



CAPITAL COUTURE

Presidents set the agenda, first ladies set the style BY KELSEY B. SNELL







The U.S. Constitution details what's required of presidents, from minimum age to mandatory oath. But no "checklist" exists for the first lady, who must adapt to an ever-evolving role. While supporting their spouses full time, many first ladies altered history—Ellen Wilson who encouraged passage of the bill to eliminate Washington slums or Rosalynn Carter and Betty Ford who advocated for the mentally ill. Despite their heroic causes, their wardrobe often had the more visible impact.

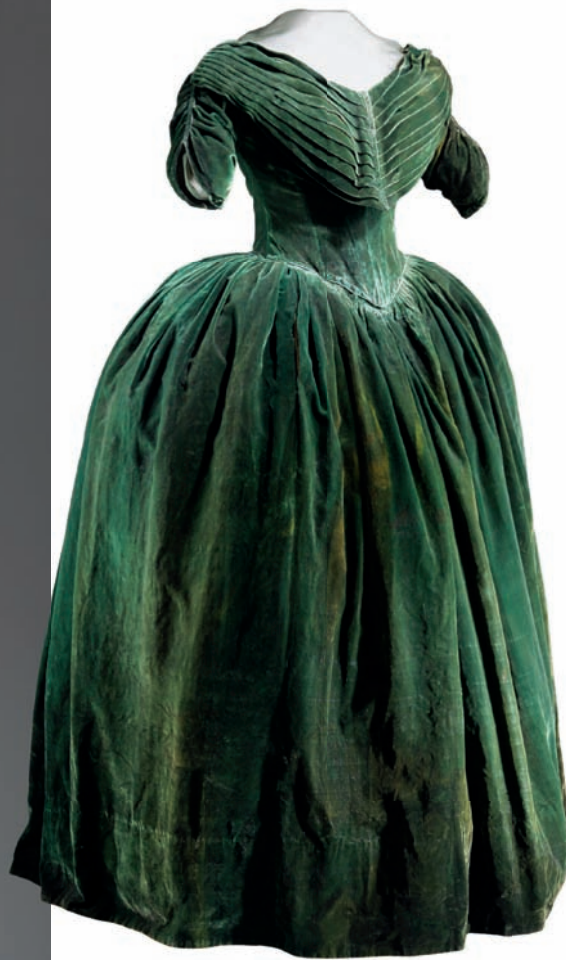
Jacqueline Kennedy wasn't the first trendsetter. At the turn of the 19th century, hostess Dolley Madison (1809-17) introduced ornate turbans and French designs, while decades later Frances Cleveland (1886-89, 1893-97) refused the bulbous dress bustle at a Washington department store. (Thank you, Frances!) Sarah Polk (1845-49) and Edith Wilson (1915-21) also became fashion savants with their taste for couture.

In the 2012 fashion issue of the *White House History* journal, edited by William Seale, articles on Polk, Cleveland and Wilson reveal their common and distinct sartorial leanings. Elite Americans, including the first ladies, often wore French fashion—fine preferences that the average American found out of reach. Polk patronized couturiere Madame Oudot Manoury in Paris, and in Cleveland's and Wilson's terms, Charles Frederick Worth's Maison Worth (a favorite of Napoleon III's court) ruled the fashion world.

No doubt French was "in," but each woman added her own flair. Polk continued Madison's tradition of turbans, except she repositioned them on the back, rather than the top, of the head. Cleveland's closet included interchangeable bodices and skirts that gave the illusion of a larger wardrobe than she actually had. Women deemed their hairstyles "à la Cleveland" and donned another of Cleveland's staple looks: her *décolleté* (low-cut) gowns.

