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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF POLITICAL FASHION

A look at how color and style choices in Washington convey messages in politics

By Candace Lombardi | March 25, 2009 12:50 p.m.

When Michelle Obama showed up for her first day on the job wearing a lemon-colored shift dress and coat combo, her Inauguration Day attire wasn't just another example of her heady sartorial choices. Her classic yellow tweed Isabelle Toledo ensemble, whether the first lady knew it or not, had a political agenda in mind. In fact, the sunny shade, a seemingly unconventional color for a city mired in red and blue, first debuted in political circles during the suffrage movement.

At the turn of the twentieth century, politicians wore a yellow rose in their lapel if they were for the Nineteenth Amendment (granting women the right to vote) and a red rose if they were against it. As a result, yellow is seen as a positive political color today, according to Dr. Mary Ellen Bulcharis, a professor at La Salle University who specializes in women and politics.

Purple, a color used in suffrage banners because it was said to stand for dignity—and a hue oft spotted on the fashionable first lady—can also signal a positive attitude. While many politicians wore blue or red ties to indicate blue-state or red-state loyalty during the Bush administration, purple is worn to signal a spirit of bipartisanship, according to Laura Schwartz, political consultant and former director of events for the White House social office during the Clinton administration.

Sometimes a trend even becomes a classic. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright wore lapel pins, many of them by Ann Hand, Washington's reigning patriotic jeweler, as a way to convey her mood throughout her tenure.

"The pin trend that started with Albright developed in the '90s and has completely held its value. It's now a timeless piece in political fashion," said Schwartz. Today, Ann Hand wearers include Laura Bush, Elizabeth Edwards, Tipper Gore, Theresa Heinz Kerry, Cindy McCain, and Condoleezza Rice.

Lifestyle changes also carry over into political fashion. "As the first lady, Hillary Clinton wore a lot of St. John clothing, and it really flattered her," says Schwartz. "When she ran for the Senate in 2000, she switched to more tailored pantsuits to break from her softer first lady role, but she kept the look feminine by adding vibrant color, like bright pink, under her suits." Then during her presidential campaign, she went even bolder with colored pantsuits: "When you're at a rally with 5,000 people you've got to stand out among the other politicians onstage," says Schwartz.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has also turned to vibrant color as a way to assert herself visually at press conferences alongside the plethora of congressmen in dark suits.



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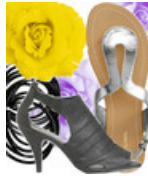
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