

*Encore!*

*The Artistry  
of America's  
First Ladies*



*What do little girls want to be when they grow up? Oh, the list is endless with possibilities – but some of the chart toppers have to be in the field of art – actress, dancer, painter, writer, or musician. First Ladies were no different in their aspirations when they were young. In Victorian times, a young woman’s “education” was mainly to be “accomplished” enough in some art form so that she would make a good impression for a future husband. As times changed (ever so slowly), women could pursue a career in the arts; however, most willingly sacrificed their own individual aptitude once they married. A woman’s career goals are still a dilemma of conflicts between their aspirations and those whom they choose to spend their life with.*

*There were many First Ladies with artistic talents – so many that it is difficult to acknowledge them all.*

## *Encore!* *The Artistry of America’s First Ladies*

*is an exhibit that highlights a few of the First Ladies’ whose talents in the arts were either life-long or a major factor in their lives.*

## Louisa Catherine Adams (1775 – 1852)



Louisa Catherine Johnson Adams was born in England to an American shipping-owner father and an English mother in 1775. Her family moved to France during the American Revolution, and Louisa grew up speaking the French language fluently. American dignitaries frequently visited the Johnson home where they were lavishly entertained. It was natural for Louisa and her siblings to sing, read poetry and play instruments for their distinguished guests. Louisa played the pianoforte and the harp and was

noted for her lovely singing voice.

As the second oldest child of eight siblings, Louisa was quiet, preferring to read and write poetry. She stated, “Music and reading were the only things in life I thought worth living for.” Though she always wished for a more formal education, her background and talents served her husband’s political ambitions very well.

In the winter of 1815, John Quincy signed the Treaty of Ghent to officially end the War of 1812. Louisa was living in Russia at the time and he asked her to join him in Paris. On February 12, her fortieth birthday, she began the harrowing trek across the war torn and ravaged Prussian frontier in a horse and carriage with her seven year-old son, Charles Francis. She wrote a narrative of this risky venture entitled, “Journey from Russia to France, 1815.” Always a prolific writer, she penned her memoirs in 1825, “Record of a Life, or My Story” and at age 65 began her autobiography, “The Adventures of a Nobody.”

## Rose Elizabeth Cleveland (1846 – 1918)

Unlike many First Ladies of the Victorian era, Rose Cleveland

was unique in that she had a career her entire life. She began her literary vocation as a teacher after graduating from Houghton Seminary in New York. In 1867, she took a position at the Lafayette Collegiate Institute in Lafayette, Indiana. It was a college preparatory school that stressed “equal advantages to both sexes.” Rose taught Latin, mathematics and English Criticism.

Her first book, a literary criticism entitled *George Eliot's Poetry and Other Studies*, was published while she was serving as a reluctant First Lady in 1885. The book earned her royalties and monetary independence. Her first novel, *The Long Run*, was the love story between a “young society woman,” Miss Emeline Longworth, and a “romantic scholar,” Mr. Rufus Grosbeck. In 1887, she wrote the introduction to Frances E. Willard's, *How to Win. A Book for Girls*. The next year she penned another introduction to the Victorian book on etiquette, *Social Mirror: A Complete Treatise on the Laws, Rules and Usages That Govern Our Most Refined Homes and Social Circles*.



She wrote numerous poems and essays for literary magazines, and became the editor for the Chicago-based magazine, *Literary Life*, after leaving her White House hostess duties in 1886. She moved to Europe and *The New York Times* reported in December of 1905 that “The Divine” Miss Sarah Bernhardt, was to purchase a play about the French Revolution written exclusively for her by Miss Cleveland. Her last book, published in 1910, was a rendition of *The Soliloquies of St. Augustine, Translated into English by Rose Elizabeth Cleveland: With Notes and Introduction by the Translator*.

Caroline Scott Garrison  
(1832 – 1892)

From an early age, Caroline Scott showed skill as a musician and painter. She was an accomplished pianist by the time she



was a teenager, and took private painting lessons from her aunt, Caroline Neal. When Benjamin Harrison met fifteen-year-old Caroline in 1847, she was producing a book of poems, watercolors and drawings titled, *Floral and Poetical Album*.

In 1849, Dr. John Witherspoon Scott, Caroline's father, became the first president of The Oxford Female Institute. It was a family affair: Caroline's mother, Mary Neal Scott, served as dean of women and house manager. Caroline attended classes and taught piano, graduating in 1852 with a degree in language, music and art.

