

HER WAY

A year into her White House residency, Melania Trump defies expectations in her own quiet—and ultra glamorous—style.

BY EMILY GOODIN





Melania Trump's statement coats with militaristic influences, and chunky sunglasses are quickly becoming her signature look. She is regularly seen wearing Chanel and Burberry, but here she is sporting a custom coat from designer and friend Alice Roli. Similar to the custom Ralph Lauren coat she wore to the inauguration, also with coordinating leather gloves, it is reminiscent of the Adolfo suit Nancy Reagan donned at her husband's wedding ceremony in 1958.

PHOTO: JEFFREY MATHIAS/SIPA IMAGES OUTLINE

It is a job with no description and no salary, yet every American has an image of what it entails.

The term "first lady," which Jacqueline Kennedy famously quipped sounded like a good name for a horse, has no mention in the United States Constitution. There is no set of guidelines. No policy manual. Women who have inhabited the role have had to find their own way and use their talents to make their declarations of independence in the glaring spotlight of the White House. This is what Melania Trump has done from the start.

The country's 47th first lady established her independence on day one, with her refusal to move to the White House until son Barron, then just 10 years old, finished the school year in New York. At each step along the way, she has moved with caution, taking her time to hire staff, and maintaining a respectful distance from the swirl of politics, keeping even Beltway insiders guessing.

For a woman who is fluent in several languages, Trump does not speak often in public. It might be said that the former model lets her clothes speak for her, perhaps even using them as her armor as she moves through her new political world. Her personal style has become one of her most effective shields as she deals with a constant stream of exposés and media criticism about her husband's administration.

Her look is polished and glamorous: coordinated ensembles, big sleeves, coat over shoulders, sky-high stilettos, large sunglasses and a Birkin bag. "She thrives on a runway that is a little bit different from the red or blue stage," says Lauren Rothman, a DC stylist and author of *Style Bible: What to Wear to Work*.

Trump's fashion choices assert her political independence. She favors European designers instead of touting American ones. She opts for clothes that few Donald Trump voters can afford. She'll wear heels to a hurricane if she wants to.

While some call this a fashion faux pas, Rothman notes, it could be the first lady "digging in her heels and saying 'this is who I am.'" Rothman explains, "Some women don't want to wear the appropriate armor to the occasion. Instead they stay true to themselves and wear whatever armor or costume or clothing they feel good in."

Trump's clothing can offer clues to her mindset. Take the hot pink Delpezo dress with the huge sleeves she wore to address a United Nations luncheon in September. It got more attention than her actual words about cyberbullying—and could have been chosen for that very purpose, to cover for her apparent nervousness addressing the esteemed group of world leaders. Speaking in English (which is not her native language) to an international audience, she used a teleprompter. But even with that safety device to guide her words, her voice shook and she was hesitant in her remarks.

Contrast that with her appearance a few days later with school children in the White House garden. Dressed in jeans, Converse sneakers and a plaid shirt (albeit a \$1,380 Balmain one), the first lady was visibly relaxed and spoke off the cuff. She was warm and friendly, putting her arms around the kids and asking them about their favorite vegetables.

It may have been a small glimpse of the difference between the public Melania and the private Melania. People who have

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-Nancy Pearlstein

met her in small settings say she is warm and charming. That is not the image the public always sees.

"She's a cool cucumber," says Nancy Pearlstein, owner of the DC boutique Relish. "She is very precise in her dressing. Every hair is in place. Every detail is thought out to the T. She's either a very controlled person or she's trying to hide or camouflage something through her dress."

It's a marked difference from the last woman in the position—Michelle Obama, who cultivated an image of the mom-in-chief and often dressed in the casual clothing of accessible, American designers.

"A first lady can do whatever she wants," says Dana Perino, a former White House press secretary and host of Fox News' *The Daily Briefing*.

"Melania Trump understands fashion, and with her background in knowing how to carry herself and being used to being photographed, I think that gives her an advantage over other first ladies who had to learn that at any moment you could be photographed," adds Perino.

When it comes time to look at her tenure in the White House through the lens of history, Melania Trump will be known for doing the job her way, dressed as glamorously as possible. But if she wishes to leave an indelible mark, she may eventually have to let her words, and not just her fashion, tell her story. ■

The Melania effect? From her iconic Jackie O-channeling Ralph Lauren inauguration day dress to show-stopping herringbone and statement reds, trend-watchers are noticing Melania's style on royals and first ladies around the world, including Queen Mathilde of Belgium, Crown Princess Mary of Denmark, Queen Rania of Jordan, Queen Letizia of Spain and Argentina's Juliana Awada.



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When children came to plant vegetables in the White House garden, Melania wore a pair of black pants and a \$1,380 Balmain shirt. It wasn't the first luxe White House gardening ensemble—Michelle Obama once sported a pair of biker leather Jimmy Choo flat gardening boots.