

A Portrait of Amy Sherald

The portraitist went from near obscurity to fame via Michelle Obama's official commission

By [Elizabeth Fishel](#) | June 18, 2025 | [Living](#)

At the recent San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) show of Amy Sherald's stunning, original and nearly life-size portraits, most of the paintings were hung at eye level so the viewer is locking eyes with the subjects, looking straight into their hearts and souls. Strikingly, every face being observed is Black, but each image is rendered in the grey tones or "greyscale" that Sherald is known for; her choice to take the focus off race and put it on the individual's interior life.



Artist Amy Sherald at the Met Gala, 2025 | Credit: Getty

Among the everyday subjects are swimmers, construction workers, church ladies, children and teens — plus, most famously, her 6-foot high, 2018 official [portrait of Michelle Obama](#), wearing a tender, direct expression and a cascading white dress with a geometric print that recalls the abstract patterns of the famous 19th century Gee's Bend quilts, a nod to the First Lady's Black heritage. The background is a serene robin's egg blue.

"With Michelle Obama, it was a joyful, collaborative process. She's authentic and grounded, and I wanted the portrait to reflect that."

The portrait of Michelle Obama has traveled the country to huge crowds on its own and is one of the keystones of the new exhibit [more on that below] along with a portrait memorializing [Breonna Taylor](#), the 26-year-old medical worker who was killed by a Louisville, Kentucky, police officer in a no-warrant break-in. The full-size re-creation of this important figure of the Black Lives Matter movement was commissioned by [Vanity Fair](#) for its September 2020 cover. The portrait shows Taylor in all

her youth and vulnerability wearing a loose-fitting turquoise dress.

Amy Sherald is 52, lively, fashionable and authentic. She grew up in a middle-class household in Columbus, Georgia; her father was a dentist who hoped she'd take over his practice and her mother despaired when her daughter chose to be an artist. She did not have much exposure to art and artists and certainly not to those who shared her background. On an early school trip to the Columbus Museum of Art, she saw her first portrait of a Black figure. It was in a painting called "Object Permanence" in which the white artist, Bo Bartlett, pictured himself as a Black man, wearing a tool belt and standing with his family in front of their brick house.

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It was an a-ha moment for Sherald, yet it would take years of studies at Clark Atlanta University and later at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore before she had the confidence to begin painting her own portraits of everyday Black people. Much later, she would see herself in a tradition of Black painters like Kerry James Marshall and Kara Walker as well as white figurative painters like Andrew Wyeth and Edward Hopper.



Former First Lady Michelle Obama | Credit: National Portrait Gallery
Smithsonian Institution © Amy Sherald