

"The Most Important Dress in the Country": The Rhetoric of Glamour in the Smithsonian's "The First Ladies".

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The overall impact depoliticizes and domesticates the role of first lady, sidestepping questions of female political power while locating women in a benign, domestic realm. This article contributes to our understanding of how glamour invites us to understand the public memory of powerful women. [ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR]

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This article examines the exhibit "The First Ladies" in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. The exhibit, composed primarily of inauguration gowns and china settings from state dinners, has existed since the early twentieth century and is one of the Smithsonian's most popular and controversial exhibits. I argue that "The First Ladies" relies on a rhetoric of glamour that emphasizes the perfection, ease, and mystery of those who hold this role. This rhetoric constructs a subjectivity for viewers as spectators appreciative of the elite culture on display that perpetuates a masculine way of seeing. The overall impact depoliticizes and domesticates the role of first lady, sidestepping questions of female political power while locating women in a benign, domestic realm. This article contributes to our understanding of how glamour invites us to understand the public memory of powerful women.

Keywords: First ladies; glamour; masculine gaze; public memory; Smithsonian

The "First Ladies" exhibition, housed in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, began as the "American Historical Costume Collection," a stylistic display of upper-class American clothing. The idea was born on a rainy day when Cassie Mason Myers Julian-James and her mother discovered a trunk of old family clothing and began to add to it, packing away three generations of apparel. With the help of fellow Washington socialite Rose Gouverneur Hoes, great-granddaughter of President James Monroe, the collecting began in earnest. Because Hoes had heirlooms from the White House, the two commenced, in Julian-James's words, "collecting the costumes of the ladies of the White House," which in 1912 sparked the Smithsonian's interest (Julian-James i). That same year, Helen Taft lent her inauguration gown to the Smithsonian, starting a tradition that endures. Using their ties to Washington's elite women, Hoes and Julian-James secured donations from influential families

often loath to part with heirlooms, and the exhibit opened to the public in 1914. Now, more than 100 years later, "The First Ladies" is consistently one of the most popular exhibits at the Smithsonian, a title it has held for decades (National Museum of American History). Nonetheless, the exhibit has yet to move beyond its origin story of displaying upper-class privilege and ease. This origin has implications for how visitors to the Smithsonian are invited to remember first ladies.

As one of the most visible and potentially powerful women in the United States, the first lady and the public memory processes whereby we remember her are undoubtedly significant. As Benjamin Hufbauer suggests, what is at stake in our commemoration of first ladies is the expression of women's power in the United States (107). The exhibit's persistent popularity also speaks to the importance of public memorializing of first ladies. While the Smithsonian does not keep statistics for individual exhibits, the National Museum of American History received 4.1 million visits in 2015, behind only the Air and Space Museum and the Natural History Museum ("Visitor Statistics"). "The First Ladies" exhibit was the most crowded of any exhibit in the history museum each time I visited while researching this article. Yet the exhibit has drawn criticism for the limited role it prescribes for first ladies (Mathewson; Givhan, "Smithsonian's"). Because it showcases primarily inaugural gowns and china settings to represent our most popular public memory of first ladies, the exhibit reifies cultural norms that see women as objects of observation and consumption. "If we are not to reinforce the idea that it is natural that women's importance be measured this way, then we need to lay bare the peculiar underlying premises of this long-standing and popular exhibition," argues one Smithsonian curator (Smith 70). This article is an attempt to grapple with these premises.

I argue that the exhibit presents the role of the first lady using the rhetoric of glamour. The rhetoric of glamour suffuses the role with perfection, effortless, and a balance between mystery and familiarity. This rhetoric invites visitors to the exhibit to inhabit subjectivities as spectators who have the duty to appreciate the elite cultural artifacts on display. However, this spectator role is premised on

adopting a masculine way of seeing, wherein viewers look upon the bodies of women. These display practices are significant because they combine to depoliticize and domesticate the role of first lady. As a result, the exhibit fails to provide a meaningful narrative about women's power, placing the first lady in a feminized, domestic realm. A more productive exhibit ought to clearly reckon with the gendered tensions that are inherent in this role. I make this argument with the hope of inspiring rhetorical scholars of public memory to take seriously the power of glamour in memorializing practices.

The National Museum of American History sits on the west end of the National Mall, a collection of the District of Columbia's most popular tourist landmarks, including the Washington Monument and many of the Smithsonian museums. This "experiential landscape" (Dickinson et al. 29) situates the National Museum of American History in the most venerable collections of museums in the United States. The sheer concentration of national treasures marks the National Mall as a place of pilgrimage for domestic and international tourists alike. Inside the history museum, we find "The First Ladies."

Since its grand opening in 1914, "The First Ladies" has undergone a variety of transformations that have mirrored budgetary and size constraints. Lisa-Kathleen Grady curated the exhibit's present version, which opened in 2011. Plans are underway for another renovation; but today the exhibit is composed of one large, C-shaped room and a smaller back hallway. It currently has four sections: The Fashionable First Lady; The Nation's Hostess; Inaugurations and Opportunities; and Changing Times, Changing First Ladies. The entry point to "The First Ladies" is through the exhibit titled "The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden." Once the west wing renovations of the museum are complete, the exhibition will be moved. The overall exhibit is a great deal smaller than many of the others at the history museum, and a casual stroll through it while glancing at the gowns and china collections could be accomplished in less than three minutes. Even today, "The First Ladies" is one of the few places on the National Mall that preserves women's history. There is no dedicated women's history museum on the mall,

although sponsors continue to press for congressional financial support (Fitzmaurice 520).

This article is in four sections. In the first, I provide my theoretical orientation to studying "The First Ladies." Second, I argue that the exhibit presents the role of the first lady using a rhetoric of glamour. Third, I explain that the rhetoric of glamour invites visitors to assume the role of a spectator appreciating elite culture, a role which perpetuates a masculine way of seeing. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of counternarratives of female power, implications for scholars of public memory, and musings on what a more powerful exhibit might look like.

