

Michelle Obama Emerges As An American Fashion Icon

A new big O is ascending on the fashion scene.

Incoming First Lady Michelle Obama is poised to be the new Oprah and the next Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis—combined!—for designers, retailers and fashion aficionados. (Does that make her a double-O agent of change? Hmmm.)

When Obama, 44, posed Monday for photos at the White House, she wore a tomato-colored sheath with clean lines that Kennedy Onassis might have approved, designed by a talent that Oprah helped expose in the '90s, Chicago-based Maria Pinto.

The parallels don't stop there.

After Obama wore J. Crew on "The Tonight Show" and a White House/Black Market dress on "The View," the pieces sold out the next day.

Very Oprah.

When Obama wore a modified cocktail dress by Narciso Rodriguez on Election Night, she stood in fiery contrast to televised images of Jill Biden, Sarah Palin and Cindy McCain in traditional suits.

Very Jackie. (Anyone old enough to remember Kennedy on Inauguration Day? At age 31, she eschewed the full-length furs worn by other matrons, opting for a beige wool coat edged in fur. "So the first impression you had of Jackie," recounted designer Oleg Cassini, "was of a very young woman surrounded by bears.")

"Michelle Obama will have a huge impact on fashion," said Heiji Choy, 30, owner of the progressive design shop Hej fina in Chicago's Bucktown. "Some people say she's going to be comparable to Jackie O. But I think she has an even more elevated sense. She's not afraid to mix high and low, whereas Jackie was a little bit more rarefied. Mixing high and low is what modern fashion is now."

By all accounts self-styled, Obama exhibits the confidence in her own taste that is lacking in many celebrities. Like a true fashion lover and the accomplished professional woman she is, she has taken risks, as in the Rodriguez dress, which was not universally adored, but could not be ignored.

Obama has proved she knows designer fashion, wearing emerging or insider designers such as Thakoon (pronounced Tuh-KOON) and Azzedine Alaïa.

No doubt Obama has pursued some of her higher education in fashion from Ikram Goldman, owner of the nationally renowned boutique Ikram, where Obama has shopped on Chicago's Gold Coast. (Goldman declined to comment on Obama.)

"Michelle Obama knows the designers that are not only American but are also important to fashion," Choy said. "If you look back to Laura Bush or Hillary Clinton, they wore, OK, Oscar de la Renta and maybe Ralph Lauren, these established designers. But there wasn't this sense that the first lady knew what was happening on the ground. She wasn't necessarily wearing designers who were struggling to make it and had brilliant new perspective on American fashion. And so I think it's going to be very exciting and interesting and important to see what fashion she chooses to represent while in the White House."

Even before her tenure begins as first lady, Obama has opened Americans' eyes to the fact that what walks down the runway is sometimes just a first or second draft. After the shows, buyers for stores often request design modifications for their customers. Women of considerable stature and buying power do the same.

From its runway version, for instance, the Rodriguez dress Obama wore had wider straps, a longer bodice and a backing for the sheer skirt. To the Pinto dress Obama wore Monday, sleeves were added and the fabric changed to a wool crepe to adapt it from its spring styling to fall.

"People think that's just a dress she has bought, but there have been redrafts, fittings, a lot of thought that goes into the final product," said Tim Long, curator of costumes at the Chicago History Museum, which is showing "Chic Chicago," an exhibit of designer masterpieces worn by the grandes dames of Chicago. (No Obama piece as of now, but Long is on it.)

"As we learn about how much interest she has in fashion, it will be one other thing that shows a complete picture of these two people, who are sophisticated in many ways," said Long, 33, referring to Michelle and Barack Obama, who has had six suits made by Chicago-based Hart Schaffner Marx. "It doesn't surprise me that they put this much thought into their overall appearance."

That Michelle Obama isn't a size 2 like Nancy Reagan puts designer fashion in a perspective not often seen by the masses. That she topped the Rodriguez dress with a cardigan that looked as if it could have come from White House/Black Market warms her to a populace that, particularly in this economy, gravitates to affordable pieces. (Not for nothing is Thakoon debuting an offshoot line at Target on Christmas Day.)

"Every woman who is into fashion can relate to her," Choy said. "And that's a first."

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Excerpted from *Michelle Obama emerges as an American fashion icon* - [chicagotribune.com](http://www.chicagotribune.com)
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