

World watches Obama, Sarkozy - forget the husbands

By JOCELYN NOVECK – Friday, April 3, 2009

It's been billed as one of the major face-offs of the NATO summit, and it had nothing to do with troops in Afghanistan or relations with Russia.

No, it was the breathlessly anticipated moment on Friday when two of the most scrutinized women on the planet — Michelle Obama and Carla Bruni-Sarkozy — finally met, in the grandeur of an 18th-century palace in Strasbourg, France.

Only a day earlier, the airwaves had been filled with dissections of Mrs. Obama's meeting in London with Queen Elizabeth II — how the two had bonded, despite what some in Britain implied was a mild faux pas on the first lady's part of draping her arm briefly around the monarch.

All due respect to the queen. But suddenly on Friday that story seemed so, well ... yesterday.

"Fashion Face-off," wrote Britain's Guardian newspaper of the meeting between Mrs. Obama and Bruni-Sarkozy, wife of French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Others called it a "Style Summit" between "the First Ladies who Lunch." Women's Wear Daily wrote in an online update that the "much drumrolled First Lady fashion showdown" had confirmed that both women were "sticklers for their pet designers."

Even the Hollywood entertainment site E! Online posted an item on "European summit fashion" — undoubtedly a first. (It added: "Yeah, we never thought we'd say that.")

The meeting began with a friendly "Bonjour!" from Mrs. Obama as the couples approached each other, then a French-style double-cheek kiss between the women.

Then it was time for the presidents to greet the opposing spouse. While Sarkozy and Mrs. Obama kissed, the other pair did not, leading to a vigorous debate in the blogosphere: Did Bruni-Sarkozy suddenly turn shy and avoid a customary kiss from the U.S. president?

Or was it Obama who hesitated? Or, more likely, did Bruni-Sarkozy anticipate that Obama MIGHT hesitate, and thus hesitate herself? Or did Obama ... well, never mind.

Because the focus was really on fashion. And for the record, the women did not look exceedingly different. Each wore a stylish but proper coat with a bow at the neck — for Mrs. Obama a black silk number flecked with fuschia flowers by Thakoon, one of her favorite designers, whose ivory tweed coat she wore to board Air Force One in Washington.

For the French first lady, it was a gray coat by Dior, also a favorite. Both women removed their coats inside to reveal coordinated dresses — Bruni-Sarkozy's in gray, and Mrs. Obama's in fuschia. Mrs. Obama wore kitten heels, and Bruni-Sarkozy wore flats — apparently to avoid towering over her husband.

And for the evening later in Baden-Baden, Germany, the two also looked remarkably similar in chic knee-length black dresses.

One fashion expert thought both women looked elegant, but that Bruni-Sarkozy, a former supermodel, may have toned down the flash just a bit too much.

"I'd prefer a little color with that beautiful tailoring," said Sasha Igleton, deputy fashion director of Glamour magazine. Then again, she suggested, the French first lady may have been purposely toning down the glamour. As for Mrs. Obama, Igleton especially liked the "gorgeous" fuschia dress.

Although both first ladies are hailed for their sense of style, they are in most ways vastly different. The Italian-born Bruni-Sarkozy, 41, was a celebrated supermodel and is still a songwriter and singer. She dated Mick Jagger and Eric Clapton, posed famously in the nude, and raised eyebrows in July by releasing an album with lyrics mocking her reputation as a man-eater and comparing her lover to a drug.

Mrs. Obama, 45, is a Princeton and Harvard-educated lawyer who grew up on Chicago's south side and was a hospital executive until she stopped working while her husband campaigned for president.

Her popularity at home has grown enormously since the election, and she's now seen as a fashion icon who, with one wearing, can cause an item of clothing to sell out — as she did with a champagne J. Crew cardigan this week.

Her first European trip has brought countless comparisons to Jackie Kennedy. And it's worth recalling that it was Mrs. Kennedy's first presidential trip to France in 1961 that led her husband to introduce himself as "the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris."

But to some, all the attention to Mrs. Obama's fashion and style, though overwhelmingly positive, is an unfortunate distraction from her other endeavors.

"I've seen so much more attention to her clothes on this trip than to the poignant remarks she made at that school in Britain," said Carl Sferazza Anthony, one of the nation's foremost experts on first ladies.

He was referring to an emotional speech Mrs. Obama gave at an all-girls school in north London on Thursday, telling them about her youth in Chicago and the importance of education in her life. Afterward, she hugged many of the students, and some were moved to tears.

But Anthony, the historian at the National First Ladies Library, also notes that the media has always loved to compare first ladies, especially when they're standing together on the world stage.

It happened in 1985, when Nancy Reagan met Raisa Gorbachev in Geneva. "The media really blew that into a full-blown rivalry," Anthony says.

He also notes that fashion comparisons were rife when Princess Grace of Monaco, the former actress Grace Kelly, visited the Kennedys in the United States.

"Everyone was asking, 'Who's more elegant?'" Anthony says. "Even JFK teased Jackie that Grace had more jewels on."

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This photo provided by the Elysee Palace shows U.S. first lady Michelle Obama, left, speaking with France's first lady Carla Bruni-Sarkozy before a luncheon at Rohan Palace as their husbands held bilateral talks in Strasbourg, eastern France, Friday April 3, 2009. (AP Photo/Pascal Segrette/Elysee Palace)



First lady Michelle Obama stands with Carla Bruni-Sarkozy at Palais Rohan in Strasbourg, France, Friday, April 3, 2009. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)



President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama are greeted by France's President Nicolas Sarkozy and wife Carla Bruni-Sarkozy at Palais Rohan in Strasbourg, France, Friday, April 3, 2009. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)



German Chancellor Angela Merkel, her husband Jochen Sauer, Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, his wife Anne Mette, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, France's first lady Carla Buni, NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer and his wife Jeannine, from left, pose together before a piano concert and working dinner at the Kuhhaus in Baden Baden, Germany, Friday April 3, 2009, to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Rasmussen is tipped to be the next Secretary General of NATO. (AP Photo/Michael Sohn)

