



# THE POLITICS OF *Fashion*

Throughout history, the first lady's style has made a statement

By Johanna Neuman

**F**rom the beginning, we have obsessed about their clothes, reading into the sartorial choices of America's first ladies the character of a nation and the expression of our own ambitions. "We want them to reflect us but also to reflect glamour," observes author Carl Sferrazza Anthony, who has studied fashion and the first ladies. "It is always said that Mamie Eisenhower reflected what many Americans were, and Jackie Kennedy reflected what many American women wanted to be."

In a nation born in rebellion against the king, the instinct among public figures to dress regally clashed with the

**Jackie Kennedy in Ottawa, Canada, in an outfit designed by Oleg Cassini**

new country's more egalitarian inclinations. Martha Washington dressed simply, but her use of a gilded coach to make social calls led critics to lament that she was acting like a queen. Abigail Adams, who had cultivated an appreciation for French fashion, was careful to moderate her tastes but failed to protect John Adams from criticism that he was a monarchist; he was defeated for re-election by Thomas Jefferson. "These Founding Fathers had deep ancestral and intellectual ties to countries where government lead-

ers' dress was explicitly understood to reflect and represent their august positions," says historian Caroline Weber, author of *Queen of Fashion: What*



*Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution (2008)*. “Even colonialists looking to break away from European monarchies would still be influenced by that basic, deeply entrenched” belief.

When Dolley Madison came to the White House, the onetime Quaker embraced the role of “Lady Presidentress” with such panache that she fused the twin missions of royalty and democracy with her popular weekly White House receptions. Her ebullient personality put guests at ease even as she wore the latest, often most expensive, and sometimes controversial French fashions. Anthony notes that her official portrait reveals more bosom than most first ladies tend to show, but her personality conveyed a down-to-earth spirit. Ever since, first ladies have brought an American flair and individuality to wardrobes befitting a queen.

**LEADING LADIES.**

**Michelle Obama (left) at the White House; Mamie Eisenhower (far right) in Geneva, Switzerland**

One of the most liberating fashion figures was Grace Coolidge, who arrived at the White House in roaring 1923. Grace was a sportswoman who was often seen by day in loose-fitting clothes working in her garden with her dogs at her side. By evening, she turned the White House into a glamorous cultural center where film stars like Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford mingled with the likes of Will Rogers

and Charles Lindbergh. Even among these luminaries, the first lady stood out with her short, sleeveless flapper dresses. Grace provided a role model of modernity, a sharp departure from her predecessors.

First ladies have demonstrated that pragmatism can be fashionable, too. Eleanor Roosevelt’s clunky shoes allowed her to travel widely as her husband’s

**First ladies who mix style with fun may have the greatest impact.**

ambassador. Famously, vice presidential candidate Richard Nixon defended himself against charges of maintaining a slush fund by noting that his wife wore not a fur coat but “a respectable Republican cloth coat.” Twenty years later, First Lady Pat Nixon was comfortable enough in her own choices to model pantsuits for *Ladies’ Home Journal*, a sartorial first.

In the modern era, as in Martha Washington’s, a first lady’s wardrobe often reflects politics. Appealing to voters whose jobs and pride are on the line, candidates and their spouses have learned to showcase American products. Jacqueline Kennedy made no secret of her hopes to turn the Kennedy White House into an American Versailles, but she hired the French-born American Oleg Cassini to design her



clothes. The wardrobe may have owed its provenance to France's Hubert de Givenchy, but it quieted criticism, heard from *Women's Wear Daily* during the campaign, that John F. Kennedy was running on the Paris couture ticket. First Lady Nancy Reagan was similarly pilloried for her expensive tastes and designer clothes. But she chose Adolfo, Bill Blass, James Galanos, and Oscar de la Renta—Americans all.

U.S. companies have long looked to presidential wives for inspiration, seeking to capitalize on their fame. When a 21-year-old beauty named Frances Folsom married President Grover Cleveland, she annoyed the Women's Christian Temperance Union by wearing gowns that showed off her bare neck, shoulders, and arms. But American companies rushed to put her classically beautiful face on their products. The White House counsel's office would make sure that couldn't happen these days. But when First Lady Michelle Obama (Mrs. O to the fashionista press in a nod to the legacy of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis) wore a J. Crew crystal-flecked cardigan in London in 2009, the sweater sold out in all New York stores by 10 a.m. Michelle Obama's interest in clothes, from the salmon-colored Levi's and sweater from the Gap to the strapless, floor-length gown by Indian-born designer Naeem Khan that she wore at a state dinner for the Indian prime minister, has conveyed her political astuteness in patronizing American designers and companies.

In true American fashion, first ladies can launch a trend only if their public is willing. When Obama plucked Chicago designer Maria Pinto from obscurity to create a teal dress for the Democratic Convention, it did not translate into success. Recently, Pinto had to shutter her business, a casualty of the recession. "Michelle Obama exerts the kind of influence on trends that *Vogue's* Anna Wintour does," says Caroline Weber. "Both of them can generate a lot of excitement about . . . a particular designer or look. But that's no guarantee the designer or look will take off and become a national trend."

Hamish Bowles, *Vogue's* European editor and creative consultant to a 2001 Costume Institute retrospective on Jackie Kennedy's White House years, thinks first ladies set fashion trends when they convey not only a sense of style but also of fun. "Mrs. Kennedy's blending of sophisticated and worldly haute couture taste with a breezy American sportiness proved enormously influential," he says. As Anthony notes, Mamie Eisenhower wore sleeveless dresses in the 1950s, so the trend was already ascending, but a more youthful, more exuberant Jackie Kennedy showed the style to greater advantage. Similarly, Michelle Obama's "influence has been very real and tangible," says Bowles, noting that her contemporary and sophisticated mix of high-end fashion labels like Isabel Toledo and Jason Wu with accessible brands like J. Crew reflects "a woman who clearly has fun with her clothes." And, he says, she looks wonderful in her choices. ●



**REAGAN RED.** Nancy Reagan wearing an Adolfo coat-dress during a visit by Princess Diana in Springfield, Va.; below, Frances Folsom Cleveland

