

How Joe Biden uses White House art to send a message to Americans

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'It can't just be a coincidence': How Biden is using artwork to underscore his message to America

Michael Collins, USA TODAY

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Getty Images; Andrew Harnik, AP

WASHINGTON – In Joe Biden's White House, political messaging is not just an art.

Sometimes the art is the message. And it's often hiding in plain sight.

Look closely at the video posted on the official @potus Instagram account on March 18. Biden talks about how his administration is about to achieve an important milestone in the fight against COVID-19, with 100 million vaccine shots injected into the arms of Americans. In the background, hanging on the wall just above Biden's shoulder, is a portrait of James Monroe.

Most students of history know Monroe as the nation's fifth president. What they may not know: As governor of Virginia, Monroe imposed a quarantine and took other steps that prevented an outbreak of yellow fever from spreading. His actions are credited with heading off a major health crisis and offer signs of hope for Americans battling a deadly pandemic 200 years later.

Biden has made artwork a part of his message numerous other times.

On St. Patrick's Day, March 17, the White House posted an Instagram message from Biden, who often talks fondly of his Irish heritage. In the photo, Biden is sporting what he calls "my lucky tie" – a shamrock-patterned carbhat accented with a live shamrock carefully tucked into the breast pocket of his navy suit. Peering over his left shoulder is a bronze bust of Robert F. Kennedy, a former senator, attorney general and beloved member of one of the country's most prominent Irish American families.

A month earlier, on Feb. 18, another Instagram photo showed the Democratic president calling Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, to discuss how the federal government can help the state recover from a deadly winter storm. On the wall behind Biden and featured prominently in the photo: Artist Theobald Chartran's painting of the signing of the peace protocol that ended the Spanish-American War.

"It can't just be a coincidence," said Des Moines art gallery owner Liz Lidgett, who spotted the White House's custom of incorporating artwork into the president's message.

"To me," Lidgett said, "this painting is almost saying, 'I'm asking for unity here. And I don't care who you voted for. I'm your president, and I'm going to make sure I send you help.'"

When Biden speaks, Americans should pay attention not only to what he says, but what's in the background, said William Bike, a historian, communications expert and author of a how-to guide on political campaigning.

"There's always something going on behind the scenes," Bike said.

President Joe Biden's Oval Office: A bust of Cesar Chavez, painting of Roosevelt and more



Politics is ‘drama’

The White House did not respond to inquiries about how it uses artwork to reinforce the president’s message, who decides which pieces will be featured and how much research is involved.

But politicians have long recognized the power of art – be it a painting, mosaic, sculpture or even music – as a messaging tool.

“Politics is in a sense drama. It’s a communication of values,” said Usha Haley, a professor of management at Wichita State University who has researched the use of art in politics and propaganda. “There is a narrative to politics, and, obviously, Biden is sensitive to it.”

Politics is often interpreted through symbols, and art is highly symbolic, Haley said.



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President Biden changes decor in Oval Office to include bust of César Chávez and portraits(1:05)

Biden changes decor in Oval Office to include busts of César Chávez and Eleanor Roosevelt plus portraits of Franklin Roosevelt and Benjamin Franklin.

USA TODAY

Alexander the Great used artwork as a way to symbolize political power and burnish his image as a war hero. He often personally picked the artists to paint his likeness. Modern-day politicians in the United States often build flashy logos or campaign ads around images of the American flag, the bald eagle or other patriotic emblems.

It’s an effective way to communicate because “we’re a graphic-oriented society,” Bike said. “We look more than we read, whether we’re looking at our phones or we’re looking at our computers or our TV.”

When you're president, there is no shortage of artwork at your disposal. The White House's permanent art collection has more than 500 pieces. Presidents also can – and often do – borrow pieces from the Smithsonian Institution's vast collection to hang on the walls of the Oval Office or other White House rooms. Museums, galleries and private collectors also loan out pieces for display in the presidential mansion.

“If you are president and you want something in the Oval Office or in the White House someplace, no one is going to say no,” Bike said.



'The Bronco Buster' and Winston Churchill

A president's choice of artwork often reflects his personal taste, personality or place in history.

John F. Kennedy, a naval officer who enjoyed sailing Nantucket Sound, positioned a model of a ship on the credenza behind his desk in the Oval Office. Lyndon Johnson displayed Frederic Remington's sculpture The Bronco Buster to reinforce his image as a macho Texan.

Barack Obama, the nation's first Black president, kept busts of Abraham Lincoln and civil-rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in the Oval Office. George W. Bush, who led the nation through two wars, exhibited a bust of Winston Churchill that was a gift from Tony Blair, the British prime minister at the time.



President Barack Obama meets with Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in the Oval Office in 2013, flanked by busts of Martin Luther King Jr. and Abraham Lincoln.

Pablo Martinez Monsivais, AP

The Churchill bust “not only bolstered George W. Bush’s persona as a war-time leader but was also indicative of the alliance between the United States and the United Kingdom,” Bike said.

Sometimes, the president’s art selection triggers a national conversation. And, sometimes, that’s the point.

