

Is This What Happens when Anna Wintour Feels Emotion?

by Sydney Andrews

Abstract

This paper reviews the growing relationship between the fashion industry and politics, emphasizing reasons for this strengthening correlation. It features an analysis of the style of current female political figures such as Michelle Obama and Anne Romney, as well as *Vogue*'s controversial story "Storm Troupers," intended to pay a tribute to Hurricane Sandy's first responders. Using concepts of perception and femininity, the recent involvement of the fashion industry with politics is discussed with particular historical and modern relevance to *Vogue*, and its editor-in-chief, Anna Wintour.

Key Terms:

FASHION – industry

POLITICS

VOGUE (periodical)

WINTOUR, Anna, 1949-

OBAMA, Michelle, 1964-

"STORM TROUPERS" (fashion story, *Vogue* 2013)

FEMININITY

I. The Fashion of Politics

Most politicians probably do not think the fashion industry has a large impact on their success in politics. There is not much variation as to what you see political figures wearing, as their fashion sense is not generally something that is the topic of conversation or a factor that can make or break an election. Dominated by men and conservative in nature, politics is a field where public perception plays a huge role, and straying too far from the expected 'dress code' could be detrimental, especially for female political figures. There is essentially no variation on what men in politics can wear when it comes to the structure of an outfit, but for women the possibilities are endless. Regardless of this, women in politics have generally stuck to a regimented wardrobe, perhaps to level the playing field between them and their male counterparts. What Michelle Obama has mastered however, is a way to use fashion as a tool to her advantage, instead of deemphasizing it. Because of figures like Michelle Obama, the fashion industry has recently shown just how prominent and penetrating it can be in the political sphere.

Over the first four years of Barak Obama's presidency, Michelle Obama was praised for her style with an aesthetic and influence comparable to Jackie Kennedy. Her care for and interest in her personal wardrobe caught the attention of a nation—or at least a lot of the women in the nation—and spurred a newfound concentration on what or *who* women in politics were wearing.

The article “*Vogue*'s New World: American Fashionability and the Politics of Style” by Allison Matthew David chronicles the history of the most influential fashion book in the industry: American *Vogue*. From an “elitist Eurocentric” magazine at its inception in 1892, *Vogue* has grown to appreciate and celebrate the casual simplicity of American Fashion. This is perhaps illustrated most by the 1992 hundredth anniversary issue David cites, where ten high-fashion models appear on the cover, all donning white jeans and white button-up shirts from Gap. David says featuring Gap, as well as American designers Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein and Donna Karan deliberately breaks down the class and ethnic distinctions that early *Vogue* upheld. Essentially framing these designers as “all-American,” I deem it no coincidence that these designers are all ones that Michelle Obama elects to wear. (Fig. 1)



Fig 1: Michelle Obama wearing a custom version of a gown from Ralph Lauren's Fall 2011 Collection. (stylelite.com)

Jan Goggans argues in her article “Working-class women and women ‘working’ class: Literary masquerade in the inter-war years” that women who wear fashionable attire do so for one of two reasons. There is first the woman who wants to create the indication that she is higher in society than she is, and then there are the women to do it because “it feels good.” Superficially this is a pointed claim, but in comparing it to the history of *Vogue* outlined by David, it does ring true. As *Vogue* from its inception focused on class and ethnic barriers, and only the ‘highest’ of fashions, it seems women would read early *Vogue* to emulate the magazine in order to achieve a higher-class status. With the transition to a less class-focused American heritage, the modern day readers of the magazine would dress to “feel good” as Goggans suggests.

