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Who has Fashion?: Why is the fashion of the First Lady important?

The First Lady does not hold a place in the world of politics, but in the world of fashion in the United States she is a fashion icon. Every time she appears in public the first thing that is usually noticed about her is what she is wearing. If it something that is felt to represent America in a positive way she is praised for being fashionable, if her attire is felt to be inappropriate for a woman of her position she is ridiculed and publicized to the highest extent. If the attire of the First Lady is so important why are there not women always dressed in the way that she does? The reason the fashion choice of the First Lady is always a topic of discussion is not to appear as she does, but it is because she is who greets the world in the name of the United States of America and it is expected that she represents the United States in way that shows the world power. This thesis is supported by an investigation of media coverage comparing the style of First Lady Jackie Kennedy to that of Michelle Obama which focuses essentially on the importance of how the way they dress is a portrayal not of their own style, but is a representation of what America wants them to be.

According to Diana Vreeland when Jackie Kennedy entered the white house she was thought to put a little style into it (Mulvaney, 2). Her fashion was not only the talk in America, for she was known in many other parts of the world and when they travelled many people flocked to see what she was wearing (Mulvaney, 53-55). Jackie felt that her wardrobe was counterpart of the actions of her

husband and therefore she wanted the best (Mulvaney, 3). Since she wanted to please the people her husband now represented she even did things that she did not like wearing hats (Mulvaney, 104).

Though she set many trends she was most famous for something simple, wearing a triple strand of faux pearls during her time at the white house (Mulvaney, 183). Her pearls were not the only component of her style, but also the shift dress, plain cloth coat, the pillbox hat, and the Bouffant hairdo (Craughwell-Varda, 29).

She not only revolutionized the position of First Lady with her fashion skills, but also because she was more active than any other First Lady prior to her (Mulvaney, 55). She travelled more frequently to other nations than any other First Lady prior to her though she went to help promote the policies of her husband somehow her wardrobe was talked about more frequently than the policies, and because of this she became a “global ambassador for style” (Mulvaney, 55). With this title and this image to maintain there also came a price to buy all of the clothing that she was wearing, and it was hit the president’s budget hard he stated frequently, “she is breaking my ass” (Mulvaney, 109). Even her husband noticed what an icon she had become by stating, “fashion is becoming more important than politics and the press is paying more attention to Jackie’s clothes than to my speeches” (Mulvaney, 91).

Her impact on fashion was great and it could be seen throughout the styles of the sixties. According to a 1989 article in The Philadelphia Enquirer, “For thirty years, she has been dynamite, setting trends, breaking rules, and putting her stamp on American style (Mulvaney, 167).

Though she was a fashion icon and she was very well respected by the American people and many other nations, two incidents really showed her strength: when her son died and when her husband was assassinated. She showed the American people that they had had someone in the white house that not only represented America with her appearance, but also that when she visited nations without her husband the nations saw that America was powerful because of the actions that she took

(Mulvaney, 162). Though she was respected and praised by the American citizens she was also criticized by them because her clothes were not made by American designers. Her choice to hire Cassini, a descendant of Russian aristocracy, was greatly influenced by Jack Kennedy, her father-in-law, since he said he would pay for her wardrobe if she chose this designer (Craughwell-Varda, 22).

When our present First Lady, Michelle Obama, entered the white house the response from the American people was very similar to the way that they responded to former First Lady Kennedy. Mrs. Obama wasted no time taking over the world of fashion. On the night that her husband was became the Democrat's presidential nominee she was wearing a purple sheath dress with pearls and the world immediately knew that if she made it into the white house that she would woo the world with her style (Norwood, 4). Though Mrs. Obama has an appearance of strength and power she does intimidate women instead she inspires and many women see themselves in her (Norwood, 11). This is because her style is very relaxed and everyday like, with bare arms and bare legs, while still looking professional (Norwood, 34-35). A woman in the public eye with no panty hose is seldom heard of because it is considered disrespectful in esteemed company, but since our First Lady is nearly six feet tall panty hose are bit uncomfortable and she chooses comfort over tradition (Norwood, 35). Many feel that she is real and relatable which is why he is said to be the perfect poster for America (Norwood, 61 & 102)

When Mrs. Obama became our official First Lady of the white house she was said to bring glamour back to it, which was much needed after five presidential terms that lacked fashion (Norwood, 61& 77). She is known for making daring choices such as wearing stripes, bright colors, and flats. Though these are seen to some as inappropriate, but Mrs. Obama says she is not inappropriate she is just not a stereotypical First Lady in a solid color business suit with heels (Norwood, 65). Though she has exquisite taste she is also very wise with the money, which is very appealing to the American eye in the economic situation that we are presently in, she is known for shopping J. Crew instead of the usual

pricey stores like Sak Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus (Norwood, 98). President Obama built his campaign on change and that *change* has also been apparent in the appearance of Mrs. Obama since she is different from the First Ladies of the past (Norwood, 95).

On her first appearance wearing a sheath dress with pearls, she was instantly compared to our former First Lady Jackie Kennedy. The style of their hair was even compared. American had not seen this style since the time of Jackie, and like Jackie the pearls have also become a signature of this First Lady as well (Norwood, 4).

These women are more compared often because they were close to the same age when their husband took office, and because of their youth in comparison to the other First Ladies is why their fashion was far different than what America was use to (Norwood, 18). Both of these women also were very popular with the American people their husbands even stated that they were more popular with the citizens than they were (Swimmer,12). Interesting enough, both of these lady's husbands made a mark in history during their time; Kennedy being the youngest elected president, and Obama being the first African American elected president. These women are very similar in fashion and in the way they gained popularity with their personalities and way with people (Swimmer,12).

So why is the fashion of the First Lady important? Norwood states it best by saying, "If the President is the voice of the nation, the First Lady is its look. For better or for worse, her style characterizes the entire population. Which is the reason such scrutiny is paid to every pantsuit, dress, hat, and hairstyle."

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