

Women see themselves in Michelle Obama's mirror

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NEW YORK - First, everyone was talking about how Michelle Obama was bringing more fashion to the White House with insider labels and youthful looks.

Then came the chatter about her being less formal, wearing all those sleeveless dresses and baring her famously toned arms. Together, those sides of Mrs. Obama - fashion-conscious and unstuffy - make her both a designer muse and an everywoman.

Truth be told, Mrs. Obama's much-discussed bare arms aren't revolutionary; first lady Frances Cleveland broke that ground more than a century ago.

But with all the gloom-and-doom economic news out there, Mrs. Obama seems to have hit fashion's sweet spot with looks that are fresh but not showy, a sensibility designers tried to mimic at the recent runway previews of fall collections.

"Michelle Obama seems to be the singular beacon out there to get us excited about the way we look or to buy a new lipstick or to get our hair done," says Mandi Norwood, whose book "Michelle Style: Celebrating the First Lady of Fashion" will be published by HarperCollins/Avon in May. "We can live vicariously through her."

The first lady's clothes tend to be colorful and classic, with some very modern accessories thrown in such as a chunky Tom Binns costume necklace or green patent Jimmy Choo pumps. In her first official portrait, she wears a sleek, black racer-back dress by Michael Kors, adorned with small earrings, a double strand of pearls and a Cartier tank watch.

"My favorite clothes are about framing the woman and putting the focus on her," Kors says. "This dress exemplifies a modern confident woman like Mrs. Obama with its clean timeless elegance."

Interestingly, it's in dresses, which Betty Ford and Pat Nixon largely rebelled against in the '70s as the women's movement was in full swing, that Mrs. Obama looks the most contemporary.

"What's special about her is she has modern glamour. You can imagine her having a lovely breakfast meeting or cocktails. She doesn't wear dark pants and old sweater by day and wear over-the-top gown at night," says Norwood. "She can carry through in that 24-hour way that most women do."

Remember, it was only a generation or two ago when women would change several times throughout the day, from their morning slacks to dinner dress. At that time, Mamie Eisenhower and then Jackie Kennedy set the fashion tone in Washington and beyond.

But they weren't the first style icons in the White House, says Carl Anthony, historian for the National First Ladies' Library in Canton, Ohio. Grace Coolidge, who was considered attractive

and athletic like Mrs. Obama, wore lavish clothes in the Roaring '20s and so did her predecessor Florence Harding, who toured the rural West in a wardrobe of flashy styles inspired by the recent discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb.

Cleveland wore sleeveless gowns - sparking a petition drive by a religious group asking her to cover up, which she promptly ignored, according to Anthony.

Eisenhower and Kennedy both went sleeveless with little fanfare. But Mrs. Obama's bare arms have gotten plenty of attention for their definition as much as their exposure in midwinter.

The Washington Post's Robin Givhan called them "post-Title IX arms." New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd called Mrs. Obama's biceps a "symbol of American strength," countering her colleague David Brooks who said, "She's made her point. Now she should put away Thunder and Lightning."

Bare arms and sheath dresses lead to comparisons with Kennedy, but Anthony says Mrs. Obama is probably more like Eisenhower.

"Mamie was extremely stylish. She was known for her famous hat collection and people were copying that. But, like Mrs. Obama, she'd mix in costume jewelry from J.C. Penney," he says.

Unlike Kennedy, who would collaborate with Oleg Cassini on much of her custom-made clothing inspired by the European catwalks, Mrs. Obama picks things that women can imagine themselves wearing. She varies her look from day to day - drawing a contrast between herself and both Laura Bush and Hillary Clinton, who favored pantsuit uniforms - but she'll wear the same garments repeatedly, tweaking the outfit with new accessories, something else that women not married to the president do.

"What I think is so fascinating about her (Mrs. Obama), and what my friends talk about is that her style is relatable," says Christine Schwab, a wardrobe consultant and author of "The Grown-Up Girl's Guide to Style." Schwab wouldn't be surprised if there were soon armies of chic women over 40 layering waist-hugging belts over their cardigans, wearing shoulder-baring tops and accessorizing with costume jewelry because Mrs. Obama does.

Maybe Mrs. Obama has been a little too casual on occasion, like wearing khaki pants and T-shirts on the campaign trail. But she's not perfect, nor would women want her to be, Schwab says.

"Sometimes she gets it right and sometimes she gets it wrong, but we don't mind because we all get it wrong sometimes. I think she's appropriate for her age and her physical body and for her position. I think she's breaking through a glass ceiling, and I don't mind it," Schwab says.

"I loved that her hair was blowing on inauguration day. Can you ever remember another first lady's hair that wasn't a helmet?!"