

Thom Browne Breaks Into the White House

By: Chris Russo

“Fashion for a woman predominates how people view you,” former First Lady Michelle Obama shared in her Netflix Documentary, *Becoming*. Despite the praise and criticism she has received, Mrs. Obama acknowledges her conscious decision to embrace fashion, choosing to “turn it into your tool rather than being a victim of it.”

An integral part of any administration, First Ladies are cast in a unique role—numerous solo engagements, a dedicated staff, and their own portion of the East Wing. To the surprise of many, First Ladies must supply or source their own wardrobes. Still, there is an expectation for these women to dress the part, cultivate a message, and bear subsequent scrutiny.

First Ladies must balance their closets between “of the people” and “world leader.” A daunting task to most, Thom Browne’s designs have found their way onto the campaign trail, into the West Wing, and even on the First Lady.

The first glimpses of Michelle Obama’s 2013 inaugural outfit came as she and President Obama arrived at St. John’s Church in Washington, D.C. The checked pattern of her navy silk jacquard coat marked a stark contrast to the ornate lemongrass-colored coat she wore in 2009. It feels inappropriate to describe the second-term First Lady as having matured, but she had clearly grown into her role.



The Thom Browne design received a more stately debut as Obama walked out onto the inaugural platform on the West Front of the United States Capitol.¹ Appearing before an in-person audience of approximately one million attendees and 20.6 million viewers across the country, many asked “who is she wearing?”

Browne discovered the First Lady had chosen to wear his design while on business in France. He was among a handful of designers who had submitted looks for the First Lady to choose from. After selecting a look by lesser-known designer, Isabel Toledo, for the historic 2009 inauguration, Obama had continued the tradition of championing American fashion with Browne.

To this day, Browne is known for trousers cropped above the ankle, skirts for men, and reimagining the grey suit. His target consumer base is hip, young, and generally high earners. Thom Browne was not an obvious choice of designer for an inauguration, let alone to dress the

¹ First Lady Michelle Obama arrives at the 2013 Presidential Inauguration (Win McNamee/2013 Getty Images)

First Lady. Still, he appreciated the halls and stages Obama has taken his designs. “It’s one of those humbling experiences in life ... the fact that she chose mine was overwhelming,” he told Vogue. “I’m so proud that she chose it – and I’m also so proud that she looked so good in it.”

I’ll repeat: “She looked so good in it.”

Looking good seems to be Browne’s foremost goal. When asked about his approach to designing the inaugural look, the weight of the occasion seemed to melt away. “She likes well-tailored clothes ... something that’s as strong as she is as a person and as an individual.”

Other than respect for her and the occasion, there is no mention of agenda. No engineered conversation.

In a roundtable discussion at Notre Dame in Spring 2023, Browne revealed his perspective on the power of dressing, “Clothes are a way to shape your image.”

Thom Browne has established a look and reputation far from what one might expect to grace the halls of the West Wing. Until, of course, Browne was honored with the National Design Award by Michelle Obama at the White House in July 2012. He wore his signature short pants to complement the rest of his reimagined proportions. Soon after, Mrs. Obama would wear a simple grey and black lace dress by Browne to the Democratic National Convention. Daringly, she rewore it to the third presidential debate between her husband and Mitt Romney.²



Subtly, Michelle Obama was inviting a boundary-pushing rising-star into the world of Washington D.C.



Perhaps even to Browne’s surprise, one of his bolder commercial designs made it into the White House before he himself could expose his ankles in the East Room. In 2011, Emily Spivack was invited to the White House to read poetry for President Obama’s “Celebration of American Poetry.”

Wearing a suit from Browne’s Black Fleece label for Brooks Brothers, Spivack described Browne as an “avant-garde” designer whose approach paralleled her poetry: taking traditional patterns and pushing them “way too far”—Spivack read traffic reports to the President.³

² Michelle Obama with Barack Obama at the 2012 Democratic National Convention (2012 Getty Images)

³ Emily Spivack’s Thom Browne suit for “Celebration of American Poetry” in 2011 (Photo by Ally Lindsay)

Upon meeting Spivack, President Obama exclaimed, “That’s a great suit! You know? I’d wear a suit like that. But my staff would never let me.” A foreboding statement to make only a few years before the President’s own “tan suit controversy.” Although the President knew that a paisley or pastel suit was too groundbreaking for his office, he could acknowledge its appeal and the fact that it had made it into his White House. I wonder if he was aware that the very same designer would go on to dress his wife on numerous occasions.



