The Evolution of Jackie Kennedy’s Suit: From a Representation of Identity to an Object of Mourning

Certain objects in our modern society can act as emblems of defining moments in American history. One such object is a pink suit famously worn by Jacqueline “Jackie” Kennedy on November 22, 1963 when her husband, John Fitzgerald “Jack” Kennedy, was assassinated publicly in Dallas, Texas (Appendix Fig. 1). The suit was simple in its lines, constructed from pink fabric with navy lapels and pink, cloth-covered buttons. As First Lady, Jackie considered it important to be seen buying and wearing American clothing, so though the suit was a “line-for-line” copy of a French Chanel suit from the era (Appendix Fig. 2), it was produced by the American Park Avenue brand Chez Ninon (Appendix Fig. 3).¹ The suit epitomized the “Jackie Look” of “simple styles, pillbox hats, bouffant hair, [and] minimal jewelry” that was copied both by stylish women in America and across the globe.² While initially a symbol of Jackie herself and her relationship with the President and the public, the suit would later come to symbolize a national moment of grief in American culture, and would help catapult the First Lady into an unwanted media frenzy of public mourning.

Prior to the assassination, the pink suit was important both to psychologically to Jackie herself as well as culturally to the American people. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his article “Why We Need Things,” on a psychological level, belongings can “stabilize our sense

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of who we are; they give a permanent shape to our views of ourselves that otherwise would quickly dissolve in the flux of consciousness.” For Jackie, her fashion sense provided her with a way to assert her own power and identity in the highly public position of First Lady. Jackie was of French heritage, and often used her clothing as an avenue through which to express her fondness for French styles and glamour. This was often done, as with the pink suit, by having American designers imitate French style. To her personal designer, the French-born American Oleg Cassini, Jackie wrote that she wanted pieces that “I would wear if Jack were President of FRANCE.” In doing so, Jackie was able to assert her own personal style and the importance of her heritage while still wearing American clothing appropriate for her position.

Furthermore, Jackie used her clothing as a way to define herself to the American people. According to Csikszentmihalyi, our sense of self is “vague and insecure” and “depends on the reflection we get from others’ reactions to it,” so we use objects to display the qualities that we believe others will positively react to and that will solidify our identity. By appearing perfectly coiffed and elegant yet still simple, Jackie was able to convey her competence and the elevated status of her office, all while not distracting from her husband’s campaign and presidency. As Jackie stated, “I refuse ... to be the Marie Antoinette or Josephine of the 1960s.” Furthermore, as a constant figure in the media, Jackie’s exposure made her feel vulnerable, and “fashion gave her a sense of separation from the public’s gaze... it was armor.” Through her fashion, Jackie was able to protect herself from the public while simultaneously presenting them with the media

4 Walton, "Jacqueline Kennedy, Frenchness, and French-American Relations,” 40.
5 Csikszentmihalyi, "Why We Need Things,” 24-25.
6 Walton, "Jacqueline Kennedy, Frenchness, and French-American Relations,” 40.
7 Horyn, "Jacqueline Kennedy's Smart Pink Suit."
image of the perfect First Lady. Her pink suit, in its rosy simplicity, was a continuation of this carefully crafted identity.

Since the First Lady’s fashion was so strongly associated with her husband’s presidency, her clothing can also be analyzed in terms of her relationship with him. Beyond functioning as an aspect of the Kennedy image, Jack himself greatly admired his wife’s fashion (though he did have qualms about how much money she spent on her wardrobe), and actually requested that she wear the pink suit to Dallas as it was one of his favorites. Therefore, the suit represents Jackie’s willingness to please her husband and the mutual appreciation that they had for one another in their periodically tumultuous marriage. According to Csikszentmihalyi, “in our mobile American society things play an important role in reminding us of who we are with respect to whom we belong.”

Jackie’s pink suit symbolizes her role of a supportive wife in Dallas as well as throughout Jack’s presidency. On the other hand, for Jack, the worldwide renown of his wife’s grace and fashion sense was why he once described himself as “the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris” on a trip abroad. As a fashionable young couple, the way that they dressed cemented their relationships with the public as well as with each other.