When Wilson accompanied her husband to the 1919 Paris peace conference, it was the first official overseas

HOLDINGS IN PRESIDENTIAL COLLECTIONS: (PREVIOUS SPREAD) SARAH POLK'S SATIN BROCADE GOWN BY MADAME MANOURY OF PARIS, 1847; (FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT) CUT-VELVET EVENING COAT WITH FOX TRIM BELONGING TO FRANCES CLEVELAND; POLK'S TURBAN IN TUNISIAN BLUE PLAID; EDITH WILSON'S PERSONAL NOTE ABOUT HER FIRST MAISON WORTH DRESS; (THIS PAGE) POLK'S HOUSECOAT WITH RIBBONS IN FRENCH "POMPADOUR" STYLE



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: EDITH WILSON'S FLAPPER-STYLE CHIFFON EVENING DRESS; POLK'S VELVET DINNER GOWN MADE IN WASHINGTON, D.C.; A FAN DEPICTING THE FIRST 11 PRESIDENTS GIVEN TO POLK BY HER HUSBAND TO CARRY DURING INAUGURATION FESTIVITIES

trip by a first lady. Due to her frequent travels to Europe, her wardrobe featured a mélange of designers. Next to purchases from Maison Worth hung a jersey suit from House of Chanel and apparel from Rizik Brothers (now Rizik's on Connecticut Avenue).

In the journal, Conover Hunt says that during Polk's term "American citizens wanted a first lady who looked like a queen but did not act like one." Parisian gowns of silk and chiffon, furred and feathered capes and sparkling costume jewelry didn't belong to most American women, yet these were the looks that represented them on the world stage. While some first ladies did little to close the divide between classes, many made efforts to find the balance between glamour and approachability. For instance, Kennedy posed in casual wear and wore French-designed outfits made in America.

Today White House style, though still elegant, is more approachable than ever. Michelle Obama's inaugural gown designed by a 26-year-old remains a showpiece in the National Museum of American History, while her casual sundresses and Rachel Roy-designed T-shirts win public approval too. Instead of aiming to dress like the first lady, American women now realize that they already do, and that's a fashion statement worth making.

The photography in this piece was originally commissioned by the White House Historical Association for publication in the fashion issue of its semi-annual journal White House History. To learn more about the journal or subscribe, visit www.whitehousehistoryjournal.org.



ALL IMAGES: BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION. (PAGES 26-27, 29) COLLECTION OF THE JAMES K. POLK ANCESTRAL HOME; (PAGE 28, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT) GROVER CLEVELAND BIRTHPLACE; COLLECTION OF THE JAMES K. POLK ANCESTRAL HOME; COLLECTION OF THE WOODROW WILSON HOUSE; (THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT) COLLECTION OF THE JAMES K. POLK ANCESTRAL HOME (2); COLLECTION OF THE WOODROW WILSON HOUSE



(THIS PAGE) COURTESY NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY

ALL DRESSES ON DISPLAY IN *THE FIRST LADIES* EXHIBIT IN THE AMERICAN HISTORY MUSEUM: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) LADY BIRD JOHNSON'S INAUGURATION COAT; JULIA GRANT'S EVENING DRESS MADE OF FABRIC GIVEN BY THE CHINESE EMPEROR; MICHELLE OBAMA'S INAUGURATION BALL GOWN (2009) BY JASON WU

First in Fashion

Flapper frocks, one-shouldered styles and dresses in neon hues show that the only thing “traditional” about first lady fashion is the century-old ritual of donating these inauguration gowns to the National Museum of American History. The clothes of the first ladies signify more than special occasions.

The First Ladies collection displays dresses from Martha Washington's to Obama's, highlighting styles and designers of each era and materials like moonstones and velvet. Each dress represents the woman—supportive wife, gracious host and independent history-maker—who wore it. As Michelle Obama said in her 2010 gown donation speech, the pieces in the collection represent “something much more about each single first lady...and uniquely define a moment in our American history.”

The Smithsonian Institution requests that first ladies donate their inauguration ball gown to the American History museum's collection, and each has done so since Helen Taft in 1909. The exhibit's original focus on the White House fashion and furnishings of these “lady presidentesses” shifted in 1992 to include the political and public contributions of each woman. Custom porcelain and table settings also on display signal the role of national hostess and reveal the way first ladies use the table to form strategic international relationships.