Public memory, the rhetoric of glamour, and looking at first ladies

Public memory studies are about how we construct our shared understanding of the past, an activity that is always contested, even as it calls into existence shared identities (Blair et al. 6). As John Bodnar explains, public memory emerges from undoubtedly political discussions that implicate fundamental social questions: "Public memory is a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present, and by implication, its future," he argues (Bodnar 15). Pioneering work on public memory has examined museums and memorials, or "memory places," that garner significance from their public announcement as sites holding important memories for particular audiences (Blair et al.; Fitzmaurice; Hasian; Hufbauer). In these places, visitors expect profound experiences of authenticity as they expend time and resources on travel (Aoki et al.; Blair et al.; Dickinson et al.; King; Maurantonio).

Unsurprisingly, the very building of memory places and curating the stories that they tell is a process deeply interwoven with political struggle (Atwater and Herndon; Blair et al.; Fagin; Fitzmaurice; Hubbard and Hasian; Katriel; McAlister; Paliewicz and Hasian; Taylor; Woods et al.).

As the extant literature suggests, public memory emerges from immanently rhetorical processes. Memory places speak to audiences about what is important about the past. Indeed, as Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki write, these places invite visitors to assume subject positions by hailing them in unique ways (30; Aoki et

al. 239; Clark 119; Johnson 345). Rhetorical scholars have pointed out that some museums invite their visitors to take on problematic subjectivities (Aoki et al. 239; Katriel 6). In line with this work, this article seeks to understand how "The First Ladies" exhibit invites viewers to look at women's bodies through a masculine subjectivity that has implications for women's access to political power.

Glamour is a word that is "notoriously difficult to define," despite a general understanding of it as magnetism or an allure based in various combinations of beauty, mystery, wealth, and leisure (Gundle 2, 6). Virginia Postrel argues that glamour is a nonverbal rhetoric that draws its persuasive power from images and objects, not words (6). Despite its frequent dismissal as trivial or superficial, glamour is persuasive as it promises those who look upon it "a life devoid of mediocrity" (Postrel 4). Although glamour has meant different things at different points in history (Wilson 95–97), it has included several elements from the mid-twentieth century to the present. First, glamour presents a "mask of perfection," composed of elements of dress, makeup, hair, and setting (Wilson 105). Yet this appearance of perfection must be regarded at a distance for effect (Gundle 14). Second, the appearance of perfection is based on careful calculation that appears effortless (Wilson 100; Thrift 299). Glamour is not effortless, but it must appear to be so. Finally, glamour balances contradictory elements, including the tension between mystery and familiarity (Gundle 12; Postrel 9; Roach 4; Thrift 297). As Elizabeth Wilson writes, "Glamour depends on what is withheld, on secrecy, hints, and the hidden" (100). At the same time, for glamour to succeed, it requires public attention (Gundle 15), and as such it "invit[es] just enough familiarity to engage the imagination, a glimpse of another life" (Thrift 297). Women most frequently enact glamour (Gundle 11). Accordingly, this article seeks to unite scholarship on glamour and on gendered public memory to answer the question of what type of audience the rhetoric of glamour might suggest.

Scholarship on first ladies has identified a rhetorical double bind. These women are subject to similarly intense scrutiny as their husbands during campaigns, as they become a central part of the "team" that comprises the U.S. presidency

(Watson 806). However, when attempting to exercise power, first ladies are often accused of overreach or of ignoring duties to their families (Campbell; Parry-Giles and Blair 567). These challenges wax and wane throughout time. Habitually serving in ceremonial roles as hostesses or engaging in appropriately feminine and diminutively titled "pet projects," first ladies serve as a "barometer of the status of women in society and our shifting views on womanhood" (Watson 808). This aspect of first ladyhood is particularly significant given public memory's link to the present. As Roseann M. Mandziuk writes, the process of public memorializing can both engage and erase "difficult ideological battles over race, gender, and, indeed, what comes to stand as 'truth'" (272). In the twenty-first century, women in politics encounter postfeminist ideology. Advocates of postfeminist ideas argue that women's legal gains, such as laws against sexual harassment, indicate that gender is no longer a central axis of inequality in the United States (Anderson and Sheeler 226). U.S. political culture now trumpets women's political equality even as women in power are disciplined for violating norms of femininity and/or not being strong enough leaders.

To "read" "The First Ladies," I use a rhetorical perspective that seeks to understand how the exhibit persuades. Primarily, I am interested in how the exhibit invites viewers to move through it, engage with it, and respond to it. Given that glamour is often created through nonverbal rhetorics and images, I am concerned with how visitors are invited to see the exhibit. A host of scholarship about visual culture and museums engages with questions of seeing and sight. As Ott, Aoki, and Dickinson conclude in their exploration of the Cody Firearms Museum, looking is always selective and biased. They argue that the display practices in this museum domesticate and sterilize firearms for the visitors and, in doing so, attempt to erase a history of violence and colonialism (Ott et al. 216–217). This is a useful illustration of what is at stake in the display practices of museums. Indeed, practices of looking in museums are deeply intertwined with concerns about power. "There is power in looking," bell hooks agrees (115), as looking carries assumptions about who can be consumed with the gaze (Oates 87). As John Berger writes, seeing establishes our place in the world, which we then explain to others using words (7).

How visitors look at items displayed in a museum is not a natural, unproblematic process (Ott et al. 218). Visitors are always summoned to look in specific ways at specific things. The rhetoric of glamour, this article argues, conditions how visitors are invited to look at first ladies and, as such, presents certain artifacts—dresses and china settings—for observation while absencing other potential displays. Indeed, those who curate displays make important decisions about concealing and revealing (King 237). The tension between concealing and revealing represents the central dynamic in display writ large (Prelli 2, 15). In choosing to display dresses, the curators eschew displaying significant documents, showing speeches, and presenting memorabilia. These choices condition not just what we are invited to look at but how we are asked to do so. "Objectifying, exploiting, and disciplining female subjects" can occur when museum visitors are invited to look upon representations of bodies or people, especially women (McAlister 4). As Joan Faber McAlister has shown, feminist scholars "ha[ve] focused on the tendency for both visuals representing individual bodies and exhibits remembering individual experiences to symbolically transform subjects into objects, reduce lives to artifacts, and fold complexity and difference into homogenous narratives" (4). Thus, understanding how we are invited to look is significant because looking has the potential to transmit ideological messages about the women upon whom we are invited to gaze.

