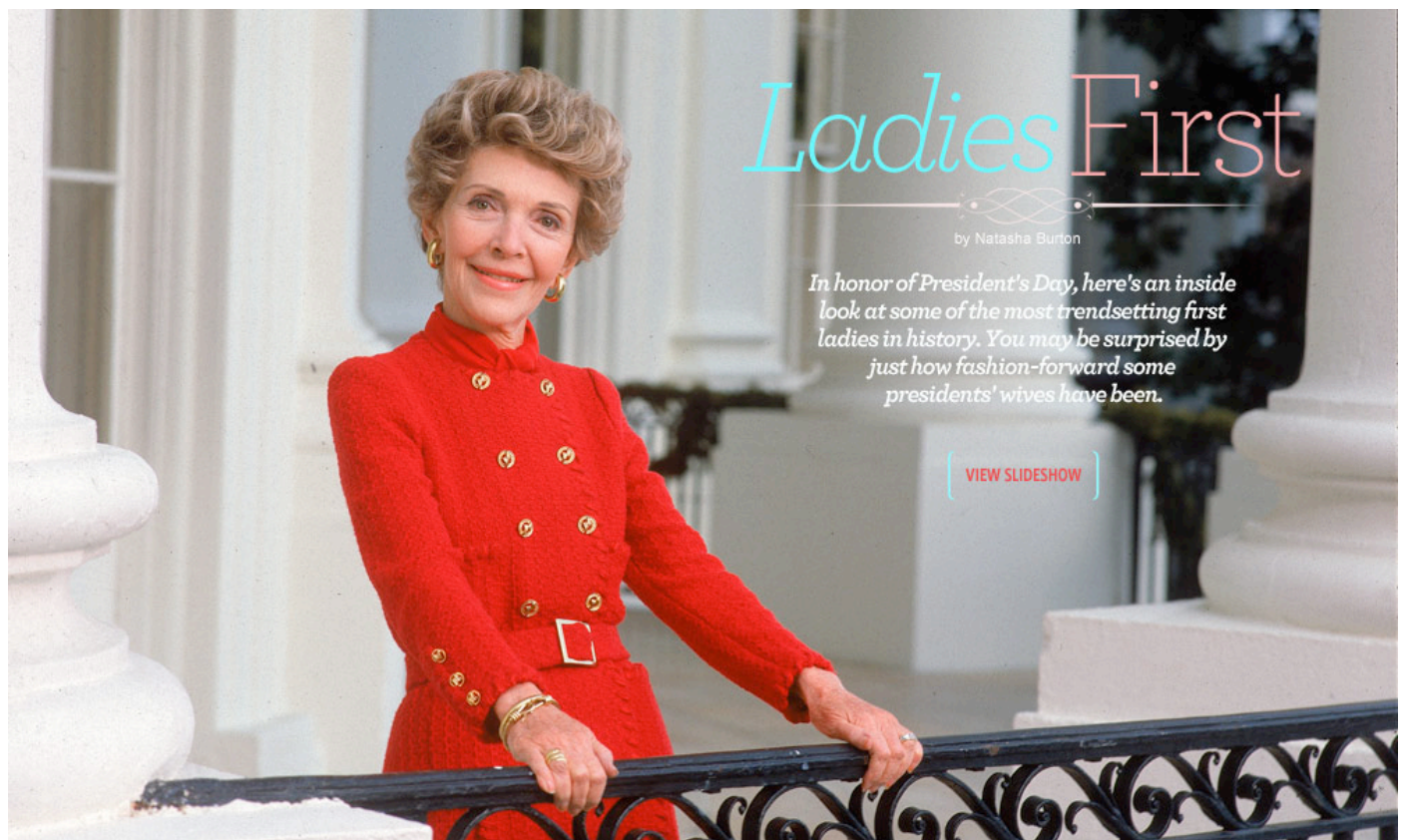




First lady fashion and beauty, a look back

By Natasha Burton | January 20, 2013





Big Spender

Before Martha Washington became the first first lady (when she was 58), she ran a trading business, which enabled her to purchase English laces, silk, stocking and bonnets from abroad, according to researchers at Mount Vernon Estate. Later, when George Washington took office, she reportedly spent up to \$800 a year on clothing—roughly \$25,000 in 2013 dollars—as well as \$200 annually for a hairdresser and \$150 on jewelry. While her style was



French Dressing

According to first lady fashion guru [Kate Betts](#), author of *Everyday Icon: Michelle Obama and the Power of Style*, Dolley Madison was one of the first White House women to use fashion for her political—and personal—advantage. She was known for opening up the White House—her husband James was in office from 1809 to 1817—for grand events and for wearing gowns modeled after those worn by Josephine Bonaparte, often accenting her look with silk turbans and feathers in her hair. Très chic!



Shopping Around

As a Kentucky-born "outsider" to the socially rigid Washington, Mary Todd Lincoln used fashion as a way to fit in, says Betts. However, she was often criticized for her extravagant taste, especially once the Civil War erupted (Lincoln famously had 16 gowns made for her during the conflict). [Cheryl Ann Wadlington](#), style director of Evoluer Image Consultants adds that Lincoln would make frequent trips to New York and Philadelphia for new duds, often running up quite a tab on credit—after all, who could refuse the first lady?



A Cut Above

As the earliest first lady to get married in the White House—and the first to allow her image to be used in advertisements—Frances Cleveland, wife of Grover Cleveland who was in office from 1885 (when she was a mere 21 years old) to 1889, welcomed the spotlight. Betts notes that she started a serious hair trend while her husband was in office: Cleveland cut her hair short and shaved the back of her neck, a daring-for-the-time style that was soon copied by women across America.



