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CHICAGO, Illinois (CNN) -- Michelle Obama turned the campaign trail into a runway this year, sporting eye-catching colors and feminine cuts that sent fashion bloggers buzzing.



COURTESY/BOB CARL  
Future first lady Michelle Obama hugs one of her favorite designers, Maria Pinto.

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As she coupled chic designer splurges with off-the-rack goodies from J. Crew, H&M, White House/Black Market and Target, fashion spectators say her ability to make a strong statement on a budget sends an important message during tough economic times.

"Michelle Obama can't be too over the top; she has to be recession chic all the way," style expert Mary Alice Stephenson said. In a soured economy, the choices she made throughout the campaign show that "she gets it," Stephenson said.

And it's inspiring American women to emulate her [style](#).

"What she has worn in the last year has really caused a seismic reaction in the fashion community, and also retailers are depending on her," Stephenson said. "The choices she has made have set fire to slumps in retail that we've seen

because of the recession."  [Watch the buzz on Obama fashion and a favorite designer >](#)

There is such a demand for information on Obama's style and outfits that there is a Web site dedicated to that theme: [MrsO.org](#). It promises a regular look at who and what she's wearing.

[Obama's](#) urban chic wardrobe is a style turn from the sometimes matronly choices made by other first ladies.

It's also elevated the status of [designers](#) whose clothes she wears, especially Chicago's own Maria Pinto, the woman behind some of Obama's most notable looks.

## Don't Miss

- [Designer Maria Pinto](#)
- [DressRegistry](#)
- [MrsO](#)

The prices of Pinto's outfits may not fit all recession-squeezed budgets. Her collections are sold at Saks Fifth Avenue, Barneys New York and Takashimaya. Her signature scarves sell for \$300, and gowns may be priced at \$1,200 to \$5,000.

But her designs have served the future first lady well during historic moments of her husband's campaign. The coat Obama wore in Springfield, Illinois, when her husband announced his candidacy, the purple sheath she donned the night she fist-bumped her husband when he clinched the nomination, the teal number she sported at the Democratic convention in August: all Pinto creations.

"Sometimes I have no idea what she'll be wearing until I see it on television," said Pinto, whose 92-year-old mother had to call her to ask, "is that your dress Michelle is wearing?" when Obama, wearing a red dress, accompanied the president-elect to the White House to meet President Bush and first lady Laura Bush just days after the election.

"I am very attracted to colors, because I think it really lifts our spirit. It flatters a woman. Even if you're wearing a dark suit, it's important to have color to lift up mood. I try to take into consideration women's needs, and it has to be low-maintenance and still fulfill an element of beauty and longevity. I think wardrobe is an investment, and the pieces that I create have that quality and workmanship that is timeless."

Pinto's been fortunate. She's spent a lifetime building up her brand and attributes her success to understanding a woman's body and adapting to how their needs change. She firmly believes that the woman should be the first thing that walks in the room, not her dress.

"I think we all have our own beauty, but you really need to be true to yourself," Pinto said.

"I know it's time-consuming. Especially working women and mothers don't have a lot of time to pay attention to how they're wardrobing themselves ... but there's a certain amount of time we need to give ourselves as women, because it's an expression of who we are. What we put on our backs when we go out in the morning speaks more than what we say or do initially in terms of how people perceive us. It's a little bit of an investment in that we need to make to be able to feel better about ourselves."

Many speculate Pinto is designing Obama's inaugural gown, a big honor because inaugural dresses are put on permanent display in the Smithsonian's First Ladies Collection.

Whatever dress Obama chooses to wear, many hope she won't suffer the same fashion embarrassment that first lady Laura Bush almost faced at a White House event in December 2007.

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She had planned to wear an \$8,500 red Oscar de la Renta gown but quickly changed her outfit when three other guests showed up in the same dress.

For any ladies fearing that they may show up at one of the celebratory balls in Washington in the same gown as another or, heaven forbid, several other women, there is a Web site where you can register your designer gown. [DressRegistry.com](#) states on its site that you can

see what other ladies will be wearing so you don't become their fashion twin.