

Smithsonian's exhibition of presidents' wives inaugural gowns: Michelle Obama to Jackie Kennedy

Fashion fit for a First Lady debut: From Michelle Obama's Jason Wu to Jackie Kennedy's couture, Smithsonian's tribute to Presidents' wives inaugural gowns

By [Tamara Abraham](#)

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When Michelle Obama arrived at an inaugural ball in 2009 in that white one-shoulder gown, it cemented her position as a major fashion influence.

But she is not the first - and by no means the last - first lady to have made a style statement in her debut appearance as the President's wife.

A new exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, which opens tomorrow, will see the display of the most

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Michelle Obama wore a white one-shoulder gown by young designer Jason Wu for a ball in 2009 to celebrate her husband's inauguration. It is now part of a new display of first ladies' debut dresses at the Smithsonian

In addition to Mrs Obama's Jason Wu dress, gowns worn by Mamie Eisenhower, Betty Ford, Barbara Bush and Nancy Reagan, as well as the more recent Hillary Clinton, form part of the exhibit.

All gowns are for very formal occasions, given that most were for state dinners or inaugural balls. And though they differ wildly in style, each a fascinating representation of the fashion at the time, there are also some startling similarities.

The palest pastels, along with vibrant yellow, are favoured almost universally until the late Eighties, when Barbara Bush stepped out in royal blue.

From then on, we saw a riot of colour, from Laura Bush's red crystal-embroidered Chantilly lace by fellow Texan Michael Faircloth in 2001, to Hillary Clinton in 1993, who wore a violet beaded lace gown, designed by Sarah Phillips and made by Barbara Matera, a theatrical costume maker.

But Lady Bird Johnson, Pat Nixon and Rosalynn Carter all wore gowns in shades of lemon and gold, while Mamie Eisenhower, Betty Ford, Nancy Reagan and Jackie Kennedy went for paler-than-pale hues.



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Jacqueline Kennedy inaugural gown might well be one of the most memorable. She was careful to use American couturiers and her dress for the 1961 ball was made by Ethel Frankau of Bergdorf Custom Salon





Lady Bird Johnson wore a yellow satin gown and sable-trimmed coat by John Moore to the 1965 inaugural balls. The simple, timeless design was chosen with the Smithsonian display in mind

Indeed Mrs Kennedy's might well be one of the most memorable. Considered a fashion icon to this day, she was one of the most glamorous first ladies in history.

Though she favoured the likes of Chanel, she was careful to use American couturiers and her dress for JFK's inaugural balls in 1961 was made by Ethel Frankau of Bergdorf Custom Salon.

The dress, it was later reported, was designed from sketches and suggestions from Mrs Kennedy herself, and had a matching cape.

The gown won high praise, and Washington Post wrote at the time that the new First Lady's 'career as a major fashion influence was beginning impressively.'





Barbara Bush



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Hillary Clinton's violet beaded lace gown with iridescent blue velvet silk mousseline overskirt, worn for the 1993 inaugural balls, was designed by Sarah Phillips and made by Barbara Matera, a theatrical costume maker

One of the most lavish, though, was Mamie Eisenhower's; a Nettie Rosenstein design which boasted over 2,000 rhinestones stitched into the pale pink peau de soie.

There was huge media speculation about the dress at the time, and details were released to press a week prior to the 1953 inaugural balls, along with formal photographs.

For Rosalynn Carter, though, her debut appearance as First Lady in 1977 offered an opportunity to recycle a favourite gown - with mixed responses.

The gold coat, worn over a blue dress with co-ordinating gold trim, was first worn for a 1971 ball celebrating her husband's inauguration as governor of Georgia.



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Laura Bush wore a red gown of crystal-embroidered Chantilly lace over silk georgette to the 2001 inaugural balls. The dress was designed by fellow Texan Michael Faircloth





As there was no formal inaugural event in 1975, Betty Ford made her debut instead at a State Dinner at the White House for the Shah of Iran in 1975. Pictured in the gown (right) at a State Dinner with his wife Farah

Her decision to re-use an old dress sparked media debate about the first lady's responsibility to the American fashion industry, the symbolism of an inaugural gown, and Americans' desire for glamour in the White House.

Glamour is a word that appears in descriptions of subsequent first ladies' inaugural dresses though.

When James Galanos described how he came up with the design for Nancy Reagan's white beaded lace gown for her husband's inauguration in 1981, he said that he wanted to make her look glamorous, 'elegant and in keeping with the new formality.'

And designer Arnold Scassi, who created Barbara Bush's royal blue velvet and silk gown in 1989, described her as 'the most glamorous grandmother in the United States.'





© Getty Images

When designer James Galanos described his inspiration for Nancy Reagan's white beaded lace gown for her husband's inauguration in 1981, he said that he wanted to make her look glamorous





At his inaugural ball in 1969, President Nixon knew wife Pat's yellow silk crystal-studded ensemble by Karen Stark for Harvey Berin would go down in history

The biggest compliments, of course, are those won from the President himself. Who could forget Barack Obama remarking, 'How good looking is my wife?'

Mrs Obama's gown, the newest addition to the Smithsonian collection was designed by young designer Jason Wu, who did not know until he saw her on television, that she had chosen his dress.

