

Short notice: Much ado over first lady's 'do

A haircut? Or an updo? Buzz over hairstyle spotlights Michelle O's influence



Matthew Cavanaugh / Pool / EPA

It was just an updo, not a haircut, but Michelle Obama's new look at a country music concert at the White House on Tuesday still caused a sensation.

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Gadzooks! The first lady has a new hairstyle!

Or so it seemed on Tuesday when Michelle Obama appeared with a shorter, sleeker look at a country music performance at the White House. Almost immediately, Web sites began tittering about the big news. USA Today and People posted information about her new hairstyle; the [blog Mrs. O](#) praised her updo and wondered whether it was actually a new cut.

So which was it? Did the first lady abandon her signature, elegant bob cut? On Wednesday, the Office of the First Lady broke the news with the American public:

Nope, it wasn't a haircut. She just pinned it up.

An endless fascination

All the hubbub over a simple updo is yet another example of our endless fascination with the fashion sense and style decisions of first ladies — and with Michelle Obama in particular. With her undeniable, effortless flair, this first lady is growing accustomed to having every outfit and every hairstyle lovingly chronicled.

In fact, historians say it wouldn't be at all unusual for women across America to start imitating the look the first lady sported Tuesday.

First ladies' hairstyles have captivated the American public for decades, noted Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian for the National First Ladies' Library and author of numerous books about first ladies. Indeed, the locks of presidents' wives have served as a touchstone for some of our kindest and harshest judgments over the years.

"There's a long history of people being very interested in the clothing and the look of the first lady and fairly or unfairly judging them," Anthony said. "We all like to have a great haircut, we all like to look great — and we expect that of our first ladies."

Anthony recalled how much scrutiny Hillary Clinton garnered for her hairstyles and wardrobe choices when she was first lady. The close attention prompted Clinton to say, "If we ever want to get Bosnia off the front page, all I have to do is ... change my hair."



National First Ladies' Library

Was Michelle Obama's hairstyle on Tuesday reminiscent of Jackie O, another first lady who endured endless scrutiny?

Jacqueline Kennedy also expressed befuddlement over the public's near obsession with her look and hairstyle. "All the talk over what I wear and how I fix my hair has amused and puzzled me," she once said. "What does my hairdo have to do with my husband's ability to be president?"

Of course, in the final analysis, Jackie O's popularity had a lot to do with JFK's success as president — and that lesson has not been lost on the Obamas. The photogenic family members — Malia and Sasha included — consistently appear happy and attractive at home and abroad, and this boosts their likability quotient.

'Superficial' — and unavoidable

Michelle Obama unveiled her new look in the East Room of the White House at the second concert in a music series that she started last month. The first concert focused on jazz. Tuesday's event featured country musicians such as Alison Krauss, Brad Paisley and Charley Pride. A classical music workshop is scheduled in the fall.

The audience at the concert included lawmakers, Cabinet secretaries — and Mrs. Obama decked out in a white Michael Kors sheath dress and sporting her pinned-up 'do.

If the attention Michelle Obama gets every time she tries a new look seems excessive, it really isn't anything new, said Anthony of the National First Ladies' Library. He pointed out how much fanfare accompanied Helen Taft's geisha hairstyle, or Bess Truman's poodle cut, or Mamie Eisenhower's highly stylized bangs.

Even Abraham Lincoln's wife wasn't immune. Mary Todd Lincoln loved to wear flowers in her hair, and she once was ridiculed for wearing "a flower pot on her head" in public.

"There's a little danger in making judgments about other people based on the superficial stuff," Anthony said. "But there's something basic about human nature to it, too."