

Michelle Obama's choice of inaugural gown is big gossip topic

• MORE ON THIS STORY

- [Story | Obama's new home was slow to accept integration](#)
- [Story | Review: Policy's important but so are Obama's clothes](#)
- [Story | A day comes that many didn't think they'd live to see](#)
- [Story | Past inaugurations have produced many memorable moments](#)
- [Story | Obama, Lincoln took similar paths to presidency](#)
- [Story | Washington's trendy U Street shows path of racial progress](#)
- [Story | Changing country sees its reflection in Obama](#)
- [Story | As Obama prepares inaugural address, he might consult past ones](#)
- [Story | Whatever Obama accomplishes, his election was a breakthrough](#)
- [Story | From Washington to Obama, 220 years of festivities \(and fights\)](#)
- [Gallery | Obama's all the rage in Paris](#)
- [Gallery | The fashion of Michelle Obama](#)
- [Gallery | First Ladies' fashion](#)
- [On the Web | Dress Michelle Obama for the Inauguration](#)
- [On the Web | Presidential Inauguration Committee's donor database](#)
- [By Maria Recio | McClatchy Newspapers](#)

WASHINGTON — Inauguration Day will belong to President Barack Obama, but that night will be wife Michelle's turn in the spotlight, as all eyes will be on her — and her choice of ball gown.

Throughout U.S. history, and especially in the post-World War II era, first ladies have made statements about themselves and the times they live in with their inaugural wardrobes.

"They are symbols of our country. They reflect around the world an image of our country," said Carl Sferrazza Anthony, a historian who's written extensively about first ladies.

At the same time, he said, people want to know that the president's wife is accessible to them.

"The first lady is a balancing act between being a queen and a commoner," Anthony said. "The inaugural gown is a metaphor for the first lady role."

The statuesque Obama has excited fashion designers, who are eager to dress her, but observers say that the recession makes it likely that she will wear a subdued gown in keeping with the country's economic downturn.

"I'm sure she won't have an over-the-top gown studded with diamonds and rubies," said etiquette expert Letitia Baldrige, former social secretary to first lady Jackie Kennedy. "It will be something suitably quiet for the times."

Women's Wear Daily has created a buzz with its feature "Michelle Obama: What should she wear?," which showcases designers' sketches for her inaugural gown done at the behest of the newspaper.

The reaction to the piece on the Web, said Bobbi Queen, WWD senior fashion editor, "has been unbelievable." The posting, with a slide show, has had nearly 6 million hits and has been on six or seven blogs. Queen thinks Obama's appeal is that she's the first presidential wife "since Jacqueline Kennedy who has the presence and elegance that would intrigue women."

As for the importance of the gown itself, Queen said it would be worn at one of the most significant occasions of Obama's life — and that of the nation.

"Just about everyone yearns to dress Michelle, who could raise the profile of American fashion around the world," she said.

Inauguration fever as we now know it, with multiple balls, galas and celebrations, is a relatively new phenomenon. The tradition of the inaugural ball began in 1809 with first lady Dolley Madison, a skillful hostess who knew that social events could support her husband's presidency.

Throughout the 19th century, there was usually a single inaugural ball, paid for by the winner's political party. Some of them were in hotels or temporary quarters, according to Anthony, but then the Pension Building, which is now the National Building Museum, became the preferred site for the inaugural ball.

Sometimes the personality of the president and wartime intervened. There were, in fact, no official inaugural balls from 1913 to 1949.

President Woodrow Wilson decided that there'd be no balls in 1913 and again in 1917 because of World War I. Warren G. Harding started to plan for one in 1921 and encountered so much criticism that there was instead a private inaugural ball paid for by a wealthy benefactor of his wife's.

Evocative of the flapper era it was designed in, Florence Harding's iridescent gown is made of tulle and adorned with pearlized sequins and gold beads. It's in the Smithsonian Museum of American History's popular first ladies' gown collection, which reopened Dec. 19 after museum renovations.

"Some of these inaugural dresses are timepieces of their era," Anthony said. "Mrs. Rutherford Hayes' gown had steel-cut beads, which spoke to the Industrial Age." Hayes was president from 1877 to 1881. "It was the real height of the Victorian Age."

Nellie Taft, the wife of the 27th president, who was inaugurated in 1909, was the first first lady to break with tradition and accompany her husband in the inaugural parade, according to the National First Ladies' Library. She was also the first to donate her gown to the Smithsonian, starting a tradition that continues to this day.

During President Franklin D. Roosevelt's four inaugurations there were no inaugural balls but March of Dimes' balls for charity, some attended by first lady Eleanor Roosevelt but none by the president.

In the post-World War II era, Jacqueline Kennedy glamorized the inauguration festivities — as well as the presidency — with her style. Her inaugural ivory gown and cape, which she helped design, caused a sensation.

Rosalynn Carter provoked criticism for repeating a dress for the 1977 inauguration, appearing in one she'd worn for Jimmy Carter's gubernatorial inauguration.

Nancy Reagan wore a glittery one-shouldered off-white gown that was considered very Hollywood but also very insensitive during the 1981 recession. Hillary Clinton's 1993 purple gown by a young designer was criticized as less than chic.

Laura Bush's 2001 red-beaded Chantilly lace gown by a Dallas designer met with an underwhelming response in fashion circles. Her 2005 Oscar de la Renta silver and blue tulle gown, however, was a hit. Only the first inaugural gown typically goes to the Smithsonian.

"It's an interaction of the glamour of the first lady and the outfit," Bruce Buchanan, a presidential scholar at the University of Texas at Austin, said of the intense interest in inaugural gowns. "Jackie Kennedy set that standard. Jackie began the fascination that extends to Michelle."

Baldrige, for one, is impatient with comparisons to Kennedy. "That comparison is unfortunate," she said. "She (Obama) is herself. It is a different time in history."

Some things are timeless, however.

"We can predict everyone will be fascinated about the dress," Baldrige said. "We all want the first lady to look fabulous."

ON THE WEB

[Women's Wear Daily slide show of designer sketches for Michelle Obama's inaugural gowns](#)

[Smithsonian Institution](#)

[The National First Ladies' Library](#)