

The china syndrome

By Christopher Muther
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For a moment, imagine that you're just about to move into your dream house: Georgian columns, tastefully decorated rooms, and a dining room that comfortably seats 140. You've lobbied endlessly for this house and had to persuade millions of people to let you move in.

Now, let's say that the previous owner makes a decision shortly before moving out to purchase a new china collection. "That's fine," you say. "Everyone should be free to buy new dishes whenever they want." In fact, what makes this country great is the freedom to buy new dishes when you like. That, and the ability to watch a cat eat spaghetti on the Internet any time of day.

But here's the sticky wicket: You're inheriting these dishes with the house, they cost just shy of \$500,000, and whether you like them or not, you can't replace them. At least, not without public scrutiny.

This is the scenario that's facing Michelle Obama as she prepares to move to the White House on Tuesday. Last week, current first lady Laura Bush held a press conference in the family dining room of the White House to display a \$493,000 gold-rimmed set of official George W. Bush state china. The dishes were paid for by a privately funded trust of the White House Historical Association.

At the press conference, Laura Bush explained that the dishes had been in the works for several years (when "the economy was a lot better than it is today", she joked) and she had hoped that the china would have arrived earlier. Bush's recession china purchase did not raise eyebrows the way that Nancy Reagan's did when she spent over \$200,000 on a new set of state china during the early 1980s, but the purchase does seem to annoy at least one dinnerware designer.

"I can't believe she did that!" says designer Jessica Rust. "I'm not personally angry about it, but I would be if it happened to me. I would have been offended. You just move in, but someone else got to pick out the dishes?"

Rust is closely following the china purchase because she was hoping to design the new White House place settings herself. She has already sketched out a dramatic black and white set that is based on motifs found on Abraham Lincoln's dishes, and on patterns found in the Lincoln bedroom. She chose Lincoln as an inspiration because the president-elect has frequently referenced the 16th president in speeches.

"I think the combination of black and white would be particularly stunning in large state dinners," says the Minneapolis-based designer. "The color combination is classic, and

they seem to have very classic taste, but also contemporary. There's nothing more classic than black and white."

Laura Bush was not being passive aggressive in ordering new china so late in her husband's second term. According to Carl Sferrazza Anthony, an author and expert on the nation's first ladies, it's not uncommon for an outgoing administration to order new china. It's a matter of having a matching set large enough to use for state dinners. Previous first lady Hillary Clinton unveiled a new White House china set just as her husband was leaving office, as well.

"There's a lot of breakage," says Anthony. "When Mrs. Reagan came into the White House in 1981, she found that she was not able to have a dinner party where there was uniformity with one china set. It seems like such a fussy thing when there are people who are unemployed or can't afford food to be worrying about the china at the White House. It may seem really Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. But in a funny way, it's especially useful to have that uniformity when heads of state come to visit. It's a symbol of the country."

I'm about as deep as a Nutella crepe, but even I understand that perhaps a better symbol of the country, which is experiencing record unemployment and soaring foreclosures, would have been to take the majority of those private funds used for the \$500,000 china and helped folks who lost their homes in the housing crisis. And no, I'm not simply suggesting this because I'm bitter that the White House is getting new dishes while mine are older than Jamie Lynn Spears.

Whatever's left in the coffers could then be used to purchase a set of dishes with no gold leaf and no embossed design. I'm sure world leaders going through similar banking and economic meltdowns (hello, Iceland) would understand when their chicken fricassee arrived on a dish without an eagle staring back at them.

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