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The message in the dress

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President-elect Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle, are expected to attend all 10 official inaugural balls.

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In many ways, it feels strange to focus so much attention on one dress – and to have it be the focus of such a historic night. But every four years we do it, and tonight will not be different. I'm sure plenty of you will be looking at the pictures Wednesday morning, as well.

I'm talking, of course, about Michelle Obama's inauguration gown.

The discussion until this evening will come with a healthy dose of speculation – will it be Narciso Rodriguez? Maria Pinto? Will she choose color? Glitz? Scale her gown back a bit to be a bit more recession-friendly? Ahhh, the questions.

Carl Sferrazza Anthony is a historian at the National First Ladies Library in California. This man knows everything about the First Ladies, and that includes some very important dress knowledge. Still, I was surprised to hear him equate those frocks with the bible used for the President's swearing-in.

"The inaugural gown has taken on significance akin to the holy grail of inauguration day," Anthony said. "It's right up there in terms of important symbolic tangible items with the bible that the president, each president, individually decides to use in their ceremony."

Anthony went on to say the inauguration gown really is more than just a dress, it is the symbol of a new administration and a new beginning.

Michelle Obama's fashion sense has been a hot topic since she first appeared on the campaign trail, so it's no surprise there is chatter about her inauguration gown. She's been compared to Jackie Kennedy, but celebrity stylist and Harper's Bazaar contributing editor Mary Alice Stephenson says that while both are fashion icons, it's not for the same reasons.

"Jackie Kennedy, when she showed up on inauguration night in an ivory sheath dress and cape that she designed (...), I think there was a collective 'Wow!'. She brought glamour to the White House but she was so beautiful and so glamorous it almost seemed unreal," Stephenson explained.

"What makes Michelle so special is that she seems normal, she seems like she's your best friend. She has the same kind of figures that most of us have as women, she dresses in a very American way — classics with a twist. She's more approachable and more real and I think women are really responding to that."

Fashion has always been important to Michelle Obama, but we've seen her style change as the campaign progressed. "She understands the power of clothes to send a message," Stephenson told me, "and you will see through the course of the last couple of years, as Barak has risen, you've seen her change the way she dresses. As a lawyer she's really dressing in dark clothes, boxy suits. In the past few years, you've seen her embrace this feminine, gentle colorful way of dressing, which I think really shows that she understands how to send a message with what she wears."

What will tonight's message be?

Stay tuned.