As I analyzed "The First Ladies," I carefully read each plaque and looked closely at the artifacts. I observed other visitors moving through the exhibit, paying attention to where they lingered and what caught their attention. I took hundreds of photographs of the plaques, dresses, and other exhibit contents. I also handwrote observations about the environment, exhibit layout, and artifacts during my time in the museum. When I formulated my arguments, I triangulated among my field notes, my photographs, and the text and images available online on the National Museum of American History's Web site ("First Ladies Interactive").

Given that the objects displayed in "The First Ladies" are dresses on mannequins, this article explores how the exhibit perpetuates a specific "way of

seeing" the first lady's role that has implications for women's ongoing struggles to access political authority and power. I argue that the glamorous rhetoric in "The First Ladies" perpetuates a masculine way of seeing, as it invites spectators to view a passive, silent female form. John Berger develops this concept in his study of Western art history. Taking the genre of nudes in European oil paintings for his study, Berger suggests that the women in these paintings were arranged to appeal to the imagined male viewer. The woman appears in the artwork because the "spectator-owner" was there surveying her. Indeed, that the woman in such a painting gazes outward indicates her seeking approval from the viewer, not from the other figures in her frame (Berger 56). "Women are depicted in a quite different way from men ... because the 'ideal' spectator is assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him," he argues (64). Accordingly, Berger concludes that we are invited to use a masculine way of seeing when we look at these pieces of art. This way of seeing stems from a perspective perpetuated in Western culture that tends to position women as objects to be looked at to ignite heteronormative masculine desire.

So, too, I argue that visitors, regardless of their gender, are invited to adopt a masculine way of seeing when looking at "The First Ladies." The presence of passive mannequin forms who do not speak but instead are subject to scrutiny from a historical and contemporary public provides this invitation. Unlike other exhibits in the history museum that allow visitors to touch artifacts and engage with interactive computer screens, "The First Ladies" is about a spectator's gaze. This gaze affirms a gendered hierarchy wherein women are contained by a need to please men through their appearance and performance of traditionally feminine tasks. It also largely reinforces whiteness as the standard of feminine grace and elegance. In sum, I read the connotative and ideological meanings (Barthes 17) that emerge from this exhibit and the way that we are invited to see it. Rhetoric, composed of a set of connotators, as Barthes notes, is the "signifying aspect of ideology" (49). These connotators are read using specific cultural codes that correspond to bodies of attitudes (Barthes 46–47). This article argues that the rhetoric of glamour, connoted through perfection, ease, and mystery,

promotes ways of seeing that perpetuate problematic ideologies, including postfeminism and male supremacy.

The rhetoric of glamour in "The First Ladies"

"The First Ladies" presents the role of first lady as one steeped in glamour. The rhetoric of glamour has important implications for how visitors are invited to understand the role, its duties, and women in power more generally. As this section illustrates, the curation of the exhibit exemplifies the elements of the rhetoric of glamour. These elements include perfection, effortlessness, and the tension between familiarity and mystery.

Perfection

The gown collection, the centerpiece of the exhibit, casts the first lady in a realm of perfection. Whether they were one of a kind or not, these gowns emanate haute couture. They appear custom-fitted, exquisitely detailed, and handcrafted. While not every dress in the exhibit is an inaugural gown, almost every article of clothing is eveningwear. Inaugural gowns are worn to the inaugural balls that celebrate the beginning of a new presidential term, and they represent lavish fashion on display for national consumption. The main showcase of gowns, which is directly in front of viewers as they enter the exhibit, illustrates the emphasis on exquisite fashion. In this large display case, viewers discover Caroline Scott Harrison's evening dress. This dress, from the late 1880s, features a lush, rich velvet bodice in burgundy with a velvet train. The silver skirt sparkles with beadwork, which also adorns the collar. Also in this case, Eleanor Roosevelt's 1933 silvery-blue inaugural gown shimmers with gold embroidered flowers. The simple silhouette is enhanced with a rhinestone belt. Meanwhile, in a case near the rear of the exhibit, Nancy Reagan's 1981 inaugural gown presents a modern silhouette: a one-shouldered dress of white silk with intricate beadwork from shoulder to floor. All the gowns radiate beauty and elegance through sophisticated beading, tasteful sparkles, and rich fabrics. The low lighting throughout the exhibit, a lighting strategy associated with romance and expensive restaurants, hides imperfections in the artifacts. The connotation of these curatorial choices is that the role of the first lady is to appear a perfect and

glamorous being, and that the duties of the public are to scrutinize the delicate details of her sartorial choices.

The placards surrounding the dresses solidify the link between first ladies and glamorous fashion. A plaque on the left wall to the entrance of the exhibit notes, "While some duties, such as White House hostess, are performed by all first ladies, the job does not come with a specific list of responsibilities." This placard goes on to provide examples of the roles first ladies have fulfilled, including "national advocates, trend setters, leaders, and role models." Despite this declaration, the exhibit showcases first ladies primarily as fashion icons and hostesses. Indeed, only in the back hallway of the exhibit in the section titled Changing Times, Changing First Ladies, and to a lesser extent in the Inaugurations and Opportunities section, are first ladies' accomplishments ever featured beyond these realms. While the first section on The Fashionable First Lady points out that not all first ladies have been elevated to the status of fashion icon, the primacy of the gowns in the exhibit visually confirms fashion as a significant component of the role. Thus, the placards' persuasive potential to describe the varied roles of first ladies is undermined by the visual juxtaposition of the artifacts displayed. The roles of advocate and leader are obscured given that no artifacts are displayed to draw audiences' attention to those roles. Instead, the eminence of the role as fashion icon indicates both the stylish perfection to which first ladies must aspire and the duties of the public to appreciate her.

