Tuesday, the White House released a list of works it has borrowed for its walls, and most must have seemed tame when they were chosen. Those works may yet do some pouncing.

Working with curators at the White House and at the local museums that made loans, the First Couple selected some works whose politics are explicit, and mild. They seem to redress past imbalances in the nation's sense of its own art. There are works by African Americans (seven paintings from three artists, out of a total of 47) and by Native Americans (four artists contributed three modern ceramics and one abstract painting). There are also 12 paintings *depicting* Native Americans, by the 19th-century ethnographic artist George Catlin.

But there are still only six works by women, vs. 41 by men. And there are no works at all by Latinos. (A work by the deceased Cuban American artist Félix González-Torres would have filled the gap perfectly, and added a nod to the country's gay culture. The Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum has one that could have been borrowed.)

The politics in at least one of the new choices is strong and direct as could be. "Black Like Me #2," on loan from the Hirshhorn, is by Glenn Ligon, one of the best African American artists working today, and also one of the smartest and toughest. His loaner work is a tall white canvas covered from top to bottom with the repeated phrase "All traces of the Griffin I had been were wiped from existence," a quote from the 1961 book the picture's named after, "Black Like Me," in which the white journalist John Howard Griffin made himself look black and reported on the troubles that befell him. Just as Griffin disappeared into blackness, and into the obliterations of American racism, so Ligon's stenciled text disappears into an ever thicker mess of black pigment as it descends the canvas, until at the bottom it's close to illegible.

White House curator William Allman speaks of the Obamas' borrowings as expressing "probably more interest in truly modern art" than was seen in previous administrations. But the work by Ligon takes them way beyond the modern, to territory on the vexing cutting edge of the contemporary. Hirshhorn curator Valerie Fletcher says she started out making suggestions of works that were "pretty conservative," but when those were rejected, she proposed works she saw as "way out in left field," such as the Ligon. When they were accepted, she says, "I was quite surprised, and impressed."

Some of the Obamas' choices do seem less challenging, at least on the surface. They borrowed sweet bronzes of dancers by Edgar Degas, some peaceable still lifes from the 1950s by the Italian Giorgio Morandi and various attractive abstractions by art stars such as Mark Rothko and Josef Albers, as well as works by lesser-knowns such as Edward Corbett, who worked in Washington during the '60s.

But once you've seen the Ligon, it's easy to read vexed meaning into almost every one of them.

In the late 19th century, when Degas made his sculptures of nude "dancers," such women were considered one step up from prostitutes -- the first, perhaps, to grace the walls of the executive branch. (Its sofas are another matter.) And it has never been clear if Degas was ogling or even manhandling these girls, like the other toffs who went to the ballet, or if his art views them with sympathy. In fact, it's not clear if Degas even thought these sculptures counted as art. He modeled them in wax, for his personal use, and they were cast in bronze only after his death.

Then there are Morandi's mild-mannered paintings of bottles and jars. Those shouldn't raise an eyebrow . . . unless a viewer cares that they were painted by a once-proud fascist who'd sucked up to Benito Mussolini. It's not far-fetched to see something fiercely reactionary in Morandi's work. Even the fiercest Blue Dogs might wince.

Abstractions from the 1950s and '60s by Rothko and Albers may seem like safer choices, though both would have voted *way* to the left of any current Democrat. (What would the House Un-American Activities Committee have made of Rothko's flaglike painting titled "Red Band"?) But the "abstract" painting by the almost-unknown Edward Corbett tells a story that isn't about decorating walls. It is titled "Washington, D.C. November 1963 III," which connects it to the Kennedy assassination, which makes it read, pretty clearly, as a black road with its curbs drenched in red. A fine homage to an Obama role model, but grimmer and more weighty than most presidential art.

A surprisingly sober, even dour thread runs through many of these loans. If, in these times of war and recession, the Obamas set out to emphasize their gravitas, they couldn't have done better. Winslow Homer, the classic American artist, made lots of cheery pictures. But the one chosen for the presidential residence is "Sunset," from 1875, a dark and gorgeous little image of the light failing as a lone man struggles to pull a boat from the water. Obama must feel that way sometimes.

A great 1970 work by Jasper Johns is nothing more than the numbers zero through nine, piled on top of each other and cast in funereal lead. Existence is just one thing after another, and none of it adds up to much -- shades of Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" or his famous existentialist pronouncement "I can't go on, I'll go on."

It's not hard to see the same spirit in a classic -- and classically cryptic -- text painting done in 1983 by the Los Angeles artist Ed Ruscha, titled "I Think I'll . . .". It's a moody, Rothko-esque red field, bearing the all-capped words "I THINK MAYBE I'LL . . ." and "MAYBE . . . YES . . ." and "ON SECOND THOUGHT" and "MAYBE . . . NO . . ." Susan Rothenberg's 1976 painting of a lone dark horse, crossed out with a big X -- which, at the White House, might easily read as the mark of a voter -- is hardly more hopeful.

Even the most positive of gestures made by the new White House loans can have complications wrapped around them. One of the African Americans with pictures in the Obamas' residence is William H. Johnson, a sophisticated artist who trained in Scandinavia in the 1930s. After returning to the United States to bide out World War II, however, he made pictures of Harlem that can seem falsely naive, as though buying into then-standard notions that "genuine" black culture was "simpler" than the culture of white Europeans. Why did one of the new White House Johnsons, showing impoverished parents and children in a modest room, get titled "Folk Family"? Did being poor and black make you more "folky" than other Americans?

As for the Catlin Indians, should we think of them as a positive nod to the original peoples of this continent, or are they all about a white colonialist gawking at exotic conquered peoples? Paul Chaat Smith, who curates contemporary art at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, says that even he and other native peoples aren't sure of the answer. "They're not us, they're not for us," he says, but they're also "part of how we think about ourselves."

In today's art world, these kinds of debates and complexities are where you want to sink your teeth. In those terms, the Obamas could hardly have done a better job of choosing their loans.

Whether the whole electorate feels that way about them is another matter. Has Obama the art lover trumped Obama the skilled politician?