

Presidential preferences

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The inauguration next week of Barack Obama as the 44th US president will bring historic change to the White House. But the porticoed building that serves as an office, private home and official ceremony venue for the first family is in line for much more than different occupants.

As soon as the new president is sworn in, the 208-year-old executive mansion – set between Lafayette Square and The Ellipse in Washington, DC – will start to receive a makeover that could stretch from the Entrance Hall to the Lincoln Bedroom. Like the selection of cabinet positions and the handing-off of state secrets, an overhaul of the White House decor has long been a principal part of the orderly transition of power.

“It may not be the most crucial element of a new president’s agenda,” says historian William Seale, who has studied and published on the White House for more than 20 years. “Yet you can be sure it will be among the most observed and scrutinised things the incoming first family will do.”

Obama’s transition team has not responded to inquiries about his design plans and there’s no official word yet as to who will oversee the enormous task of redecorating any or all of the building’s 132 rooms. But presidential historians, White House observers and veteran interior designers say there is little doubt that the president-elect, his wife, Michelle, and his two daughters, Sasha and Malia, have already discussed how they will put their personal stamp on America’s most famous dwelling.

“It probably started as soon as they got their first glimpse of their new house,” says Kaki Hockersmith, who presided over an extensive renovation of the building as Bill Clinton’s interior decorator, redoing more than 25 rooms.

As per tradition, the Obamas visited outgoing president George W. Bush and his wife, Laura, a few days after the November election (right) and, while the two men talked policy, the two women did a full tour of the house. This is when the outgoing first lady typically explains the history of all the rooms and spaces and how they are used but Laura Bush said she also made a point of showing Michelle how much closet space she would have and letting Sasha and Malia jump on the beds that will soon be theirs. The Obamas would also receive transition books prepared by the White House usher, listing available furnishings from the more than 40,000 pieces in the White House collection.



“That’s when you get the first real sense of the rich history and majesty of the place [and] when you start to visualise how you transform this house into your home,” says Hockersmith, a former member of the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, a group formed in 1964 that includes the White House curator and the National Gallery of Art director. “You quickly realise what a daunting task the whole thing is.”

But, since 1800, when John Adams moved into a half-finished executive mansion, new presidents and their families have been eagerly carving out their own legacy of style at the White House.

In 1817, for example, when James Monroe and his wife, Elizabeth, moved in, they installed more than 50 pieces of carved and gilded French Empire furniture by Parisian cabinetmaker Pierre-Antoine Bellangé, whose pieces also graced the royal palaces in France. (The president had developed a taste for such decoration while serving as US ambassador to France in the late 1700s.)

In 1901, when Theodore Roosevelt took office, he and his wife, Edith, found the accommodation too cramped and antiquated so they quickly hired prominent architects McKim, Mead & White to supervise an expansion and renovation that forced them out of the space for six months. A west wing was added, along with a tennis court; the east wing was restored to its Federal style; and there were new colonial revival interiors influenced by the late-18th-century Scottish designer Robert Adam.

John and Jacqueline Kennedy's famous refurbishment of the White House in the 1960s meanwhile included extensive efforts to locate authentic antiques associated with the house and its history. The first lady enlisted the help of Dorothy May "Sister" Parish, a noted US decorator, to add some Federal-era style and later appointed Henry DuPont, a well-connected collector of Americana, and Stéphane Boudin, a respected Parisian designer for the House of Jansen, to help acquire pieces from donors and add more rigour and sophistication to the decorating.



Nancy Reagan also set forth upon a big renovation shortly after her husband took office in 1981, appointing Ted Graber, a Beverly Hills, California, decorator popular with west coast celebrities, to help. Several rooms were overhauled, including all of the second and third floors and the press briefing room. A closet was converted into a beauty parlour and a dressing room, done in shades of salmon, and the west bedroom became a small gymnasium. New decorative touches included specially ordered hand-painted wallpaper depicting Chinese birds in the master bedroom and the installation of Reagan family furniture in the president's study.



During the current president's two terms, the Lincoln Bedroom, a sitting room, the Cabinet Room and the Green Room were refurbished or redecorated and there has been

increased emphasis on energy efficiency, with the installation of compact fluorescent light bulbs, low-water-consumption toilets and faucets and LED lights for the house's exterior. This month Laura Bush also introduced new formal china with a price tag of about \$500,000.

"The job of redecorating the White House falls to the first lady and many, like Jackie Kennedy and Nancy Reagan, didn't want to merely redecorate but to restore the White House to a grander, more authentic period look," says Carl Sferrazza Anthony, the historian of the National First Ladies' Library. "The first lady supervises everything from paint jobs and acquiring new furniture to wall hangings and bedding."



Costs are covered by several sources, including the US Congress, which has appropriated \$1.6m a year for repair and restoration of the White House, including \$100,000 every four years to spend on the private quarters. Sometimes friends and supporters make private donations and it is not uncommon for first families to pay for some things themselves. In addition, the White House Historical Association, a non-profit educational institution, provides money for preservation from two sources of income – the \$33.8m White House Endowment Trust, which is used to refurbish public rooms and pay for conservation, and the \$6m White House Acquisition Trust, which is used to acquire fine and decorative arts for the permanent collection.

The president and the first lady typically concentrate their efforts on the living quarters, which comprise 14 rooms, seven bathrooms and east and west sitting rooms on the second floor. At their disposal are vast amounts of furniture and objects dating back to the first days of the White House, as well as nearly 500 paintings, sculptures and drawings, including more modern ones by Henry Tanner, the first black painter represented in the collection, and by Georgia O'Keeffe, the first woman, according to the mansion's curator, Bill Altman. New occupants have a surprising amount of freedom although changes to the appearance of some rooms does require consultation with the Committee for the Preservation of the White House.

Though few details have yet emerged as to how the Obamas will outfit their new home, presidential historians suggest the family is unlikely to make any radical changes. "Redecorating the White House is ultimately a political endeavour so hanging new drapes isn't high on the Obamas' list of priorities right now," says R Louis Bofferding, a design historian and furniture dealer. "America is in two wars and the economy is at levels not seen since the Great Depression, so you're not likely to see expensive, bold gestures in White House decor at this juncture."

Historian William Seale, author of *The President's House*, agrees that measuring the public's mood is critical. He points to Abraham Lincoln, who took office in 1861 as the country was approaching civil war and so left the decorating to his wife, Mary Todd, with a budget of \$20,000. When two more appropriations were needed a few months later to pay for a French porcelain dinner and dessert service, carpets, French wallpapers, draperies and an ornate mahogany bedroom suite that included the Lincoln Bed, "Lincoln was furious", says Seale. "He understood that a country gripped by upheaval wouldn't find these kinds of luxury expenditures amusing."

Other first families have indeed faced criticism for their design choices. John Quincy Adams was berated for using government funds to buy a billiard table; Jackie Kennedy's look was deemed too French by many on Capitol Hill; and Nancy Reagan drew controversy after spending \$210,399 on scarlet, cream and gold china at a time when the US was in recession.

“How the Obamas furnish the White House will make headlines,” Anthony says. And “history will record how they perform as stewards of a home that is essentially America’s museum.”

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