The china collection, which is displayed to the left at the exhibit's entrance, also appears perfect in its display. The dishes are large and they glisten under the spotlights focused on them. Many of them also prominently display the official seal of the president. Like the dresses, the dishes have rich, vibrant colors, featuring an abundance of blues, reds, and golds. Hillary Clinton's china, for instance, presents an intricate gold White House in the center of each plate to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the building. The china has very few scratches or imperfections, and most items in this large collection look as though they have never been used. The curators' choice of artifacts and their attendant

display strategies confirm the ideas of perfection and luxury that comprise the role of first lady. These ideas limit the role to a figurehead for ceremonial occasions, like the inaugural balls and state dinners that require the use of these artifacts.

Moreover, the exhibit's very surroundings exude the perfection of refined taste. For example, the walls behind the gowns are shimmery silver with a damask pattern. Delicate gray tables display purses and shoes. On the whole, the exhibit is uncluttered and refined, reminiscent of a wealthy woman's powder room. The rest of the walls of the exhibit either feature informative plaques or are blank. The plaques are gray, oval-shaped, and have intricate borders, which make them look like mirrors, a visual effect that encourages the viewer to look upon the women on display and recognize the first lady's imperative to check and maintain her glamorous appearance. In sum, the curators' choices associate the first lady's role with her fashion and ceremonial displays, suggesting that first ladies' lives are composed by perfection and luxury. Not only does this construct an overall rhetoric of glamour; it invites the viewer to look upon the women on display and inspect their fashion and cultural choices, a move which reinscribes the powerlessness women have often experienced in visual culture.

Effortlessness

In addition to emphasizing the perfection of the role and the women who have held it, the exhibit makes fulfilling the role of first lady seem easy. Effortlessness is another tenet of glamorous rhetoric (Postrel 79; Wilson 100; Thrift 299). "The First Ladies" presents the lives of those women lucky enough to fill this role as lives of ease. Display strategies and textual cues demonstrate the ease of first ladyhood.

One way in which the exhibit perpetuates the myth that the role is an easy one to fill stems from the display strategies for the dresses. They are displayed on mannequins that have been specially designed to showcase the beauty of the gown and fit perfectly. There is no pinched or stretched fabric or loose sleeves. Each headless mannequin presenting a glittering dress elides that an embodied

woman would be wearing the delicate clothing. Viewers are not overtly invited to wonder whether the first lady was uncomfortable in the clothes or shoes on display. Erased are the many fittings needed to perfect the look. Glamour is "work and effort—artfully concealed" (Wilson 100). The exhibit implies that the perfect look is easy to achieve, that first ladies are naturally graceful, elegant, and beautiful.

Other textual cues in the exhibit erase the work of fashion. For example, the section titled Inaugurations and Opportunities displays television panels that show first ladies dancing at inaugural balls. A quote attributed to the *Washington Post* in 1997 appears above these panels: "For one evening, the inaugural ball gown is the most important dress in the country." Presented in an elegant italic script, the quotation does not explain why the inaugural gown is so important, nor does it dwell on the implications of this statement for the woman who wears it. While there is an understandable need to be brief when painting declarations on walls, this quotation elevates the inaugural gown and veils it in the mystery of glamour while emphasizing ease. The *Washington Post* article itself explains the delicate balance that goes into selecting a dress (Givhan, "State of the Union" F05). According to this article, the gown must be fashionable and elegant without being (too) extravagantly expensive. These challenges are erased in the glamour of the exhibit, subsumed under the overall argument that the life of a first lady is effortless.

The presentation of the china also emphasizes ease. The china display includes various sizes of plates, soup tureens, serving dishes, champagne flutes, etched goblets, teacups, and saucers. In short, these pieces are meant to evoke a formal dinner experience, the likes of which would be prepared for heads of state and foreign dignitaries. Although the exhibit does not mention this fact, viewers likely know that first ladies were neither cooking nor serving the food for these fancy dinners. Even as the china frames the first lady role as a domestic hostess, it is not her blood, sweat, or tears that prepares the meals. Instead, the placards above each china set emphasize the innate domesticity and ceremonial style of the corresponding first lady. Each first lady picture has a biographical text blurb

that explains how she was related to the president (some early first ladies, such as Martha Jefferson Randolph, were daughters or nieces, not wives), her years of life, and when she served as first lady. Small placards underneath these biographical tidbits present facts about her entertaining style, including what types of entertainment she preferred (Lady Bird Johnson added dancing to state events), how many courses she served (twenty-nine for Julia Grant), and how many pieces made up the collection (4,370 pieces to accommodate 220 people in Nancy Reagan's case). This connotes a domesticity that is graceful, easy, and glamorous as it solidifies the link between women and domestic pursuits, suggesting that each first lady had a strong pull and desire to craft White House ceremony to her deep-seated preferences.

The curation of the aural aspects of the exhibit also provides a sense of easy, lilting movement. Throughout the exhibit floats the music of a faint, stringed waltz. The music emanates from the three television panels in the left of the exhibit's back wall that show first ladies dancing with their presidential husbands at inaugural balls. On these screens, first ladies proceed in chronological order from Pat Nixon to Michelle Obama, each taking her turn to glide across the dance floor with her husband, the newly sworn in president of the United States. These videos are presented without sound; the viewer listens to the waltz music floating down from speakers in the ceiling. As the first lady dances with her husband, the videos shift from shots at a distance to catch her graceful movements to close-range shots that capture intimate moments between the pair. The exhibit itself evokes the mysterious, glamorous space of the inaugural ball due to the low lighting and faint music. The music suggests gracefulness and the ease of lyrical forward momentum, characteristics that become associated with the first lady herself.