At the 2021 inauguration Jill Biden went with a design by Gabriela Hearst, but Thom Browne did not miss out on the festivities. For a performance of her song “Firework” on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Katy Perry donned a white cashmere cape with a corset and floor length skirt. While Browne lets the clothing speak for itself, the message is never overstated. The choice of white alluded to purity and the women’s suffrage movement, and the red and blue buttons—along with being two of Browne’s signature accents—referenced the American flag.⁴

Over a video call with Jonathan Zadrzynski, Global Public Relations, Thom Browne, I asked about the process of dressing individuals in the political sphere, from First Ladies to guests at the White House.

Zadrzynski framed choosing brand ambassadors as an “opportunity.” He mentioned that Thom has opinions on a variety of notables, with special appreciation for athletes and those who are “the best at what they do.” Zadrzynski echoed Browne’s sentiments, admitting that working with a First Lady is “always an opportunity.”

This philosophy likely informed Browne’s perspective when he broke from some of his peers, saying he would dress Melania Trump. Stating, “Look, I respect the First Lady,” during a discussion in 2018 at 92nd Street Y. Although, much has transpired since then.

In August of 2021 we saw the brand iconography of Thom Browne enter the White House. Comedian Benny Drama brought his “Gen Z intern” persona, Kooper, into former White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki’s corner of the West Wing. The overall message aimed at bolstering COVID-19 vaccination rates and was spliced among Kooper adding a Gen Z attitude to a variety of menial intern tasks. Of the aforementioned outfits, Benny’s was the first in which four stripes,

⁴ Katy Perry prior to performing at the 2013 Presidential Inauguration (Twitter: @thombrowne)

skirts, Hector the dog, and other distinct Thom Browne aesthetics were on display.⁵ Zadryzinski admitted that as the subject and occasion change so does the brand's willingness to capitalize on a marketing opportunity. Although the fabric has since become synonymous with Browne, notice that Mrs. Obama's inaugural gown included no branding. Only a Thom Browne enthusiast might have traced Katy Perry's lines of red and blue to the ones that accent the brand's grosgrain loop tags.

Despite racking up millions of views, the campaign received backlash from the right. In an article titled "TikTok star parades around White House as 'intern' to boost vaccines," the New York Post aggregated negative comments and mocked Benny's white skirt and long nails. On the 'Today Show' Benny revealed that he received death threats and felt as if he had become a "Republican meme."

While Benny has learned to wear meme-status as "a badge of honor," one cannot help noticing that androgynous style might have ticked off right-wing internet trolls.



Androgynous and non-binary fashion is no stranger to controversy, reaching a boiling point with Harry Styles' December 2019 Vogue cover in which he wore a lacy dress with a tuxedo Jacket—both by Gucci. Drawing ire from conservatives, Candace Owens issued a call to "bring back manly men" and Ben Shapiro stoked fears about what he alleged to be "a referendum on masculinity."

After confirming his project with the White House, Benny Drama reached out to Browne's team. Much like Michelle Obama or Katy Perry, he saw an unmistakable fit with the label's classic mid-20th-century American style and preppy details.

Browne's team was aware of the campaign's vaccine goals and Benny's unique style, but the team operates impervious to the culture wars that rage on the internet. Zadryzinski understood that some might jump to conclusions and claim "Oh, you put him in a skirt because you wanted to make a statement at the White House."

As a brand, Thom Browne operates on the contrary, "We never go into conversation saying, 'Let's put X person in this because it is going to cause such a stir.'"

They choose to pursue what is organic rather than engineered, deferring to their subjects to make their own statement using Browne's clothing. Familiar with the buzz around androgynous

⁵ Benny Drama wears Thom Browne to the White House (Photo by Benito Skinner)

fashion, Zadrynski noted that “Benny is always trying to push those narratives in his own organic unique way, so it won’t feel contrived.”

When it comes to bending the rules of gender in fashion Browne asks the question, “Why not?”

Back at Notre Dame, Browne elaborated on his philosophy behind dressing men and women. “Someone might look good in this, and it just so happens that someone else might look good in that.” He has gone so far as to drop “men’s” or “women’s” from the invitation to his Fall 2023 Ready-to-Wear show in New York City.

So, it made sense when Zadrynski exclaimed, “From our point of view, Benny looks good in skirts!”

