

Michelle Obama in Europe: First lady's style and substance on display in European trip

While turning heads in Europe, U.S. first lady stresses value of education

By Christi Parsons | Washington Bureau
April 5, 2009

STRASBOURG, [France](#)—So far on her trip to Europe, [Michelle Obama](#) has hugged the queen of England, double cheek-kissed the glamorous first lady of France and electrified the tabloids with her designer couture.

When she talked to students at a school for underprivileged girls in London, though, her message was about her working-class childhood and her rise through strong values and hard work in school.

In other words, she may be wearing Jimmy Choo kitten heels these days, but the first lady pulled herself up by an old-fashioned pair of American bootstraps.

In President [Barack Obama](#)'s first presidential expedition to Europe, he is preaching a new foreign policy, calling on Europeans to set aside negative feelings toward [the U.S.](#) in favor of a new era of friendship and cooperation.

But Michelle Obama is unveiling her own policy of foreign engagement, one that blends a high-wattage celebrity with a uniquely American message about self-reliance and personal possibility.

President Obama is asking the world to embrace a new regard for his country. First Lady Obama appears to be trying to show them why they might want to.

Her reception from world leaders and the European public has been exuberant, with ardent crowds gathering at every stop. Audience members at one event were so excited to get the hugs she was dispensing that the Secret Service agents got a little nervous.

The BBC described Michelle Obama as her husband's co-star in Europe. The London Times, noting the European love affair with former Victoria's Secret model and current French First Lady [Carla Bruni](#), asked in print, "Carla who?"

The tour brings to mind the 1961 reception for the first lady on President [John Kennedy](#)'s European trip, which prompted the president to introduce himself as "the man who accompanied [Jacqueline Kennedy](#) to Paris."

No doubt, Michelle Obama is going for glamor of a Kennedyesque order. She has sported creations from the designers [Jason Wu](#) and Junya Watanabe, and caused a particular stir with the black-and-white [Isabel Toledo](#) dress she wore to a dinner at the [G-20](#) summit in London.

The fashion press pronounced her every bit the equal of Bruni, with whom she seemed to have formed a friendship during the week. Onlookers thought the two appeared sad to be saying goodbye when they parted ways after a visit to the Strasbourg Cathedral on Saturday.

The European continent closely eyed the first lady's other A-list get-togethers— [Queen Elizabeth II](#) invited the Obamas for a private audience—as well as elegant visits to destinations such as the Royal Opera House and the Palais Rohan.

But the glitz was not the first lady's overriding message.

She mixed her Jason Wu with a little [J. Crew](#), that fixture of the suburban shopping mall (the retailer apparently sold out of its champagne cardigan the day after she wore it on an outing in London).

What's more, Obama flouted the upper-crust protocol at times, and at one point reached an arm around to actually hug Queen Elizabeth. (No harm, said the palace: "We don't issue instructions on not touching the queen.")

"Michelle walks in, and she is as she seems," British Olympian Kelly Holmes told reporters after having dinner with Obama at British Prime Minister [Gordon Brown](#)'s residence.

What she is, the first lady said in her only lengthy address while overseas, is the child of a working-class family from the South Side of Chicago.

"There is nothing in my story that would land me here," Obama said, speaking last week to students at London's Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Language College, where girls are encouraged by their school mission to "learn without limits."

"I wasn't raised with wealth or resources or any social standing to speak of," she said. "My father was a city worker all of his life, and my mother was a stay-at-home mom." She got ahead through education, Obama told the girls, urging them to pull themselves up by their bootstraps too.

Tom Hamburger of the Washington Bureau contributed to this report.