Finally, the exhibit does not describe as work the political and philanthropic projects undertaken by first ladies. Instead, the exhibit discusses "first lady projects" as moral callings or personal commitments, rhetorical strategies that deflect attention from the work of being first lady. "Laura Bush brought her commitment to literacy to the White House. Her Ready to Read, Ready to Learn

initiative supported the president's goals for education reform," the placard by her red inaugural gown explains. "Pat Nixon considered many ideas for 'first lady projects,' but encouraging volunteerism became her primary focus. At home she expanded public access to the White House and added more than 500 pieces of antique furniture to its collections," declares the small sign by her yellow inaugural dress. While it is noteworthy that these projects are mentioned and placards must be brief, the exhibit sidesteps discussions of the importance of choosing an appropriately feminine project. This absence leaves the viewer to assume that first ladies were all naturally drawn to projects focusing on children and families. Moreover, the placards also erase the difficulties first ladies encounter in enacting meaningful change. Hillary Clinton, according to her plaque, "chaired the president's Task Force on National Health Care Reform and advocated for family and children's issues." While there are other places where viewers could get information about a failed political intervention or a troubled marriage, it is significant that in the prominent place to remember the legacy of first ladies, the descriptions of projects are memorialized next to inaugural dresses, which works to undercut the seriousness of the work that first ladies undertake.

In sum, the presentation of the dresses and the dishes emphasizes that the role is a ceremonial, domestic, and primarily easy one. Likewise, the descriptions of the "callings" of the first ladies downplay the work of politics and philanthropy. The overall impact is a containment of the power of the first lady. Viewers are likely to associate these artifacts with the domestic realm, which is not the location of traditional political power in the United States.

Familiarity/mysteriousness

"The First Ladies" builds upon the effortless perfection by evoking a tension between familiarity and mystery. The exhibit invites viewers into a previously secret world for the fashionable elite without wholly demystifying the experience. It does so through a focus on the inauguration and through the overall arrangement of the gowns. The resulting tension is the final element of the rhetoric of glamour.

One way in which glamour emerges through the tension between mystery and familiarity is in the overall focus on the presidential inauguration as the central setting for the entire exhibit. The dresses go beyond mere beauty to evoke glamour given their connection to inaugural celebrations. Very few of the visitors to "The First Ladies" will have personal experience attending presidential inaugural balls, as tickets are difficult to secure even for Washington's elite. Even the eveningwear that was not worn at inaugural celebrations references a world of fancy parties and entertaining foreign dignitaries divorced from many Americans' daily routines. As a result, the gowns create an aura of glamour through the delicate balance between mystery and familiarity. Indeed, given that there are few explanatory plaques throughout the exhibit, the workings of inaugural celebrations remain concealed. The inaugural ball's mystery is confirmed through the exhibit's incredibly dim lighting. While ostensibly done to preserve the fragile fabrics of the gowns, the lighting creates the illusion of stepping into another world when visitors leave the museum's central rotunda. Small spotlights illuminate the few informative plaques, preserving the dusky feel while also inviting viewers to lean closer to squint at their content. The low lights connote the aura of mystery, playing on the glamorous contradiction between concealing and revealing.

The largest case of gowns, which is directly in front of visitors when they enter the exhibit, also evidences a tension within the rhetoric of glamour. It is at once hyperindividual, focused on the first lady's fashion sense, and oddly impersonal. The reason the case zeroes in on the individual first lady is partly because no narrative is presented in this portion of the exhibit. With the exception of the exhibit's final section in the back hallway, *Changing Times, Changing First Ladies*, the dresses present no chronological narrative. Throughout the first three-quarters of the exhibit, then, there is no narrative of the development of the first lady's role. The thirteen dresses contained in this large case range from Lucy Hayes's traditional 1880 gown to Jacqueline Kennedy's slinky yellow 1960 state dinner dress. In a certain respect, the case is discordant in its mixture of styles; its artifacts include a simple traveling suit and extravagant ball gowns. In the words of one reporter, the exhibit is "a kind of glossy, virtual intimacy that is

revealing yet not personal" (Givhan, "Smithsonian's"). Perhaps in recognition of the fact that the case is not presented chronologically, a sign on a post in the middle of the entry to the exhibit declares, "Welcome! Once inside the gallery, it is not necessary to maintain a single file line." Certainly such a sign emerges from material necessity of moving tourists through a continually crowded, popular, and small exhibit. But it also serves as a reminder of the absence of any narrative in the exhibit's beginning and focuses attention on the individual dresses. The lack of chronology that is created via the arrangement of the exhibit invites visitors to ponder the first lady not as a changing development in women's access to power but individually, a reflection on the first lady's personal style. This mirrors the rhetorical strategies of postfeminism, whereby women seeking power are judged based on "personal shortcomings or strategic miscalculations" and not in relation to broader societal discourses about gender (Anderson and Sheeler 227).

The exhibit as a whole and this large display case is also strangely impersonal. Namely, it leaves a great deal of mystery surrounding the first ladies whose clothing is displayed. For instance, the dresses are displayed on mannequins without heads. By severing one of the most identifiable personal features, the curators have undermined the individualism that the placards below the case create. The exhibit's impersonality is amplified by the speed with which visitors are invited to move through the small exhibit. In general, visitors do not linger very long, nor does the construction of the exhibit seem to encourage it. There is only one bench, located directly to the right when one enters the gallery, and it seems placed for viewers to watch the video about the dress preservation and collection. The overall effect discourages lengthy contemplation. Combined with the crowded nature of the gallery, viewers generally do not spend much time reading the plaques, and as a result merely see different dresses. The combination of speed and headless mannequins creates the impersonal feel that intertwines with the shiny intimacy of the gowns themselves. The resulting effect is a tension between concealing and revealing the intricacy of the role that builds the glamorous aura. Visitors learn and see just enough to feel like glamour is within their reach while also enjoying a mysterious arena far from many of their personal experiences.