In “Entangling the Fashion Subject Through the African Diaspora: From Not to (K)not in Fashion Theory,” Susan Kaiser and Sarah McCullough sight a quote by Michelle Obama from an article in *Vogue* that only further proves the correlation between Goggans’ idea that modern women dress to “feel good” and David’s stance on the current climate of *Vogue*. Obama is quoted as saying “First and foremost, I wear what I love. That’s what women have to focus on: what makes them happy and what makes them feel comfortable and beautiful. If I can have any impact, I want women to feel good about themselves and have fun with fashion” (366). Obama’s quote by nature of being featured in *Vogue* shows that the magazine is aligning itself with these self-empowering views on fashion, and her outspoken view on clothing that makes her feel good about herself is in direct agreement with Goggans. Kaiser and McCullough continue by illustrating how Obama has shown innovation and consciousness in her fashion choices by incorporating new or ethnic minority designers into her wardrobe and mixing price ranges.

The amount of attention the press has paid to Michelle Obama’s wardrobe has not left other female political figures in the clear, and not all of them share Obama’s outspoken and positive sentiment when it comes to discussing their choice of clothing. Dan Amira’s *NY Mag* article details a 2010 interview with Hillary Clinton in Kyrgyzstan in which she is asked which designers she prefers. Her response: “Would you ever ask a man that question?” The question was in an admittedly poor choice of timing, as it was on the heels of Clinton answering a question about sexism when it comes to what female lawyers wear in the courtroom. However, was her harsh response really warranted? I don’t know why she would not see fashion as a female-empowering platform rather than a sexist one. Or alternatively she could see fashion as a way of supporting designers, the way Obama does. Minimally I would assume she would expect to field questions like these a year into Barak Obama’s presidency since Michelle Obama’s choice of wardrobe had already become so influential.

Obama vs. Romney: Campaign Trail Fashion

Clinton is not the only one whose fashion has come under fire since the Obama presidency. Recently and most notably in the 2012 election, Michelle Obama’s fashions have been directly compared to Anne Romney’s. After the Republican and Democratic National Conventions last fall, Elspeth Reeve, among many other journalists, wrote an article for *The Atlantic Wire* comparing and contrasting the chosen outfits. The article details everything from the cost of the dresses to up-close images of the jewelry the women wore, ultimately naming Obama the winner in this “Fancy Dress Face Off” as the article is titled.



Fig 2: Michelle Obama in Tracy Reese and Anne Romney in Oscar de la Renta at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions.

With Obama's Tracy Reese dress noted as costing between \$395 and \$450, and Romney's Oscar de la Renta dress listing as \$1,990, a controversy of price was bound to unravel. (Fig 2) The choices of designers are also significant: Tracy Reese being a self-made African-American businesswoman, and Oscar de la Renta a historical fashion icon worn by many past first ladies. In Suzi Parker's article for *The Washington Post*, she discusses New Hampshire governor John Sununu's skepticism of the price of Michelle Obama's DNC dress. While Tracy Reese dresses do indeed retail around the \$400 mark that the party disclosed, Sununu's accusation is not without warrant. The truth of the matter is that Obama's dress was custom made for her, and despite being later produced for Reese's collection and retailing for \$398 on her website, a custom-made dress would normally exceed the retail price range.

Perhaps even more controversial than the price of Michelle Obama's dress was the speculation that *Vogue* editor-in-chief Anna Wintour was pressuring designers not to dress and support Anne Romney throughout the election. In *New Republic*'s cleverly titled article "The November Issue" by Noreen Malone, Wintour's significant political involvement with Obama is chronicled. After raising more than half a million dollars and hosting four dinners at \$30,000 a plate, Wintour has more than shown her political allegiance. As Malone says, "In a season that's increasingly seen banker money go to the other guy, Wintour's connections and influence in Hollywood, fashion, and society aren't merely pretty, shiny things to have around; they've become vital to the financial success of the campaign," and she could not be more correct. The relationship between fashion and entertainment industries and politics has been heightened ever since Obama's term, and Wintour is only fueling this relationship with her outspoken support. However, deemed as the most important woman in the fashion industry, and an icon in-and-of herself, does her clear

alliance with the Democratic Party affect the designers that she can easily make and break the careers of?

