

Michelle's golden year

Not for a half-century has a first lady turned so many heads with fashion

By Wendy Donahue
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America's future does not hang on the first lady's fashion. But a final grade for Princeton University senior Julie Flynn does.

"I decided to write about Mrs. Obama's style because I love to shop and I am interested in fashion," Flynn, a history major from Westwood, Mass., said of her semester-ending project for her journalism class.

For most, the fascination with Michelle Obama's clothes is as simple as that.

"It's sort of the high-brow end of celebrity watching," said Sasha Iglehart, fashion director for Glamour magazine.

For others, Obama's bold colors, brooches and biceps represent a national agenda.

Admirers and detractors alike see her bare arms as her most symbolic fashion gesture thus far.

"There's not only a strength in showing the arms, but there's also a welcoming aspect — 'Let's relax, and I'll take off my sweater and chat,'" Iglehart suggested. "It adds to her very personal presence."

Armhole analysts over the past year said Obama's fashion instincts (wide, high belts, for example) could have used a check or balance at times.

But there's no arguing that her style has left the biggest fashion impact by a current or former first lady since another you-know-O.

"For the first time in half a century, the clothes of a first lady have struck such a popular appeal and curiosity with citizens — other than within the elite class — that this has already become one of several primary elements defining Michelle Obama's tenure," said Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian for the National First Ladies' Library.

During an interview for December's Women of the Year feature, new Glamour magazine columnist Katie Couric invited Obama to vent over the public's obsession with her appearance.

"Do you ever want to say to people, 'Get a life?'" Couric posed.

"Oh, no. It's part of the job," Obama answered without sarcasm.

"People are always going to have opinions, and people have a right to their opinions, particularly when you're the first lady; you're representing the nation," Obama elaborated. "So I can't be surprised that people are interested. The first thing that I've tried to do is be at peace with the choices I make, and then be open to everyone else's reflection, and then move from there."

Eyes surely will follow in 2010.

1

Taking up arms: In her most polarizing appearance of 2009, the first lady went sleeveless in a sea of suit jackets, wearing a plum Narciso Rodriguez dress during her husband's speech before Congress on Feb. 24, the dead of winter. She had already worn a sleeveless sheath several times before (so had Jacqueline Kennedy at her husband's State of the Union address), but the high contrast of Obama's choice this time fueled an arms debate as laden as any analysis of the president's comments. More notably, there was no post-controversy coverup. In continuing to bare her arms, Obama had declared independence. And yet ...

2

Down-to-earth appeal: Backbone brands for many American office workers — J.Crew, Gap, Target, Liz Claiborne, Anne Klein — have appeared prominently in Michelle Obama's wardrobe alongside designer dresses. So have shorter-than-Bermuda shorts (kicking up a few headlines last summer). Even quirky kicks have ascended to the podium. "I don't remember ever seeing a first lady wear sneakers at a public appearance," Iglehart said. In another departure from the celebrity playbook, Obama has repeatedly worn even her most memorable pieces — a floral Thakoon dress, a J.Crew honey-colored cardigan. The sum of these parts: a message of solidarity with the American people.

3

A rainbow connection: No colors or combinations thereof seem to be beyond the palette for Obama. She took on acid yellow, tangerine and chartreuse (Italian design house Moschino dubbed it "Obama green"). Chicago designer and friend Maria Pinto, whose grape sheath got Obama noticed before the election, probably influenced this vibrant experimentation. "You always have to have some black in the closet," Pinto has told us (and like most women, Obama looks slimmest in it). "But especially when you're tired,

don't do black." Thakoon's dresses and coats for Obama have elevated prints' sophistication. Metallics have proved magnetic, including the silver-sequined champagne gown by Indian-American Naeem Khan, which Obama wore Nov. 24 at the first state dinner, with the prime minister of India. In the hours after, Khan told the Wall Street Journal, "I was the third-most Googled person in America."

4

Cardigan coalition: In London April 1, Obama's sparkly J.Crew cardigan caught so many eyes that the sweater swiftly sold out and crashed the Web site. The next day, Obama's avant-garde Junya Watanabe argyle cardigan, over a Jason Wu party dress, prompted New York Times fashion critic Cathy Horyn to warn that Obama's penchant for cardigans could become campy. Instead, it has set one of the year's biggest trends. "Michelle Obama has owned the cardigan this year," said Mary Tomer, the blogger behind **mrso.org** and author of "Mrs. O: The Face of Fashion Democracy." "That's what I hear most on Mrs-O.org — that women are scooping up J.Crew cardigans and perhaps pairing them with a belt at the waist." No coincidence that argyle abounded at stores for the holidays.

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Framers of her constitution: Anyone who thought Obama was going to spend her husband's term confined to Barbara Bush pearls should have her baubles, belts, bows and brooches examined. Accessories — often oversize, layered, asymmetrical or in unconventional colors or materials — have become key constituents of Obama's style. "She has worn green and pink pumps as a neutral, and brought a clear vinyl belt light years beyond the realm of tacky," Tomer said. The take-home impact? Tomer says, "If she can be adventurous with her style — with millions watching, no less — so can we."