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## The Story Behind Obama's Gift

by [Claire Howorth](#)  
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**The president staged a diplomatic coup when he gave David Cameron an Ed Ruscha lithograph, worth an estimated \$7,000. Claire Howorth on how the piece was chosen—and what it means for contemporary art.**

The president and first lady have been criticized for their gift-giving acumen, or lack thereof, with last year's exchange with Gordon Brown a debacle and the show tunes-packed iPod for Queen Elizabeth only slightly better. But in a turnaround, curators and critics say this week's exchange of artwork between Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron established new heights of greatness in meaningful diplomatic gift-giving.

Obama gave Cameron "Column With Speed Lines," a patriotically colored lithograph by Nebraska-born painter Ed Ruscha, who is considered a quintessential Los Angeles artist and is, as the official White House statement noted, "one of the most influential American artists of the 20th century Pop art movement." Cameron, across the ocean, selected Ben Eine's edgy, electric "Twenty First Century City" for the Obamas. (The White House declined to comment for this article, aside from pasting the official gift list to the Camerons into an email: the Ruscha print from the president, of course, and the first lady's gift to Mrs. Cameron, "a gift basket including a baby blanket. Gifts for the children include a silver charm necklace featuring eight White House charms for Nancy and a custom DC United Soccer jersey for Elwen.")



David Cameron & Barack Obama  
(Charles Dharapak / AP Photo)

"The exchange indicates a new moment for contemporary art. It signifies that art is a currency for gratitude and esteem, and that these works are measurable national treasures."

The story of how the particular exchange came about is a bit curious. The two heads of state must have agreed in advance to give each other paintings, but the fact that they chose these two works shows real deliberation. "They could have selected any number of abstract works that aren't so loaded, or thought-provoking," says Amy Cappellazzo, a deputy chairman of Christie's and the auction house's international co-head of contemporary art.

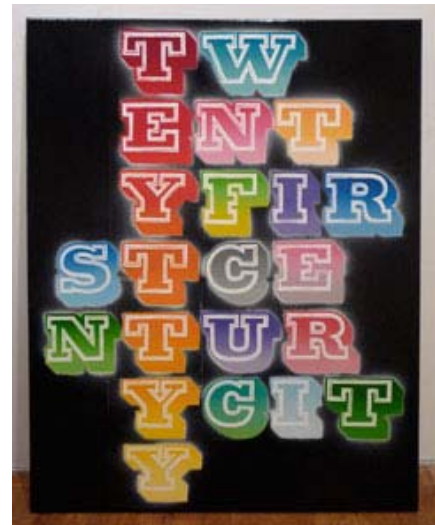
## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Ed Ruscha's "Column With Speed Lines" According to other sources, neither Ruscha nor Gagosian Gallery, the artist's powerful dealer, were directly involved, or necessarily aware of the selection beforehand. Some time ago, Gemini G.E.L., a California print-making company that has an affiliation with the National Gallery, had donated the Ruscha print to the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies, a nonprofit that is "dedicated to enhancing the United States image abroad through American art." Gemini, though otherwise for-profit, lends materials to and aids FAPE in collecting prints from a roster of noteworthies, including John Baldessari, Jasper Johns, and Roy Lichtenstein. The foundation then distributes the art, either as gifts or on loan, to embassies and dignitaries around the world. Joni Moisant Weyl, a co-owner of Gemini, told The Daily Beast that she and her husband had not known Obama gave the Ruscha to Cameron until they were notified by phone Wednesday morning, though she did not elaborate on details of the phone call, or from whom it came. Weyl added that Gemini was happy it could help by making the "outright donation," something the company has done with FAPE over many years and through various administrations, "Republican or Democrat." Although she declined to comment on the print's value, experts estimate the lithograph could be worth around

\$7,000. A signed Ruscha print sold last year for \$170,000 at auction. Thirteen Ruscha prints are listed as available through Gemini, but Cameron's new wall hanging is not among them.

Ben Eine's "Twenty First Century City" So what might have prompted the Obamas to select art as a gift, let alone a Ruscha? It may have something to do with Michael Smith, the decorator whom the Obamas chose to appoint their White House. Smith is a Southern Californian himself, recruited back East after designing Santa Monica hotspots such as One Pico, the restaurant, and Shutters on the Beach, the resort. Smith, whose tastes sometimes appear more staid than would synch with the assertive work of Ruscha, placed one of the artist's works in the Obamas' White House living quarters last year, on loan from the National Gallery. And maybe Ruscha's established support of Obama helped send "Column With Speed Lines" overseas. "I am 1,000% behind this administration," Ruscha told the Los Angeles Times last October. Ben Eine, Cameron's selection, is a street artist who has been affiliated with Banksy and whose Care Bear-adorned site lists a gallery section of "Vandalism," right under "Shows" and "Screenprints." The illegality of some of Eine's work makes Cameron's choice that much edgier. Graffiti and street art stem from American ghetto culture, notes Cappellazzo. It's possible to interpret the meaning of the Eine piece as a grateful and proud demonstration of how American culture has influenced art in the U.K.



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Pedro Alonzo, who curated “Viva la Revolucion,” the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego’s current exhibition of street art, which includes Banksy but not Eine, was thrilled to hear that Eine had been selected counter to Ruscha. “Ed Ruscha is *Ed Ruscha*, an American legend, so to have a young street artist up there with him is just fantastic,” he said. “Ben’s definitely a good artist, probably the premier artist of that genre in the U.K.” Alonzo mentioned that while he wouldn’t hang too much on the fact that the U.S. is the place of origin for graffiti and tag culture, what is “incredibly striking is that the prime minister’s wife,” Samantha, who reportedly chose the Camerons’ gift, “came out and made it clear that she likes street art.”

The pieces of artwork exchanged by powerful hands Tuesday are indeed loaded with symbolic, patriotic, and sophisticated meanings, says Cappellazzo. “The exchange indicates a new moment for contemporary art,” she told the Daily Beast, via cell phone from Los Angeles. “It signifies that art is a currency for gratitude and esteem, and that these works are measurable national treasures.”

A souvenir is, of course, meant to be a reminder. “When you have a thing that’s been beautifully researched and has meaning to the very hearts of the people of that country, it’s going to resonate for centuries,” Letitia Baldrige, Jacqueline Kennedy’s White House social secretary, told Vogue. Perhaps at 1600 Pennsylvania and 10 Downing, the neon letters and vibrant colors will carry a reminder of the elastic ties between the United States and Great Britain, long after wars have ended and oil spills wash away.

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