Ways of seeing first ladies

I have argued that "The First Ladies" is an exhibit constituted through the rhetoric of glamour. This is a rhetoric composed of elements that emphasize the ease, perfection, and alluring mystery of the role. These elements combine to suggest that the first lady's duties are limited to fashion and feminine, easy undertakings, not hard work. In line with understanding the ideologies circulating in images (Barthes 49), rhetoricians studying museum display practices have also attempted to understand what types of subjectivities visitors are invited to inhabit in certain instances of public memorializing (Dickinson et al. 30; Johnson 351; Prelli 15–16). There are numerous personae that an exhibit could invite its audience to inhabit. Visitors could, for instance, be primarily positioned as students summoned to learn about an obscure moment in history. Or they could be hailed as witnesses to some past injustice. They could be called as fellow citizens to solemnly reflect on the nation's history. These subjectivities provide important clues as to the ideologies hidden in the images comprising museum displays. The rhetoric of glamour endows its audience with a unique subjectivity as well, this section argues. The exhibit invites the visitor to take up a role as a spectator of elite culture, a subjectivity that perpetuates a masculine way of seeing.

The exhibit calls forth a "we" to appreciate the refined and glamorous choices that first ladies make. This role is explicitly described in some of the textual anchors (Barthes 39) in the room. "First ladies are expected to provide a dignified and attractive image as representatives of the United States," the plaque for The Fashionable First Lady declares. "But why are we so interested in what they wear?" it next asks. "Perhaps because we look to their fashion choices for clues to their characters and personalities and maybe even the administration's politics." Here, the plaque frames the public duty in regard to first ladies as one of looking, emphasized by the words "we look." The plaque then notes that not all first ladies rose to the level of "fashion icon," "but all have had their wardrobes scrutinized by the American public." So, the exhibit invites viewers to become a part of this American public that looks upon first ladies to appreciate how their clothing reflects their approach to the role and their place in the associated

administration. The exhibit also notes that the public has scrutinized first ladies' fashion choices since Martha Washington's time. "For more than two hundred years, we have judged their clothes, their parties, their projects, and their roles in the White House," one of the first plaques in the exhibit declares. The exhibit then situates viewers within that tradition of looking by inviting them to be one member of the "we" who judges the first ladies' clothing.

The historical public alluded to by the exhibit's text also fits into this tradition of watching. "The First Ladies" foregrounds the public's reaction to particular first ladies. Twice throughout the small exhibit are viewers told that the public scorned Mary Todd Lincoln's exorbitant spending on fashion and furnishings. Likewise, we learn that Lucy Hayes was both criticized and applauded for her demure style. The public "liked" Grace Coolidge's style. Newspapers "reported" on Edith Wilson's fashion preferences for simple lines and dark colors. People "praised" Caroline Harrison for her modesty. These are just a few of the examples, and they serve again to provide a model for critical interpretations of first lady fashion. In these texts, first ladies are positioned as passive objects that the public looks at and renders judgment upon.

Our present-day judgment of the fashions, however, is not invited to be critical. That the dresses are preserved in glass cases marks them as objects of value that the public must appreciate from afar. We are not invited to touch; we are expected to gaze but only from a distance. Moreover, the mannequins, except for the one representing Michelle Obama, are all placed on platforms that elevates them above the visitors on the ground. This further indicates that the gowns and the corresponding first ladies are unique treasures to behold. Indeed, given that the largest case containing gowns is not arranged chronologically, visitors are invited to merely gaze upon the details of each dress in an appreciative manner. The well-placed spotlights beckon us to look and to behold.

As an attempt to assess my reading of the way the exhibit was constructing its audience, I also visited the much larger "The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden" exhibit, which is located next to "The First Ladies." The presidency

exhibit offers many more informative plaques to its viewers, yet it very rarely explains who "we" are as visitors. Two exceptions warrant mention. First, the "we" of the American presidency is a "we" imbued and invested with national values. It makes its most prominent appearance on a plaque discussing inaugurations, noting that "[inaugurations] reflect the hopes we have for the presidency and our democratic process." The public in this case is invested in the success of the democracy, a loftier pursuit than scrutinizing first ladies' fashions. Second, the public is invited to do more than look in "The American Presidency." They are asked to respond and to provide an opinion that is framed in a scientific, seemingly legitimate means. Two screens ask visitors to participate in a "Visitor Opinion Poll." A plaque accompanying the computers instructs:

In this section of the exhibition, Presidential Roles, you are invited to view different roles a president must master. Using the touch-screen computer, take a moment to let us know which of these roles you think is most important. Then, tell us who you think was the most effective president in United States history. ... Compare your answers with those of other visitors. Thank you for your participation.

The exhibit collects opinions in a manner in line with social scientific public opinion polls and has the veneer of legitimacy through their recording and display on the screens. No interactive screens exist in "The First Ladies." Thus, visitors are positioned differently in the two exhibits. In the first ladies exhibit, viewers are spectators, invited to appreciate fashion, while in the American presidency exhibit, they are regarded as holders of national values with opinions so legitimate they are worth preserving and recording.

The subjectivities that museum display practices invite "entail certain ways of looking and exclude others" (Dickinson et al. 30). "The First Ladies" perpetuates a gendered way of looking. In other words, as spectators appreciate the gowns, they are invited to do so using masculine viewing practices that focus their attention on passive female bodies. These are visually displayed as headless mannequins and confirmed by the text that situates the public as appreciators of

the cultivated tastes of these classy women. The mannequins have no heads and are—except for Michelle Obama's, which is a darker brown—peach colored. As a result of the differing sizes of the first ladies' actual bodies, the mannequins, especially those in the front case, are of vastly different sizes. Julia Grant's dress is displayed on a mannequin that is short and wide, while Jacqueline Kennedy's state dinner dress, placed adjacent to Grant's, is on a tall and willowy mannequin. This juxtaposition and the design of the mannequins evokes a tension between the absence and presence of real bodies. For the twentieth-century first ladies, each gown is accompanied by a photograph of the first lady wearing the dress, more closely linking the mannequin to a real person. This presentation freezes the first ladies in time, inviting the viewer to gaze on a passive, still female form that is on display in its finery. By contrast, in the adjacent "American Presidency" exhibit, there are few mannequins. Instead, presidents are captured on video screens giving speeches and shaking the hands of world leaders. The connotation is that male presidents are active forces in history while first ladies are frozen and passive. The display reinforces the conclusion that Berger puts bluntly in his study of Western visual culture: "Men act and women appear" (47).

