

First lady's inaugural gown is a balancing act

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WASHINGTON – Inauguration Day will belong to Barack Obama, but tonight will be wife Michelle's turn in the spotlight, as all eyes will be on her – and her choice of ball gown.

Throughout U.S. history, first ladies have made statements about themselves and the times they live in with their inaugural wardrobes.

"They reflect around the world an image of our country," said Carl Sferrazza Anthony, a historian who's written about first ladies.

But he added that people also want to know that the president's wife is accessible to them.

It's "a balancing act between being a queen and a commoner," he said. "The inaugural gown is a metaphor for the first lady role."

The statuesque Michelle Obama has excited fashion designers, who are eager to dress her, but observers say the recession makes it likely she will wear a subdued gown in keeping with the country's economic downturn.

The tradition of the inaugural ball began in 1809 with first lady Dolley Madison, a skillful hostess who knew that social events could support her husband's presidency.

Throughout the 19th century, there was usually a single inaugural ball, paid for by the winner's political party. Sometimes, the personality of the president and wartime intervened.

During Franklin Roosevelt's four inaugurations, there were no inaugural balls but March of Dimes balls for charity, some attended by first lady Eleanor Roosevelt but none by the president.

In the post-World War II era, Jackie Kennedy glamorized the inauguration festivities with her style. Her inaugural ivory gown and cape, which she helped design, caused a sensation. Among others:

- Nancy Reagan wore a glittery one-shouldered off-white gown that was considered very Hollywood but also very insensitive during the 1981 recession.

- Hillary Rodham Clinton's 1993 purple gown by a young designer was criticized as less than chic.

- Laura Bush's 2001 red-beaded Chantilly lace gown by Dallas designer Michael Faircloth met with an underwhelming response in fashion circles. Her 2005 Oscar de la Renta silver and blue tulle gown, however, was a hit.

"It's an interaction of the glamour of the first lady and the outfit," Bruce Buchanan, a presidential scholar at the University of Texas at Austin, said of the intense interest in inaugural gowns. "Jackie Kennedy set that standard. Jackie began the fascination that extends to Michelle."