Though Jackie’s suit initially held the aforementioned cultural and psychological significances, the assassination of John F. Kennedy was a transformative moment for the suit as a symbol. In Susan Pearce’s book *Museums, Objects, and Collections: A Cultural Study*, the author examines how, with the passage of time and the evolution of meaning, objects “are associated with elements with which they had no original or intrinsic or metonymic relationship

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9 Csikszentmihalyi, "Why We Need Things," 27.
and in relation to which they are, therefore, acting as symbols.”11 While Jackie’s dress as a simple article of clothing for a glamorous lady would have initially been associated with fashion, France, and the White House, the assassination propelled the dress into a new sphere of meaning as Jackie Kennedy was forced to play the role of a resilient widow for the American people in the extremely publicized aftermath of the shooting. After her husband was shot, the secret service whisked the President and First Lady to Parkland Memorial Hospital, where Kennedy was pronounced dead. His body was loaded onto Air Force One to be transported back to Washington D.C., and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in aboard the plane.12 Famously, Jackie refused to change out of the bloodstained pink suit for the swearing-in ceremony (Appendix Fig. 4). According to Steven M. Gillon in his book The Kennedy Assassination—24 Hours After: Lyndon B. Johnson’s Pivotal First Day as President, “Johnson was shocked by her appearance… Her ‘beautiful, unsoiled, nicely pressed pink garment’ was now ‘streaked and caked and soiled throughout with her husband’s blood.’”13 As Pearce theorized, the suit as a symbol was able to evolve and take on a new association with destruction; Jackie’s apparent perfection and the idyllic public image of the Kennedy family as an American ideal was destroyed as her impeccable suit was soiled with her husband’s blood and her family was torn apart by the loss of its father figure. Johnson’s wife, Claudia Alta "Lady Bird" Johnson, recognized the powerful symbolism of the bloodstained suit, noting that “her right glove was caked, it was caked with blood—her husband’s blood. Somehow that was one of the most poignant sights—that immaculate woman, exquisitely dressed, and caked with blood.”14 Even

13 Ibid., 122.
14 Ibid., 122.
during the hysteria of the time, the sight of the First Lady caked in the blood of the President, himself a symbol of the United States of America, was recognized as a defining image of the tragedy.

As photographs of the bloodstained suit and firsthand accounts of Jackie’s refusal to change circulated in the press, the suit became inextricably linked to the horror of the assassination. Though Jackie had worn the suit previously on at least six other occasions (Appendix Fig. 5), its final public appearance would become iconic in American culture.¹⁵ Some of the press frenzy surrounding the suit was a direct result of Jackie’s actions. According to Lady Bird Johnson, when she asked Jackie if she wanted help getting changed into fresh clothes, Jackie responded “With almost an element of fierceness—if a person that gentle, that dignified, can be said to have such a quality” and said, “I want them to see what they have done to Jack.”¹⁶ Jackie wished the transgressions against her, her family, and the public office of President to be painfully visible to all around her. Even as she privately suffered from the shock, she was still aware that the public eye was on her; the suit allowed her to visibly convey the horror and trauma she and her husband had suffered without having to immediately make a public statement.

According to Pearce, objects are able to not only function as signs and symbols “to carry a true part of the past into the present,” but also “to bear perpetual symbolic reinterpretation, which is the essence of their peculiar and ambiguous power.”¹⁷ Even today, Jackie’s pink suit continues to evolve in its meaning; once Jackie finally changed out of the bloodstained garment, its whereabouts were unknown for years, imparting an air of mystery to the suit and its removal.

¹⁵ Horyn, “Jacqueline Kennedy's Smart Pink Suit.”
¹⁶ Gillon, The Kennedy Assassination, 123.
¹⁷ Pearce, "Objects Inside and Outside Museums," 27.
from public mourning practices. In 2013, as the 50th anniversary of the shooting brought the assassination (and the suit) back into the collective attention of the American people, multiple news outlets covered what had become of the dress. Once Jackie returned to the White House after the shooting, her personal maid Providencia Paredes placed the suit into a bag so Jackie would not have to look at the graphic reminder of her husband’s violent death. The suit was never cleaned, and was sent with the stockings and accessories Jackie wore that day to the National Archives just outside of Washington D.C. sometime before June of 1964. The items were likely sent by Jackie’s mother, Janet Auchincloss, on the instructions of Jackie.\cite{Horyn18} The whereabouts of Jackie’s pink pillbox hat are unknown, but it had been seen on Air Force One when General Godfrey McHugh described how Jack Kennedy’s “brains were sticking on her hat” after being propelled from his skull with the force of the shot.\cite{Gillon19} All of the items sent to the archives, however, technically belonged to Caroline Kennedy, Jackie’s daughter and heir. She officially gifted the items to the Archives in 2003 on the condition that the suit would not be displayed to the public until at least \num{2103}.\cite{Horyn18}

