America’s Presidents

The Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery has collected portraits of American presidents since its creation in 1962. It holds the only national collection of presidential portraits outside the White House.

“America’s Presidents” lies at the heart of the Portrait Gallery’s mission to tell the American story through the significant people who have shaped it. The recently restored museum and exhibition presents an enhanced and extended display of the images of 43 presidents of the United States, including Gilbert Stuart’s iconic “Lansdowne” portrait of George Washington.

The exhibition also includes the “cracked-plate” portrait of Abraham Lincoln by Alexander Gardner and whimsical and satirical sculptures of Presidents Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, Richard Nixon and George H.W. Bush by noted caricaturist Pat Oliphant.

Presidents Washington, Andrew Jackson, Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan are given expanded attention through the addition of more works because of their significant impact on the office of the presidency.

A video in the exhibition includes excerpts from the speeches of Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Gerald Ford, Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. In another space, visitors may listen to several of Roosevelt’s fireside chats.

The portraits of George W. Bush by John Anderson and Laura Bush by Aleksander Titovets are the most recent commissioned works for the museum. Commissioned portraits for Barack and Michele Obama will be added when he leaves the presidency.

In 2001, the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation of Las Vegas donated $30 million for the National Portrait Gallery to purchase, tour and display the “Lansdowne” portrait of Washington. The painting, regarded by contemporaries as the best and truest image of America’s first president conveys the stature Washington wanted associated with the office. Considered one of the greatest visual documents of the founding of the nation, the portrait is on permanent view in the exhibition.

The National Portrait Gallery is located at Eighth and F streets N.W., Washington, D.C. Smithsonian information: (202) 633-1000; website: npg.si.edu.