It was certainly speculated so during election season when designers Thom Browne and Tracy Reese took to their Twitters to show their gratitude for Michelle Obama choosing to wear their designs and their support for Barak. Oscar de la Renta's Twitter 'OscarPRGirl' however, was silent according to FOX News' article "Is Anna Wintour pressuring designers to steer clear of Anne Romney?" by Hollie McKay, despite Romney donning ODLR designs multiple times during the season. Even though a rep from *Vogue* denied any influence of Wintour in designers' decisions to dress Romney, according to McKay's article American designer Diane von Furstenberg's team reportedly went as far as to say they did not know how Romney obtained a dress from their collection after she was seen wearing it. Wintour may have never implied a threat to any designers working with Romney, but they could have instilled that fear in themselves based on Wintour's political involvement.

II. The Politics of Fashion



Fig 3: Image from "Storm Troupers." Karlie Kloss wearing Oscar de la Renta inside the turbine deck at Con Ed. (vogue.com)

The Fashion industry's political involvement has stretched beyond ties to female political figures though recently. In a controversial photo shoot entitled "Storm Troupers" for the February 2013 issue of *Vogue*, Annie Liebovitz photographed models in couture alongside first responders to

Hurricane Sandy. Featuring models next to the National Guard, Con Ed workers, neonatal doctors and nurses, Air NYPD, FDNY and aboard a Coast Guard boat, the shoot was supposed to pay tribute to New York's finest, according to Jessica Misener's article "*Vogue's Hurricane Sandy Spread: Crossing The Line?*" for *The Huffington Post*. Misener however goes on to explain why not everyone saw the spread as such a tribute saying, "But that hasn't quelled outrage from commenters saying that *Vogue's* spread crosses the line in nestling \$3,000 gowns amidst some of Sandy's most hard-hit neighborhoods, giving them the effect of bizarre ornaments," before making the all-too-resonant point that if the magazine wanted to pay a tribute to these heroes, they would have dressed the heroes themselves up in couture rather than surrounding them with frail fashion supermodels.



Fig 4: Image from "Storm Troupers." Kasia Struss in Carolina Herrera and Karlie Kloss in Rodarte with Air NYPD. (vogue.com)

Katherine Goldstein agrees with Misener in her piece for *Slate* called "*Vogue Pays Tribute to Hurricane Sandy First Responders With Awful Photo Spread,*" criticizing that photographer Liebovitz managed to turn firefighters, army reservists and Con Ed workers into props, and beginning her article by wryly asking "Is this what happens when Anna Wintour feels emotion?" These are understandable sentiments given such a sensitive issue that caused wreckage and negative impact on many lives. While I agree with Misener's proposal that the first responders themselves, like the neo-natal nurses who transported babies from Bellevue Hospital after it lost power (Fig 6), could and maybe should have been the ones to wear couture and strike a pose, I minimally give *Vogue* the credit of paying editorial attention to the natural disaster and social

issue at hand. With offices in the heart of midtown Manhattan, *Vogue* and its staff did not necessarily escape the hurricane unscathed, and certainly would not think to make a mockery of the situation.

The Guardian article “*Vogue's Hurricane Sandy shoot: how offensive is it?*” by Rosie Swash perhaps defends the shoot most logically. Firstly, by comparing it to recent international *Vogue* edition shoots that addressed political and social issues in bad taste, such as Italian *Vogue's* 24-page shoot with models doused in ‘oil’ after the BP oil spill, illustrates the relevance of Hurricane Sandy to American *Vogue*. Rather than an oil spill that happened half a world away from Italy, *Vogue* is addressing a natural disaster that happened in its own city. Swash describes the disaster as “apolitical,” meaning people risk nothing by supporting the cause, and references the \$1.7 million dollars *Vogue* has raised in conjunction with the CFDA for Sandy relief.



