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PAIGE WISER

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Dress a winner -- or loser?

SPLIT DECISION | Experts vote on Michelle's victory wear

Comments

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BY PAIGE WISER pwiser@suntimes.com

The people have spoken, and they are decisively behind President-elect Barack Obama.

The votes on Michelle Obama's victory dress, however, are still being counted.

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Critics found good things — and bad — to say about the dress Michelle Obama, wife of president-elect Barack Obama, wore Tuesday night at the rally in Grant Park. (AP)

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• Experts vote on Michelle's victory wear

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"As an image consultant and Chicagoan, I was personally and professionally disappointed," says Robin Walker.

The red and black embroidered silk chiffon dress was a bold choice, after the parade of Sarah Palin power separates and Cindy McCain pastel shantung.

"I thought it was very striking," says Sasha Charnin Morrison, fashion director at Us Weekly. "It's absolutely refreshing and so perfect for the direction that we're going to go in."

Why the mixed reaction?

First, the good:

The choice of designer

The dress is from Narciso Rodriguez's spring 2009 line. Rodriguez is a celebrity red carpet staple, best known for designing Carolyn Bessette Kennedy's 1996 wedding dress. A Kennedy connection is never a bad thing.

And Obama gets bonus points for her democratic approach to fashion. When she wore a \$148 print dress on "The View," it immediately sold out at White

House/Black Market stores. She appeared on the cover of the October issue of More magazine in a bright pink dress by Chicago's Maria Pinto.

"Throughout the campaign, Mrs. Obama consistently displayed an impressive instinct for mixing high and low fashion," says Colleen Curtis, *StyleList.com*'s editorial director and AOL's fashion expert. Obama has worn everything from trendy, expensive Thakoon Panichgul to off-the-shelf J. Crew. "More importantly, she looks equally comfortable in both," says Curtis.

The color scheme

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The Obamas coordinated themselves with the same color scheme: Malia, 10, wore red; Sasha, 7, wore black, and Barack Obama wore the same dark suit from Hart Schaffner Marx that he wore at the Democratic convention. "They're a very good-looking family," says Morrison. "They really just looked put together."

Now the bad:

The cardigan

First of all, it was practically balmy on election night in Chicago. The bolero-style sweater threw off the balance of the dress. And if she was worried about being chilled, Obama certainly could have asked Rodriguez to whip up some sleeves for her.

The pattern

The splotchy red was a bit of a Rorschach test for online critics. Up close, the pattern was made of tiny flowers, but at-home viewers saw flames, paint splatters, hot lava, and even a leftover Black Widow costume.

"It was too dramatic, sexy and colorful for a woman who is going to stand beside our future president," says image consultant Walker. "I'll leave the whole Halloween thing alone because that would just be catty on my part, and I adore Michelle."

Overall, Us Weekly's Charnin Morrison says Obama has the potential to be a fashion icon on the level of Jacqueline Kennedy or Carla Bruni. "She wears fashion well," says Morrison. "It seems like she just enjoys it."

Of course, it would be wrong for fashion -- faux pas or not -- to distract from the big picture.

"Michelle Obama is so much more than a dress!" says Michal Ann Strahilevitz of Golden Gate University. "I did not love the dress myself, but I am inspired by the accomplishments of the woman who was wearing it. As a marketing professor, I think the image and legacy of Michelle Obama will be far more about what she says and does than what she wears."

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