Paris Match

According to Wadlington, Eleanor Roosevelt took her cues from Coco Chanel's ready-to-wear clothes, and her look centered on functionality. Although you may not think of the former first lady as a style maverick, stylist [David Zyla](#) (who worked with Hillary Clinton), says that Roosevelt was actually fairly fashion-forward. She was the first president's wife to be photographed in a bathing suit (how risqué!) and her pink sequined inaugural gown in 1945 wouldn't look out of place on a modern catwalk.



Formal Engagement

Wadlington notes that Lady Bird Johnson had quite a task in following up fashion-forward Jackie O., who was not only 17 years her junior but also an enduring style icon. So instead of trying to compete with her predecessor, Zyla says, Johnson took her love of nature and incorporated it into her signature look. She wore simple outfits in colors like forest green, canary yellow and robin's egg blue; Johnson was known as being a true "natural beauty." Plus, her chic, conservative style, which often highlighted her hourglass figure, made her a classic in her own right.



Model Behavior

Before she was first lady, Betty Ford was a model for Grand Rapids department store Herpolsheimer's, and eventually became a buyer for the store, traveling to New York to check out the latest fashions. During her time in the White House, Ford's hair was always perfectly coiffed, and she accented her outfits with structured handbags, cat-eye sunglasses and oversize pearls.



A Leg Up

Known for her good posture and her long legs, it's no surprise that Pat Nixon was the earliest first lady to wear pants in public. Wadlington notes that Nixon chose American-made clothing whenever possible and photos of the former first lady highlight her proclivity toward cropped jackets and pussy-bow collars, which remain trendy today.



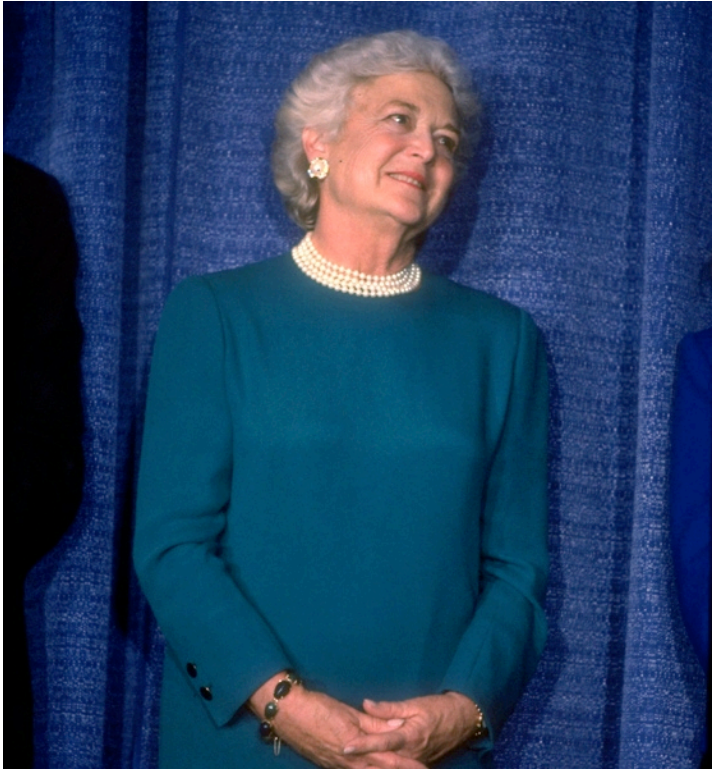
Elements of Style

According to Zyla, Jacqueline Kennedy made the biggest mark on fashion of any first lady—but she had help accomplishing this feat. Jackie O worked closely with fashion legend Diana Vreeland and designer Oleg Cassini, who alone created about 300 outfits for her. Kennedy's custom silk chiffon gown from the inaugural ball remains her most iconic look, Zyla says, because it showed that she was an entirely new kind of first lady.



Star Power

Fresh from an acting career in Los Angeles, Nancy Reagan brought a touch of Hollywood style into the White House. Wadlington says that Reagan frequently wore graceful and elegant creations by her favorite designers, Oscar de la Renta and Bill Blass, typically in her trademark color, which became known as Nancy Reagan Red.



Silver Fox

Brooke Sheldon, who was Barbara Bush's post-presidency personal assistant for three years, says that the former first lady was no-frills when it came to fashion, but took great care in dressing appropriately for each particular occasion. And she wore her trademark large pearls almost daily. As for her signature white hair, after graying at an early age, Bush accepted her new natural color.



American Spirit

Zyla says that Hillary Clinton not only chose American designers, but only purchased from those whose clothes were sold in Little Rock, Ark.—showing her loyalty to her hometown. Clinton shocked fashion critics in 1993 when she chose a long-sleeve creation for her husband's inaugural ball. Clinton's style always demonstrated that she cared more for what pleased her eye rather than following trends.



Southern Comfort

Laura Bush's look was at once conservative and feminine, Zyla says. She always chose pretty over dramatic—you'd never see her in shoulder pads or anything with a masculine cut. Zyla notes that Bush's look stayed very consistent over her husband's two terms. While she didn't have a signature color, her hallmark was wearing ice blue, which emphasized her eyes. She was also a loyal supporter of Texas-based designer Michael Faircloth, who designed her inaugural gown in 2001.



Modern Maverick

Much like Jackie O, [Michelle Obama](#) has helped redefine what first-lady style is. Mixing mass-market fashion from H&M and J.Crew with couture pieces by Jason Wu and Jay Mendel, she creates her own unique looks. Obama understands that her own sense of style has a huge impact, which is why she is so apt to wear American designers, says fashion consultant [Colin McDonald](#), who's styled the first lady.