Fig 5: Image from "Storm Troupers." Iman in Narciso Rodriguez and Karlie Kloss in Diane von Furstenberg with the FDNY. (vogue.com)

Eric Wilson expands on this donation in his article “Fashion Still Lends a Hand” for *The New York Times*. Wilson explains the money was raised through an online auction that included prizes such as a date with Anna Wintour, and also describes another auction in the works called Re/Create New York. In this auction, celebrities and designers sell off personal items to raise money. This explanation of *Vogue's* contribution that extends beyond the “Storm Troupers”

story adds validity and depth to the magazines involvement with Sandy, and as a result helps to defend the shoot.

At the end of her article, Swash speculates that the negative reaction to “Storm Troupers” indicates that people do not think the fashion industry should get involved in such a ‘serious situation’. But the fashion industry is rather using the disaster to situate themselves politically, only extending their presence and verifying their intent to be involved in such serious situations. In Malone’s article she says in regards to Wintour’s feelings on the 2012 presidential election, “She’s in search of something more than just a victory in November; she wants politics to take fashion seriously. Over the past half-decade or so, as her own profile has risen, so too has *Vogue*’s political coverage,” and I think she could not be more correct. It should be seen as no coincidence that the first lady who takes care and consideration to be fashionable, and is now regarded as a fashion icon, has been featured on the pages, and most notably twice on the cover, of the most well-respected fashion magazine in the world.



Fig 6: Image from "Storm Troupers." Wen in Michael Kors and Karlie Kloss in Marc Jacobs with Bellevue neonatal ICU doctors and nurses. (vogue.com)

Conclusion

Wintour’s ideals have always been with the Democratic Party, having made obvious her partialness to Hillary Clinton by doing favorable profiles of her until Clinton, according to Malone, snubbed Wintour in 2008 by declining to appear in *Vogue*. A year later comes along the next first lady—but this time one who reciprocates Wintour’s advances. Thus, this presidency for Wintour creates the perfect storm of having her political ideals satisfied and a first lady who is indeed, taking fashion seriously. Fashion then, perhaps, has to give in return and take politics seriously, as I speculate is what the “Storm Troupers” story boils down to: politics and the human factor. In *Fashion Spreads: Word and Image in Fashion Photography since 1980*, Paul Jobling writes about former artistic director of Condé Nast publishing, Alexander Liberman, and

his views on the evolving fashion photograph. Liberman noted that the clothes were becoming less important and that the *human factor* was dominating. This human factor is exactly what “Storm Troupers” aimed to home in on. While it could have stood to be less controversial, “Storm Troupers” was the Fashion industry taking politics seriously in an era where politicians are starting to take fashion seriously.

At the center of this debate is the question of the involvement of the two industries with each other. In the article “Madame Speaker, We Have the Votes: Feminist Style and Nancy Pelosi's Personal and Political Roles in the Health Care Reform Debate,” Mary Anne Taylor explains that feminine style has typically been deemphasized in politics for fear of being perceived as weak, which upholds the masculine hegemony. This point is only emphasized further when Malone sights Wintour’s Editor’s Letter in the issue of *Vogue* after Clinton refused to appear. Wintour essentially accuses Clinton of being afraid of appearing “too feminine,” meaning Taylor’s proposed stigma of femininity in politics is in fact true. The formerly insubstantial involvement of fashion in politics could then rather boil down a perceived correlation between femininity and weakness.

This perception may have once stood to be a valid fear of female politicians, but as Michelle Obama is wholly perceived as feminine, and hardly perceived as weak, perhaps she is leading a crusade toward the empowerment of femininity in politics. And perhaps that is what Wintour sought all along. While you could argue that Michelle Obama is able to embrace her femininity and style because she is the first lady rather than the president herself, or because she is regarded as having a nice figure due to her campaign for exercise, she is still one of the major reasons for the heightened correlation between the fashion industry and politics in the last five years. Only time will tell if her positive and innovative take on fashion will help female politicians to embrace the fashion industry and their own femininity going forward.

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