

America's new vogue for black fashion is all due to Michelle Obama

Black faces have featured on US Vogue's cover for three months in a row. This is unprecedented - and a sign that the Obama effect has changed American fashion. But is it a lasting trend, and will it mean more black models on the catwalk?

Paul Harris in New York
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It is a sign of a quiet revolution in an industry where image is everything: for the past three months the fashion bible Vogue has put a black woman on its cover in America.

The move has sent ripples though the fashion industry, which many have long regarded as discriminating against black models in favour of an aesthetic idealising a very Caucasian image of beauty.

But no longer. The great moment came in March when America's first black first lady, Michelle Obama, stared from the cover of Vogue. She was followed in April by the singer Beyoncé. Now, in May, it's the turn of black model Liya Kebede.

The covers have been hailed by some as the moment fashion finally came to terms with its less than stellar record in celebrating non-white models. It has been mirrored by a greater visibility of black models on the runways of fashion shows and a new fetish for Africa that is sweeping through many design houses. "Fashion, and Vogue, are celebrating diversity," said Edward Enninful, a top stylist and fashion director who works closely with the magazine.

But the impetus for the changing attitudes could lie a long way from the world of haute couture and its powerful designers. The key is Michelle Obama. There is little doubt that she is the biggest political icon to hit the fashion industry since Jackie Onassis. Her face stares from magazine covers, her favoured designers become overnight sensations and the clothes she wears often sell out in the shops as soon as she is seen in them. Some have complained at the triviality of the phenomenon, saying that as America faces the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, that the media focus on Michelle's newest dress is trivial at best and irresponsible at worst.

But that ignores the real powers of fashion. Fashion houses and their models can influence the way millions of Americans think, act and feel about themselves. That can be for ill - with the modern obsession with thinness. Or it can be for good - in the shape of Michelle. A black woman - and also a well-built, professional, educated, older woman - is staring out from the magazine stands and asking Americans to be like her.

It was a debate that raged across the newspapers and blogosphere in the early days of the Obama presidency, sparking furious arguments and pithy headlines on both sides. The source of all this acrimony? Not climate change, not healthcare and not

Afghanistan or Iraq. No, for many people the real hot topic of conversation in the wake of Barack Obama's inauguration was Michelle's predilection for baring her arms.

There is no exaggerating the fascination that the American media have with her. Her clothing choices fuel endless segments on cable news and countless column inches in print and online. An entire website, [Mrs O](#), has been set up to catalogue every fashion move that Michelle makes. When she chose a dress from Jason Wu to be her inaugural gown, it catapulted the designer to overnight success. Wu had set up his label only in 2006; now he is one of the hottest names in the fashion world. That in turn is revealing a new economic power in fashion for black people (after all, the colour that never goes out of style is the green of a dollar bill). "Michelle Obama and her daughters are forcing advertisers to have a new interest in black beauty," said Qianna Smith, fashion editor at Essence magazine.

Everyone is obsessed. "She has got an innate sense of how she wants to look. It goes beyond clothes. Jackie O had it. Princess Di had it. Michelle Obama has it," said Enniful. It probably helps that Laura Bush - who had Michelle's job for the past eight years - definitely did not have it. Though Laura Bush remained popular, even as her husband plumbed the depths of national disdain, she was never adopted by the fashion industry. She wore variations on the same homespun fashions for most of the decade.

Michelle Obama has been very different. Though it would have been easy to play it safe, she has made a conscious decision to make fashion statements. They are not radical. She favours black and keeps her chosen designs classic, but they are nonetheless statements. "I admire it a great deal. She has an endless sense of style. Has anyone made an impact so quickly as she has? The Obamas have not been in office for 100 days yet. Imagine what it might be like after four, or even eight, years," said Tai Beauchamp, a fashion expert and a former deputy editor at Vibe Vixen magazine.

Indeed. But what is truly remarkable about Michelle's emergence as the epitome of American grace, style and fashion is that it was not so long ago that Middle America was supposed to be terrified of her. In 2008, as her husband and Hillary Clinton battled for the Democratic nomination, Michelle was often seen as a potential weak spot. Vicious internet rumours swirled around her political opinions. She was portrayed by critics as a pushy and fire-breathing radical. One especially vicious and untrue rumour - one that prompted direct questions to the Obama campaign - suggested she had used the word "whitey" at a conference in Chicago. But that was then and this is now. Michelle Obama has safely transformed her image from potential radical to America's homecoming queen and the nation's darling. Fashion has played a big role in that. "The election of a black president, and his wife's enormous popularity, are both part of the same cultural shift. America is changing from a culture of assimilation to a culture of pluralism," said BJ Gallagher, a Los Angeles-based sociologist and author.

But Michelle Obama is changing fashion as much as embracing it. Her portrait that stares out of the March issue of Vogue - which was shot by famed photographer Annie Leibowitz - is a revolution. She is tall, middle-aged and has a robust physique. She wears a magenta dress and looks as powerful and confident as a highly-educated lawyer should do. In short, she looks far more like an ordinary American than any half-starved, botox-injected celebrity or model ever could. "Michelle Obama is exactly the sort of woman that the fashion industry has sought to exclude for 100 years," said Amy Larocca, a fashion writer for New York magazine.

There is little doubt that is true. The fashion industry has historically played fast and

loose with the sort of colour bar that could not exist in other industries. Bar a handful of top names, there are few black models on the runways of the fashion world. Nor, historically, have they been much more than tokens on magazine covers or fashion shoots. In 2007 top designer Stefano Pilati complained to a Washington Post fashion reporter (who was black) that he could not find black models that had the right body proportions and so did not design clothes for a black body shape. "You can't find [black models] that are beautiful and with the right proportions," he said. What was even more shocking was the fact that the comments were buried near the bottom of the resulting piece and they elicited little in the way of outrage. "Can you imagine another industry that does that? A novelist saying he does not write books for black readers? Or a director saying he does not make a film for a black audience?" asked Larocca.

The fact is - no matter what the current popularity of Michelle - there are still comparatively few black faces in fashion, especially among models. Just ask Bethann Hardison, a black former model who has become the leading voice for change in the industry: "I am sure all these fashion designers voted for Obama but they still have a lily-white roster of models," she said.

She welcomed the role that Michelle was playing but felt the proof would be seen on the catwalks. Only when the models sashaying down the runways were a genuine mix of races would the "Obama revolution" really have taken off in fashion. "Talk to me in two years. We'll see what happens when the dust settles down," she said.