After her marriage in 1853, Caroline set up an art studio in her home in Indianapolis. She found endless inspiration in the flora that bloomed in her garden. She began formal watercolor and china painting in 1886 when German artist, Paul Putzki, moved to the area. She became so skilled that she had her own kiln built to fire the painted china. She regularly won recognition for her paintings entered at the Indiana Exposition.

As First Lady, Caroline persuaded Paul Putzki to move to Washington to continue teaching watercolor and china painting. In 1893, Caroline painted *A White House Orchid*. She then gave permission to *Demorest's Family Magazine* to use the painting as a reproduction print for their subscribers. The act showed that the First Lady was a true advocate for the arts.

# Helen Herron Taft

(1861 – 1943)

As a young girl, there was nothing Helen Herron liked to do more than practice playing the piano. She dreamed of pursuing a musical career, but she knew she needed more training if she wanted to really become professional. She even approached her parents about giving her an advanced musical education instead of making her debut into society in 1879. After all, it would save them the expense of purchasing all those gowns! Her parents felt differently about such a “wasteful and useless” expense because a proper Victorian woman needed to be out in society to find a husband.



Though Helen would never realize her dream of having a musical career, she had a great respect for the musical talents of professional artists. She became an avid attendee at local operas and concerts in her hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio. As Mrs. Helen Taft, her passion led her to want to establish a professional symphony orchestra in Cincinnati. Along with fifteen other women, she created the Cincinnati Orchestra Association Company and served as the first president from 1894 until 1900. It was a thrilling and fulfilling role for her – she wrote, “I found, at last, a practical method for expressing and making use of my love and knowledge of

music.” The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra’s premier concert took place on January 17, 1895 under the direction of conductor Frank Van der Stucken. The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra remains an outstanding organization to this day.

As First Lady, Helen had a vision of a beautiful place in Washington for the public to go and listen to the music of the Marine Band. Helen lined the Potomac Drive with the now famous cherry trees and had a wooden bandstand built for free concerts. Her dream was realized on April 17, 1909 when ten thousand people attended the first concert.

*Ellen Axson Wilson*  
(1860 – 1914)

The young southern belle, Ellen Axson, began her formal art training at the Rome (Georgia) Female College at the age of eleven. In 1878, Ellen won a bronze medal at the Paris International Exposition for a drawing titled *School Scene*. This honor brought her regional recognition and she began to earn money for the commissions she received for portraiture. When she became engaged to Woodrow Wilson in 1883 while he was in his second year of graduate



study at John Hopkins University, she began a year of study at the Art Students League in New York.

The Art Students League was a renowned liberal school that accepted students regardless of race or gender; however, proficiency in painting technique had to be demonstrated for advancement. After only two months, Ellen established herself in those more progressive classes. She studied under leading American Artists of the day: George de Forest Brush, Thomas W. Dewing, Frederick

Warren Freer, and Julian Alden Weir. As her year of study came to an end, Woodrow Wilson wrote of his regret that she would have to give up her promising art career to which she responded that she “would never give him a divided allegiance.”

After marriage, Ellen Axson Wilson immersed herself in establishing a home and raising a family. As her three daughters grew, she gradually began to paint more and more. In 1905, she studied at the summer artist’s colony called The Lyme Summer School of Art in Connecticut. She returned again in 1908 and continued her studies each summer through 1911.

At the 25th Annual Exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1912, her painting, *Autumn*, placed in the juried exhibition. In 1913, two of her landscapes were accepted at the 108th annual exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Shortly before the presidential inaugural ceremonies in March of 1913, Ellen exhibited fifty landscapes at her one-woman show in Philadelphia.

As an advocate for women, education and art appreciation, Ellen established a scholarship for needy girls and boys at the Martha Berry School in her hometown of Rome, Georgia. Proceeds from her artwork sustained the scholarship.



Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy  
(1929 - 1994)

From an early age, Jacqueline Bouvier loved literature, especially poetry. She also enjoyed sketching – from portraiture to cartoon caricatures, and often drew imagery to coincide with her own poems. In high school she created a cartoon series for Miss Porter’s School’s newspaper, *Salmagundi*. While attending George Washington University, Jackie entered and won the prestigious *Vogue* magazine’s Prix de Paris contest. The five-hundred word essay was on “People I Wish I Had Known” – and she chose three: playwright Oscar Wilde, French poet Charles Baudelaire, and ballet impresario Serge Diaghilev.