That the first ladies are presented as frozen in time in the form of the mannequins for the visitor to appreciate is an important confirmation of this suggested way of seeing. Even when first ladies are seen in motion on the three television panels on the exhibit's back wall, this masculine way of looking at women is perpetuated. The middle television screen shows the first lady dancing with her husband, the president, while the viewer is positioned in the imagined audience at the inaugural ball, appreciating her grace and elegance. The two televisions on the edges show close-ups of the gown on the mannequin. The camera slowly pans from head to toe, allowing the viewer to examine the exquisite details, beadwork, and sequins of each gown. Once again, we are invited to appreciate the first lady's glamour, while at the same time our eyes are forced to linger on the way the dress conforms to the curves of the mannequin's shape. The dress and first lady herself are merged as she presents herself to appeal to us. Moreover, with the exception of a video directly to the right of the

entrance to the exhibit showing first ladies donating their gowns to the Smithsonian, first ladies do not speak in this exhibit. The placards describing their gowns and "first lady projects" do not even include quotations from each first lady. Their own voices are silent, subsumed in the visual. This confirms a gendered hierarchy where women's appearances are to be consumed and their voices are not to be heard.

By inviting a masculine gaze through visual display practices and validating the gaze in text that confirms spectatorship as the public's duty, "The First Ladies" exhibit struggles to help visitors understand the power these women have held throughout history. The combination of the rhetoric of glamour, spectator subjectivity, and a masculine way of seeing curate our public memory of the first lady. This invites us to understand her role in a limited manner, a proposition which I reflect upon in the article's final section.

Counternarratives and implications

Overall, the rhetoric of glamour and its invited masculine way of seeing depoliticizes and domesticates the first lady. Yet a counternarrative exists in the back hallway of the exhibit if the visitor is willing to look. This section, titled Changing Times, Changing First Ladies, is the clearest attempt to craft a narrative of the evolving role of the First Lady. In this hallway, the curators have selected four first ladies and highlighted their prowess in both performing and transforming their duties. "Over different times and circumstances, they crafted significant roles for themselves that they believed would allow them to best serve the president and the country," the section's opening plaque proclaims. In the separate display cases accorded to each of these first ladies—Dolley Madison, Mary Todd Lincoln, Edith Roosevelt, and Lady Bird Johnson—visitors get a picture of what the White House looked like under her care. They also receive a great deal more information about the first lady's role in said White House alongside much needed context about the general place of women in American society at the time. This is the only time in the larger exhibit where viewers learn about the first lady's relationship to, for instance, the suffrage movement or women's liberation activism.

Throughout this section, viewers get an implicit narrative about how these changing developments unfolded. Dolley Madison, we learn, was a "popular figure in fiercely partisan Washington society." A plaque under two of her gowns recounts the familiar tale of Madison saving paintings from the burning White House. Likewise, a plaque titled "American Women and Politics" tells us that women were political agents during the Revolutionary War who organized boycotts and contributed "in many other ways to the war effort." It notes, however, that women did not gain new legal rights after the war. This helpful context frames another plaque titled "The Political Dolley Madison," which describes Madison's "personal form of politics" of networking, favors, and building goodwill for her husband's administration. Here, the exhibit offers visitors information about the actual contributions of first ladies.

Moving to the left, the narrative illustrates how first ladies used entertaining guests and charity work to respond to national crises. In this case, viewers encounter one of Mary Todd Lincoln's velvet dresses. Lincoln, we are told, believed strongly that the first lady could symbolize the power of the union. Once war broke out, she used charitable work and entertaining to boost morale. Situated next to a plaque describing the 1848 Seneca Falls meeting and the nascent suffrage movement, the exhibit suggests that Lincoln's work represents progress toward traditional political power. Yet we are also reminded that Mary Todd Lincoln was often criticized for meddling in political affairs in her attempts to wield influence, a useful acknowledgment of the power of gender roles for curtailing behavior deemed unfeminine. In the next case, the exhibit asserts that Edith Roosevelt's "managerial approach" to first ladyhood was "an important step toward defining the first lady's duties as a real job requiring professional support." The early-twentieth-century stall in the suffrage movement is the topic of this case's contextual plaque and, as a result, viewers are invited to see the professionalization of first ladyhood as a general improvement in the role despite challenging political times.

Lady Bird Johnson completes the narrative development from wife to presidential helper. The final case in this section explains that her commitment to the Great

Society was "the first time a first lady blended herself so seamlessly into the goals of the presidential administration." She served as her husband's critic and advisor, we are told, and participated in intense politicking to pass the Highway Beautification Act. Situated against a contextual plaque that describes the activism of women in the 1960s, both for their own rights and as anti-war protestors, the actions of Johnson seem staid but powerful. The description of Johnson completes this display's narrative about the first lady's evolving exercise of traditional political influence. The role of first lady transforms from that of a party planner to a legislation advocate. There were, of course, first ladies who did not fit neatly into this narrative of power gained, but this section absents them. The narrative is a simplistic one, of progress to greater political power, which casts the widening opportunity as an inevitable opening and not a struggle. In the 1992 version of the exhibit, then-curator Edith Mayo argued that her intention was to illustrate how the role developed from wife to presidential advisor (Molotsky). The 2011 version of "The First Ladies" is different from the 1992 one, but this similarity exists at least in the back hallway.

The exhibit culminates with a plaque reflecting on how the role will change once there is a female president, representing inevitable progress to the presidency. It proclaims:

Forty-six women have served as America's first ladies. Each made the job her own. Each became an example that her successors could, and can, look to for inspiration as they set out to develop their own agenda and leadership style. As women take on more diverse and prominent roles in society and the White House (including one day the presidency), the position of the first lady will undoubtedly change.