Ronald Reagan, who was elected on a promise of restoring the American economy and reining in the federal government, caused a stir when he placed a portrait of Calvin Coolidge in the White House Cabinet Room. Coolidge not only cut spending, he also lowered taxes and paid down the national debt – all of which appealed to Reagan’s “the government is the problem” mantra.

Still, “for Reagan to choose Calvin Coolidge, who was kind of thought of as a rather pedantic, old-fashioned, didn’t-really-do-much president, that raised a lot of eyebrows and got a lot of discussion,” Bike said. “And that’s exactly what the Reagan administration wanted. They wanted to make a clear break from the Democratic policies of the last 50 years and show that Reagan was going to take us back to an earlier time.”



President Donald Trump pauses while speaking during a meeting with Romanian President Klaus Iohannis in the Oval Office of the White House, Tuesday, Aug. 20, 2019, in Washington.

Alex Brandon, AP

Donald Trump, who never held public office before he was elected president and saw himself as an outsider fighting the establishment, was fascinated by another champion of the common man, Andrew Jackson. Trump hung a portrait of Jackson in a place of honor high on the Oval Office wall and boasted to visitors that he was sometimes compared to Old Hickory.

Some historians, however, dismissed the parallels between the two men and pointed out an ugly part of Jackson's legacy: His removal of Native Americans from their land in a bloody campaign that came to be known as the Trail of Tears.

'Open our souls': Biden urges shaken nation to regain its footing in wake of divisive president



'A wealth of history' in Oval Office

As a candidate, Biden vowed he would have an inclusive administration that would look like America. That promise is reflected not only in the diverse Cabinet he selected after taking office, but also in the artwork has chosen for the Oval Office.

Down came Trump's prized portrait of Jackson. Up went a painting of Benjamin Franklin, a publisher, statesman, author and inventor, in a nod to Biden's belief in science.

Hanging next to each other as a symbol of unity are portraits of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, political rivals with conflicting worldviews and differing philosophies who, under the guidance of George Washington, still managed to work toward the common good.

Scattered through Biden's Oval Office are busts of Robert Kennedy, civil-rights icon Rosa Parks, labor leader César Chávez and the ahead-of-her-time first lady Eleanor Roosevelt.



LEFT: The Oval Office of the White House is newly redecorated for the first day of President Joe Biden's administration including a bust of civil rights leader Rosa Parks. RIGHT: A sculpture of Latino American civil rights and labor leader Cesar Chavez. ALEX BRANDON, AP; EVAN VUCCI, AP

“He was incredibly thoughtful about selecting people, men and women of different races, ethnicities, just different backgrounds,” Lidgett said. “It’s almost like there are people with a wealth of history and knowledge and experience supporting him there in the Oval Office.”

Biden was using artwork to make a statement even before he took office.

The night before his inauguration, Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris headed to the National Mall with their spouses for a solemn memorial service in honor of Americans who died from COVID-19. In a visual memorial to the lives lost, 400 lamps lined the north and south sides of the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool. As evening fell, they were illuminated, becoming beacons of light in the darkness.

“To heal,” Biden said, “we must remember.”

For the inauguration, the new first lady, Jill Biden, selected an oil painting called Landscape with Rainbow to be displayed in the Capitol Rotunda. The painting, from 1859, shows a scene with a rainbow arching high across pastureland and a young couple walking toward a house at the rainbow’s end. The artist, Robert Seldon Duncanson, was the nation’s best-known Black painter in the years surrounding the Civil War, according to the Smithsonian.

The painting was Duncanson’s vision for a future of peace and prosperity regardless of race – and a powerful message for an administration advocating unity and inclusion.

Rainbows can mean renewal and rebirth after a storm, Lidgett said, but in modern times also have been adopted as a symbol of diversity and pride by the LGBTQ community and communities of color.



Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo, presents a painting to President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden, as Vice President Kamala Harris and Doug Emhoff look...
Pool photo by Win McNamee

That obviously was not lost on the Bidens, Lidgett said.

“Through that artwork, they were saying those communities were welcome in the Capitol and in the administration,” she said.

Biden and his team have been surprisingly disciplined at staying on message and especially smart in their choices of artwork to reinforce their message, Bike said.

Among presidents, Kennedy and Reagan were the best at using artwork as a communications device, Bike said.

“Biden, to my surprise, in a lot of ways has really shown that he has been in their class,” he said.

Michael Collins covers the White House. Follow him on Twitter @mcollinsNEWS.

'Diplomacy is back': Biden promises to restore ties with allies in dramatic foreign policy shift

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From Dr. Seuss to Mr. Potato Head, Biden steers clear of polarizing culture wars

Michael Collins, USA TODAY

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Illustration: Andrea Brunty, USA TODAY Network, and Getty Images, AP

WASHINGTON – The culture warriors keep knocking on the White House doors, but President [Joe Biden](#) seldom answers.

When the Vatican announced last month the Catholic Church wouldn't bless [same-sex unions](#), the White House dodged when asked for a response from Biden, the nation's second Catholic president and a gay rights supporter who [officiated at a wedding of two men](#) five years ago.

“I don't think he has a personal response to the Vatican,” White House press secretary [Jen Psaki](#) said during a briefing that day. Psaki reaffirmed the president's support of same-sex unions: “He's long had that position.”

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