As a graduation present in 1951 to Jackie and to her sister Lee (from high school), their parents gave them a trip to Europe. In return, their gift to them was a scrapbook, *One Special Summer* filled with tales from their adventures. It featured Lee’s journal of their humorous escapades spiced by Jackie’s poems and illustrations.

Jackie’s first job was as the *Washington-Times Herald’s*





“Inquiring Camera Girl.” She asked one question each day of local Washington personalities, citizens or children and snapped their picture to go along with their answer. A special someone she interviewed was Senator John F. Kennedy. In 1953, the *Times-Herald* assigned her the coverage of Queen Elizabeth’s coronation. Her interviews and coverage of all the festivities accompanied by her pen and ink sketches were featured on the front page each day.

As First Lady, Jackie Kennedy adamantly believed that the White House was *the place* for showcasing the finest in American art. She served as hostess to performances of American ballet, theatre, and opera. She edited *The White House: An Historic Guide* to raise private funds for the newly created White House Historical Association’s work for historic restoration projects and the purchase of fine art for the Executive Mansion. She was a major force behind the establishment of the National Cultural Center, which would eventually be commemorated in her husband’s name.

Betty Bloomer Ford  
(1918 - )

There wasn’t any type of dance that Betty Bloomer didn’t love – ballroom dancing, acrobatic, tap, ballet, jazz – as she wrote, “Dance was my happiness.” She knew by the age of eight that she wanted to be a dancer. Every afternoon she would go to dance class at Calla Travis’ studio in Grand Rapids, Michigan. By the time she was fourteen, she was working as a model at Herpolsheimer’s Department Store and teaching dance in a friend’s basement recreation room.

When she graduated from high school, Betty knew she wanted to go to New York City to study ballet. Her reluctant mother made a deal with her – she could go to New York when she was twenty.



For two summers she attended Bennington School of Dance at Bennington College in Vermont. During those falls and winters she continued to model and teach dance. It was while she was attending Bennington that she met Martha Graham. Martha Graham was doing such innovative “modern” dancing that by the second year Betty knew that “Martha Graham was the person with whom I wanted to cast my lot.” Though Betty joined The Martha Graham Dance Company in New York, she danced with the auxiliary group, not the main group

of dancers. She admitted that her modeling work with the John Robert Powers agency and her active social life made it difficult to seriously study dancing. A visit from her mother culminated into her return to Grand Rapids, believing she would return to New York again soon. However, fate would see it otherwise; after a first brief failed marriage, she met her future husband, Gerald Ford, and her professional dancing days were over.

As First Lady, Betty was the driving force for Martha Graham receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom award in 1976. She believed that dance should be recognized and respected as an art form, and no one had done more for the world of dance than Martha Graham.

*Nancy Davis Reagan*

(1921 - )

There was never a time in young Nancy Davis’ life that she did not want to act on the stage. It was a natural attraction since

her mother, Edith Lockett, was a professional actress. Nancy grew up knowing big-name stars such as “Uncle” Walter Huston and Spencer “Spence” Tracy. She majored in drama while attending Smith College; however, she learned her craft more intimately from apprentice work in summer stock.

Nancy acted in her first professional role touring the country in the play, *Ramshackle Inn*. She settled in New York City in 1946, making the customary rounds of try-outs and refusals before landing a part in the Broadway musical, *Lute Song*, starring Mary Martin and Yul Brenner. But it was a bit part in a television program, *Broken Dishes*, which got her a screen test at MGM in Hollywood. She was offered the standard seven year contract with options (MGM could drop her – she could not drop MGM) for \$250 a week in 1949. She made eight films in four years before marrying Ronald Reagan in 1952 – she made a total of eleven movies before permanently retiring in 1956.

Nancy’s first small role was in the movie *Shadow on the Wall*. Like most of the characters she played, she was cast as the devoted wife. In her first starring role for the movie *The Next Voice You Hear*, she wore a pregnancy pad (but used no



makeup artist or hairdresser) to give her a more “realistic look.” She considers *Night Into Morning* her best movie role; it was rare for her to play a “glamorous” fiancée to John Hodiak as opposed to a devoted, down-trodden and/or pregnant housewife.

After marriage, movie work no longer held her interest. Her last film was with husband Ronald Reagan. Cast as his fiancée in *Hellcats of the Navy*, this was her chance to act in romantic love scenes on screen with the man she shared a real love off screen.



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Tours: Tuesday - Saturday at 9:30 & 10:30 a.m.  
and 12:30, 1:30 & 2:30 p.m.;

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Reservations required for groups of 6 or more only, recommended  
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