This final plaque of the whole exhibit capitalizes on the *telos* that had been building in the section: It suggests that women will move easily from active first ladyhood to the presidency, and once again it invites us to appreciate this progress. It does not consider the challenges relating to gender that have thus far presented insurmountable obstacles to ascending to the presidency, challenges

well documented by rhetorical scholars (Anderson). Moreover, the entire exhibit constructs a glamorous, feminized realm where masculinity is entirely absent. This functions to cast the exhibit in a postfeminist lens whereby women's power is benign and nonthreatening because it exists in a completely different world. Indeed, ponder what an exhibit about presidential dress would look like. "Wearing black, men abjure color but accrue power," writes Joseph Roach, noting that dress allows men to remain "unmarked" (86). Despite the American presidency exhibit being about four times as large as the exhibit featuring first ladies, only six mannequins in "The American Presidency" display clothing, including military uniforms and a spacesuit. Viewers look at martial masculinity in this exhibit.

This postfeminist narrative is simplistic and ambivalent. It is too easy of a *telos* that helps to obscure the highest glass ceiling of all. Yet I appreciate the Changing Times, Changing First Ladies counternarrative for its departure from the hyperindividualism and lack of context in the previous three sections of the exhibit. I also applaud the recognition that parties and balls are politics. As such, the activities of even the earliest first ladies were political. An exhibit that claims to look in depth at first ladyhood should attend to the ways in which the role has changed throughout the years, yet it should do so in a more nuanced manner. This counternarrative is subsumed by the glamorous spectacle of the gowns, which given their primacy reinforces the idea that the primary role of first ladies is to wear fashions for the public to see. A viewer must look very hard to find this narrative, physically tucked away in the back. The orientation to this narrative of changing roles is summarized in one plaque on a largely empty wall, behind Dolley Madison's clothing, a place where viewers are not likely to look.

Given the limited counternarrative and its displacement by the shimmering gowns, the overall exhibit depoliticizes and domesticates the role of first lady. These ideological messages about the place of first ladies, and women in power more generally, emerge from the glamour and the masculine way of seeing that the exhibit invites. The exhibit domesticates the role by using the rhetoric of glamour, which serves to remind viewers of an easy, luxurious past. Free from the troubles of the post-2008 financial crises, a collection of inaugural gowns

calls up a longing for the ease that glamour assures. "The First Ladies" promises a world where budgets are never tight, parties are always fabulous, and travel is as easy as boarding Air Force One. In doing this, I fear that the exhibit evidences a nostalgia for a time when women were constrained to roles as largely silent helpmates. Such a rhetoric invites us to appreciate first ladies in a realm wholly outside of traditional political power. Descriptions of "first lady projects" and simplistic narratives about changing power structures are overshadowed by the glamour of gowns and shoes. Moreover, given the absence of men in the exhibit, women are set apart in a glamorized realm of benign power exercised over feminine callings and easy domesticity. The exhibit promotes a postfeminist view that suggests a separate women's sphere is desirable and luxurious.

"The First Ladies" also depoliticizes the role through these rhetorical strategies. The counternarrative, although a useful exploration of changes in first ladyhood, represents widening access to power as inevitable, not as a political struggle for influence. Moreover, because memory places construct communal belonging (Blair et al. 7), we should be concerned that the invitation to community issued by this exhibit invites a masculine way of seeing the female body. This mirrors the development of homosocial communities in spaces like boardrooms, fraternities, and prep schools that build bonds that exclude women. This is especially troubling given that "The First Ladies" was one of the first exhibits at the Smithsonian dedicated to preserving some form of women's history, a fact that Edith Mayo, the curator of the 2001 version of the exhibit, celebrated (Hufbauer 136). That visitors are invited to serve primarily as spectators who appreciate fashion choices does not lend itself to critical thought regarding challenges facing women in politics or women in the public eye more generally.

In presenting this argument, I hope to illustrate the potential limitations of glamour as a rhetoric given its potential to depoliticize and domesticate stories about the development of women's political power and its tendency to invite viewers to assume a masculine way of seeing. Indeed, my larger concern is not merely that the exhibit is primarily constituted of dresses but that these dresses are inaugural gowns curated with a rhetoric of glamour. Clothing is an important

part of social history and helps bring the past to life. This is undoubtedly part of the reason that the exhibit has remained so popular for more than one hundred years.

My critique raises the question of what a more productive exhibit would entail. As the Smithsonian completes the renovation of the west wings of the National Museum of American History, should the exhibit be destined to stay in its current form, at minimum a name change is required. Curators should title the exhibit in a manner that foregrounds inaugural balls and state dinners instead of the vague "The First Ladies," which suggests that inaugural balls and state dinners comprise the extent of the role. "The Ceremonial First Ladies" is one option. A more substantive change would include broadening the exhibit to showcase a variety of artifacts beyond clothing. "The American Presidency," for instance, includes personal papers, documents, campaign signs, newspaper coverage, and a host of memorabilia related to the various roles the president serves. "The First Ladies" should showcase manuscripts of speeches, campaign videos, and documents related to the projects these women have undertaken, and it should present clothing beyond inaugural gowns. Finally, the exhibit should nuance the narrative it weaves in the back hallway. One way to do so would be to not blatantly sidestep the issue of power. It should confront more directly the challenges to accessing and holding political power that women have faced. This would likely involve drawing in press sources that have ambivalently discussed or dismissed first ladies' power. "The American Presidency" uses visually engaging methods to discuss the relationship between the president and the press, and I propose a similar approach be implemented here.

If my analysis of the exhibit seems ambivalent, it is because the exhibit itself is full of contradiction. "From the beginning," writes journalist Jan Jarboe Russell, "Americans have not known quite what to do with the wives of presidents" (A23). It seems unlikely that this confusion will be resolved anytime soon, especially given Hillary Clinton's embattled and ultimately unsuccessful campaign to win the presidency. In the meantime, however, it would do us well to think more deeply

about how we want to remember and understand the power wielded by America's first ladies.

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