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Inauguration fashion: Purple, pearls, and mittens



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Politicians in pearls, the colour purple and warm woollen mittens - these are just a few of Washington's favourite things from the 2021 Inauguration.

With America's leaders in the spotlight on the inauguration - and world - stage, sometimes what they wear can say more than their speeches.

DC-based fashion consultant Lauren Rothman says Americans have always taken an interest in what political leaders don for inaugural celebrations. And in 2021, with an ongoing pandemic and economic crisis as well as the swearing-in of the first female vice-president, things feel "even more loaded".

It's all about optics for the politically fashion-minded, says Ms Rothman, who helps style politicians for events including inaugurations past.

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So let's see how outspoken this year's inauguration crowd really was, from the Bidens to Bernie Sanders - with a little help from some real fashion experts.



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Kamala Harris and Doug Emhoff

Vice-President Kamala Harris' purple ensemble has already made an impact.

"Symbolically, it's a bipartisan colour because it marries [Republican] red and [Democratic] blue," says Ms Rothman, noting a number of elected officials or spouses had opted for purple today.

But that's not the only reason purple has a special place for US women in politics. The suffragettes often wore the colour in the 1900s while campaigning for women's right to vote.

Professor Elka Stevens, coordinator of the fashion design programme at Howard University, also notes it's a colour of significance in the black community - one tied to the Christian experience as well. Ms Harris' pearl necklace also made reference to a tradition in her Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, the oldest all-black sorority in the US.

Add it all up and Ms Harris' choice of pearls and a purple sharp-cut Christopher John Rogers coat was "an excellent first building block on what the legacy is of how to look like a woman in power", Ms Rothman says.

Both Mrs Biden and Ms Harris also took care to choose emerging US brands for their inaugural looks. Ms Harris' outfit, from head-to-toe, showed off African-American designers.

And we can't forget Doug Emhoff either, America's "first second gentleman".

"He chose to do everything that he should, which is to not distract and perfectly fit in," says Rothman.

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Michelle Obama

We can't discuss political fashion without bringing up Michelle Obama.

Her purple Sergio Hudson sweater and palazzo pants plus coat look, along with perfectly curled hair, did not disappoint fans of the former first lady.

"It's a different dress code and different expectation for women who are first ladies versus people who aren't, like women who are elected," says Ms Rothman.

From baring her arms to wearing both high-end and High Street fashion, Mrs Obama was "legacy-making" in a way that hearkened back to Nancy Reagan and Jackie Kennedy, Ms

Rothman says.

She also put many "independent and ethnic American designers" on the map during her eight years in the White House.

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Melania Trump

Newly former First Lady Melania Trump, too, had a clear style, often spotted in sleek looks from well-known brands (think Chanel, Hermès).

One of her favourite designers was French-American Hervé Pierre, but Prof Stevens also notes she faced a challenge dressing all-American as many US labels said they would not dress her.

For her final look of the day, Melania swapped out the all-black suit she left the White House in for a Gucci dress with a bold orange print.

"The curtain is down and she's onto the next phase of her life," says Ms Rothman of the sharp contrast. "I think that's what she's using her clothing to signal: that DC is over."

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Bernie Sanders

He may not win the best-dressed award any time soon, but veteran Senator Bernie Sanders certainly won Twitter with his extra large mittens.

Mr Sanders' pair of eye-catching woolly mittens were given to him two years ago by a Vermont schoolteacher who made them from repurposed sweaters and recycled plastic bottles. Those, coupled with a snap of him alone in a crossed-arm pose, made for prime meme fodder.

- [Bernie's mittens and other inauguration moments](#)

"What we love about it is that it's so authentically Bernie," says Ms Rothman.

When asked for his thoughts on all the stir his inauguration look caused, Mr Sanders simply said: "In Vermont we dress warm...and we're not so concerned about good fashion. We want to keep warm. And that's what I did today."

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Lady Gaga

Inauguration 2021 featured performances from Jennifer Lopez (in a crisp white ensemble) and Lady Gaga.

But it was Gaga's custom black-and-red Schiaparelli gown that stole the show or, more specifically, the large golden dove-shaped brooch she wore atop it.

Aside from the Hunger Games comparisons, the almost operatic outfit served another fun purpose in Ms Rothman's eyes.

"She brought the inaugural ball to the stage in a year where you're not going to get all of the dress up, the ball gowns that we have come to look at and adore and criticise."

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Amanda Gorman

Youth poet laureate Amanda Gorman was another star on today's stage.

- Who is Amanda Gorman, Biden's inauguration poet?

The self-described "skinny black girl, descended from slaves and raised by a single mother", touched on many heavy themes in her verses, but her outfit was a breath of fresh air.

Yellow is a colour of hope, energy, light. And her bright red Prada headband was a bold complement. To Prof Stevens, it was almost crown-like.

"It also honed attention on her hair, because no one else had that particular hairstyle. And we know that hair can be political as well."

AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Ella Emhoff

Our last noteworthy youthful garb of the day was Ella Emhoff, stepdaughter to the vice-president.

Her dainty white collar atop a bejewelled plaid Miu Miu coat was particularly striking - or in the words of Teen Vogue, "just *chef's kiss*" - and to Prof Stevens, reminiscent of late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

"I really thought about our democracy, justice, the collars [Ginsburg] wore and the messages she would send. I think this was [also] an ode to femininity."

And as for her brother Cole's look? Prof Stevens' takeaway was: "You need some gloves, young man."

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The Bidens

And last but not least, let's consider the new president and first lady.

Prof Stevens says the political dress mirrored a desire to project comfort and to reassure the nation that US democracy is safe and its way of life is "going back to something familiar" despite Covid-19.

There may not have been anything ground-breaking in Mr Biden's Ralph Lauren suit; perhaps the more interesting aspect is the way he wore it.

"As a Washington insider he's been wearing suits for decades," says Ms Rothman. "He showed that he knows what works."

Also notable with both Biden's ensembles today: the colour blue. Prof Stevens notes that blue is recognised as a colour of trustworthiness; of stability; of confidence, especially for men.

As for Jill Biden's custom-made, Swarovski-crystal-accented aquamarine coat from the up-and-coming New York Makarian label?

Both Prof Stevens and Ms Rothman say it signalled responsibility and modesty.

"We already know [the Bidens] are very united, but it signalled that they're here and ready to do the work," Ms Rothman says.

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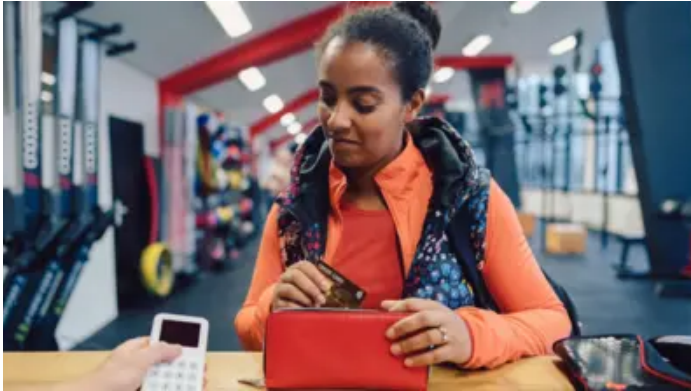
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