And at his inaugural ball in 1969, President Nixon knew wife Pat's yellow silk crystal-studded ensemble by Karen Stark for Harvey Berin would go down in history.

'I like all of Pat's dresses, particularly this one tonight,' he said that night. 'When she gets finished with it, you'll get it at the Smithsonian.'

Lady Bird Johnson also had the Smithsonian in mind when commissioning her simple yellow satin gown and sable-trimmed coat by John Moore for the 1965 inaugural balls.





One of the most lavish gowns was Mamie Eisenhower's for the 1953 inaugural balls. She wore a Nettie Rosenstein design which boasted over 2,000 rhinestones stitched into the pale pink peau de soie



For Rosalynn Carter, her debut appearance as First Lady in 1977 offered an chance to recycle a favourite gown

Betty Ford too, considered the collection at the Smithsonian, when commissioning her pale green sequinned chiffon dress from Frankie Welch, carefully specifying a favourite colour.

As there was no formal inaugural event that year, she made her debut instead at a State Dinner at the White House for the Shah of Iran in 1975.

She would wear it a second time for another State Dinner the following year, for King Juan Carlos of Spain.

The First Lady Debuts display forms part of the First Ladies Collection, which, for more than 100 years, has been one of the most popular attractions at the Smithsonian.

The new display will also examine how first ladies have shaped their roles as the role of women in society has changed.

The museum is moving some collections as it prepares to renovate its west wing with new permanent exhibits on the presidency, first ladies and politics.

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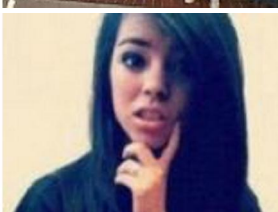
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Jackie wins!

- [susie](#) , small place usa, 21/11/2011 00:48

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cjay: Michelle is not an elected official. She is spending taxpayer money when we are broke, and therefore, deserves to be watched just like any other Washington person who is not living in reality. Her eatomg program is bogus and is one of many programs that do the same. She has had too many articles in magazines, TV programs, and anywhere else she can get attention. In other words, she has had far too much exposure.

- [Jullou](#) , Glendale,AZ,USA, 21/11/2011 00:35

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Karen, ex pat USA, 20/11/2011 22:35 Ms Karen which planet are you come from??? You should keep your mouth shut!!!! As you wrote you are and ex pat USA??? You don't know what's going own in your own country???? The President who made a mess of the economy was your ex-president Bush and Blair????

- [TheWhistleblowerman](#) , UK, 21/11/2011 00:20

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The Hillary Clinton dress is gorgeous.I'm not so sure about the buckle,but the overskirt and sleeves are lovely, as is the colour.No wonder Hillary looks happy !

- [Simon](#) , Midlands, 20/11/2011 22:45

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Mrs. Obama, just change to Mrs. Blair - Obama woman believes she is the elected one and believes she has the right to dictate to America. I just hope the Obama brood disappear after the next election, total useless people who have abused their position.

- [Karen](#) , ex pat USA, 20/11/2011 22:35

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I am sorry to say that Mrs Obama does not have the figure to carry off that dress !! In my opinion the dress is far to young for her, and would be much better suited for someone with a smaller frame !!.. Betty Ford, and Hilary Clinton both looked exquisite in their outfits ! Mrs O.. take some lessons from past first ladies !!

- [realist! with UK tax paying husband !](#) , Spain, 20/11/2011 12:37

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Nancy Reagan - now she had real style although thedress in the photo is not one of her best. Michelle's dress is lovely but to be honest most of the time she looks really frumpy and she does not have the figure to be a style icon.

- [sophie](#) , belfast, 20/11/2011 11:53

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Mrs John F Kennedy's splendid white silk coat is a copy of one of Balenciaga's most famous designs. There is a whole book on how the lady managed to dress in Paris haute couture while making it all appear as American. A part de cela one would like to know the amount of hours put down on the making of each dress.

- [suedoise](#) , Paris France, 20/11/2011 10:13

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Some of you sound bitter and jealous. Michelle Obama is not only very popular amongst Americans and the world, but she's also a major style icon. Big American (and some foreign) designers literally FIGHT tooth and nail for her to wear their pieces. And when she does, the pieces completely sell out.

The average American and mainstream media were not very aware of young Jason Wu before Michelle donned his gorgeous gown to the Inaugural evening events. But after that January 20th??? The rest was history. Mr. Wu was put on the map completely. I say GO, Michelle! Not only have you done a great job in the East Wing, but you've also helped stimulate the fashion sector and help little known (and many major) American fashion designers get more work and sell more of their clothing. You rock.

- [Daniela](#) , So Nice They Named It Twice, New York, US. , 20/11/2011 09:35

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Anna Maria, Michelle is not dictating how we should eat ! She's trying to help those who don't know how to eat the proper foods so that they are not obese & diabetic before they get out of high school! We are a nation of obese people who are major drains on our health care system which you & I & everyone has to support. She should be admired for what she has tried to promote. If she were a republican, all you tea partiers & born again Christians would be praising her for her efforts to help improve the lives of children so that they don't end up with diabetes & weighing 200 pounds in middle school!.

- [cjay](#) , Indianapolis USA, 20/11/2011 08:35

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