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Dressing Up in Down Times

First ladies must balance glamour, taste; Grace Coolidge's glitz, Rosalynn Carter's recycling
By [AMY CHOZICK](#)

Dressing for the inaugural balls has long been complicated terrain for first ladies arriving during an economic downturn. Too much glamour and the incoming administration will be accused of excess, not enough glitz and the first lady may be branded dowdy.

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Michelle Obama, who became a focus on the campaign trail for her style mix from J. Crew to Narciso Rodriguez, hasn't yet disclosed what she will wear to the 10 balls she and her husband plan to attend. Just days after Barack Obama delivered his acceptance speech, designers began submitting sketches to Mrs. Obama's team for potential inaugural gowns.

Chicago designer Maria Pinto, one of Mrs. Obama's favorites, has declined to comment on whether the future first lady plans to wear one of her designs.

The tradition of the inaugural ball -- and the nation's fixation with first lady fashions -- dates back 200 years to Dolly Madison. Hours after James Madison took the oath of office in 1809, Mrs. Madison wore a buff-colored velvet gown and large plumes in a turban to a White House reception she hosted offering guests cake and punch, the first inaugural party, historians say.

Mrs. Madison's fashion sense led to features in newspaper society pages, says Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian at the National First Ladies' Library in Canton, Ohio.

The first actual inaugural ball gown is credited to Caroline Harrison: an ivory frock with a long train for Benjamin Harrison's 1889 inaugural ball.

Letitia Baldrige, White House social secretary to Jacqueline Kennedy, says in tough times first ladies must walk a fine line. "You've got to be tastefully dressed and show off the garment industry in America," Mrs. Baldrige says. "If she appears in all black and looks like a downer, that's going to be bad."

In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt skipped his inaugural ball due to the Great Depression. Eleanor Roosevelt attended alone wearing a simple lavender velvet dress with detachable sleeves. (The president didn't attend any inaugural balls during his four terms in office.)

In 1977, Jimmy Carter took the oath of office during a deepening recession. To signal an end of Washington excess, Rosalynn Carter wore the same floor-length blue gown that she had worn to Mr. Carter's inauguration as governor of Georgia six years earlier.

"I don't know of any other first lady who recycled," says Betty Boyd Caroli, author of "America's First Ladies."

Mrs. Carter's folksiness, however, didn't go over well with many Americans who looked to the inaugural ball for a morale booster, Ms. Caroli says. The fashion industry groaned that the first lady hadn't helped the industry by ordering a new gown.

Calvin Coolidge insisted his wife not repeat outfits, says Ms. Caroli. And while he had a reputation for being stingy, he spent lavishly on his wife's clothing. In 1923 Grace Coolidge signaled a return to glitz in the White House with her bright red flapper-style inaugural gown, the height of roaring 20s style.

Too much glamour during tough economic times can spark criticism. In the midst of recession in 1981, Nancy Reagan wore a range of outfits worth more than \$45,000 for inauguration festivities, by most estimates. The former Hollywood hostess chose a one-shouldered cream gown with a sheer beaded overdress designed by James Galanos and borrowed diamond drop earrings and a matching necklace valued at more than \$100,000 from jeweler Harry Winston.

Opulent frocks had come under fire long before. At the height of the Civil War, Mary Todd Lincoln traveled to New York and Chicago to purchase the latest fashions -- gowns with floral appliqué that were cut low and showed off her curvy figure.

After Abraham Lincoln's assassination, Mrs. Lincoln had to sell the family's furniture and other personal belongings to pay off her clothing debt, says Jean Baker, author of "Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography."

With her signature bangs and frilly style, Mary "Mamie" Eisenhower became a fashion role model. In 1953 she wore a candy pink silk gown covered in more than 1,000 pink rhinestones designed by New York based Nettie Rosenstein Inc. to Dwight D. Eisenhower's inauguration.

"This was strictly a middle-aged, middle-America, 'I Love Lucy' style," says Valerie Steele, director of the museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York.

Jackie Kennedy signaled a break with the inward-looking 1950s by drawing inspiration for her gown from European designers for John F. Kennedy's 1961 inauguration.

The result: a white gown with matching cape by Emeric Partos and Ethel Frankau for department store Bergdorf Goodman. Mrs. Kennedy wore a more famous Oleg Cassini cream gown to a gala the same night.

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