Browne’s conception of gender in fashion is refreshingly cavalier while simultaneously intentional. Looking good is his priority, so his imagination is not bound by gender or setting. When asked about his general approach to rule-breaking designs, Browne said, “I want them to love it... or hate it.” In this case, “them” probably referred to society. Although Browne and Zadrynski have established that the brand does not seek out controversy, they proceed with a degree of fearlessness built for the political sphere. In fashion, critics are bound to “love it” or “hate it” for the way something looks. In the political sphere, it is the perceived message that provokes the detractors.

When I prodded about the potential risks of embracing political figures or events, Thom Browne’s only worry was honoring the subject. “Our main goal is to put them in something that feels comfortable,” according to Zadrynski.

Browne has yet to lose affection for the White House, and he is not shy to admit that he would like to dress First Lady Jill Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris. Ella Emhoff, the daughter of the Second Gentlemen Doug Emhoff, has become a regular at Browne’s shows. Still, he has yet to dress the Commander-in-Chief, and his team admitted that he would love to see the first couple in his designs.

Even with an understanding of how a luxury fashion brand approaches dressing the White House, the elephant in the room continued to go unaddressed. Where is the line for dressing public servants in luxury fashion?

In 2009, Mrs. Obama sparked the question after wearing a pair of \$540 Lanvin sneakers while volunteering at a Washington, D.C. food bank. The rest of her outfit was an affordable J. Crew ensemble. One might note that at both of her husband’s inaugurations she topped off her designer

looks with J. Crew gloves. Still, the price tag makes for a headline, and, when the economy or cost of living are at the forefront of voters' minds, it is obvious to see why.

Knowing that Browne would like to dress the current First Lady, I perused his website in search of looks that complimented Jill Biden's background in education. Thom Browne's Narrow Pleated Dress (\$3,900) and Oxford Short Sleeve Shirtdress (\$720) both give off a classy, feminine, and academic feel. Even the Mackintosh High Break Overcoat (\$2,500) seems appropriate for hopping off Air Force One.

I asked Mr. Zadrzynski to take off his "Global PR, Thom Browne" hat and to advise Mrs. Biden after Twittering fingers or television commentators inevitably get ahold of the price tag.

His first thought was telling of a polarized environment, "Nobody's ever going to have the right answer."

Still, he recommends finding that 'line' by posing three questions: "Who are you? What are you doing? What is the situation?"

In any situation, she is the First Lady; therefore, there is a degree of expectation for her to be wearing exclusive items of clothing. Due to her position, she has leeway to demonstrate how appropriate varying ensembles are for a given cause or message.



Zadrzynski says that from the First Lady's point of view, she should "showcase why it is important for her to wear those types of things." This comes down to personal brand. Mrs. Biden has taken a softer approach to fashion than her direct predecessor.⁶ On her first international trip as First Lady, Biden wore a Zadig and Voltaire jacket with the word 'Love' spelled in metal studs on the back. Commentators were quick to contrast this look with Melania Trump's "I Really Don't Care, Do U?" jacket that she controversially wore on a 2018 visit to a migrant child detention center. While Biden's choice cost around \$600 Trump's was a mere \$39 coat from Zara, yet the difference in message felt worth the upcharge.

From the White House's communications point of view, "showcase why it is important to work with brands like that even though it might be more expensive." How many jobs has this brand created? Are we working with American craftsmen? Thom Browne enjoys the advantage of being an American brand with a distinctly American look.

⁶ First Lady Jill Biden wearing Zadig and Voltaire 'Love' jacket (Tommy Melville/2021 Getty Images)

Even if Browne does not intentionally orchestrate cultural conversations, his subjects have expertly used his clothing as tools to do so. He has developed collections that are relevant to a variety of issues, but rather than speaking about topics, his clothing serves to express. Browne himself does not like to overthink, but some of his favorite brand ambassadors have the world watching.

I wonder if Browne will have the opportunity to dress President Biden and avoid a “shrunk suit controversy.” What message do his grey suits express? Would Browne lower the hem for President Biden—he did not for Jimmy Fallon or LeBron James.

As fashion has evolved in American life so has dressing in politics. The emergence of Thom Browne from a little-known suit maker to a regular choice for stately attire shows the ability of designers to influence the most predominant institutions in our country.

Browne’s process, unbridled by convention, is a message in and of itself. By prioritizing the client first and foremost, Browne is able to challenge stereotypes and rethink expectations. At the same time, the role of an elected official has evolved away from that of a distant, formal, and uniformed policymaker, and we are now in an era where politicians are akin to celebrities trying to be relatable yet distinguished. It is impressive how a reimagined suit and boundary-pushing fashion in the White House can be emblematic of this evolution.