As a gift to the National Archives, the suit has become a museum object, even if it is not on display. According to Pearce, “Museum objects have (at least in theory) been lifted out of the marketplace where commodities are exchanged and have become something else, to which a word like ‘heritage’ is often attached.”\cite{Pearce21} Jackie’s suit does indeed represent a piece of American heritage, as does the rest of her wardrobe as an American cultural and fashion icon. Though the suit has been marked as special and set apart by its “museumification,” many of Jackie’s other

\begin{itemize}
\item \cite{Horyn18} Horyn, "Jacqueline Kennedy's Smart Pink Suit."
\item \cite{Gillon19} Gillon, The Kennedy Assassination, 125.
\item \cite{Horyn18} Horyn, "Jacqueline Kennedy's Smart Pink Suit."
\item \cite{Pearce21} Pearce, "Objects Inside and Outside Museums," 33.
\end{itemize}
articles of clothing were auctioned off in spring of 1996, two years after the former First Lady passed away. According to Mark J. White in his book *Kennedy: A Cultural History of an American Icon*, “Six weeks before the auction began, the *New York Times* reported that there had already been 18,000 orders for the $45 catalogue and that demand for tickets to the auction had been so great that Sotheby’s [auction house] had been compelled to distribute them by lottery.”

While Jackie’s other pieces can also be argued to be culturally significant due to the public status of their past owner, the pink suit is set apart in a league of its own by both its “contamination” with the blood of JFK and by the fact that it is deemed culturally important enough to be placed in a temperature-controlled, windowless vault in the National Archives. Its special treatment demonstrates the gravity and importance that Americans bestow upon memorial objects, especially those significant to the nation’s history.

The fact that Jackie’s suit continues to captivate the public even today highlights the importance of the media in cementing the suit’s place in American cultural history. Marita Sturken’s book *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* explores how memory is influenced by processes of representation, as in the media. The assassination and its aftermath were widely photographed by both amateurs and the press, and in many images (even those in black and white), the blood on Jackie’s suit is blatantly visible. This is also evident in the widespread dispersal of the so-called “Zapruder film,” a video capture of the assassination taken by amateur videographer Alfred Zapruder while viewing the President’s motorcade (*Appendix Fig. 6*). Though it was not initially released to the public in its film form (some stills from the footage were released), it became defining footage of the event.

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23 Kaye, “Jackie Kennedy's Pink Suit.”
once it was released 12 years after the assassination. According to Sturken, “The camera image is a technology of memory… Images have the capacity to create, interfere with, and trouble the memories we hold as individuals and as a nation.” While the Zapruder film preserves the moment of the assassination, the footage has become so widely disseminated that it may even replace spectators’ actual accounts and memories of the event.

For those who weren’t present to witness the event, the film can actually create the memory: as Sturken states, photography (both still and moving) “is the primary mechanism through which individuals participate in the nation… national stories are often mediated through specific camera images.” The clip provides a chance to be present for those who were not actually in Dallas on November 22, 1963; viewers can see the horror and heartbreak from the comfort of their own homes and react accordingly. In the famous film, Jackie’s pink suit serves as a focal point since the bright color draws the viewer’s eye like a magnet. According to Clint Hill, who was the secret service agent assigned to Jackie, “She stood out so much in the car because of the color of that suit… it was like the sun just illuminated it.” In this way, the suit functions as a focal point not only in the shot but also in the constructed national memory based on the brief clip. This constructed memory is perpetuated as recreations of the clip are implemented everywhere from Hollywood movies and TV docudramas to performance art parody reenactments and music videos, sharing it with new generations (Appendix Fig. 7). As Sturken states, “The film has become the event.” However, with the collective mourning of the

25 Ibid., 19-20.
26 Ibid., 20.
27 Horyn, "Jacqueline Kennedy's Smart Pink Suit."
nation at the time of the shooting, Jackie’s private grief was dragged out into a public media frenzy. In her book *First Women: The Grace and Power of America's First Ladies*, Kate Andersen Brower states that “Jackie’s greatest legacy… was how bravely she mourned her husband’s death. As the years passed she came to resent being a vessel for the shared grief of Americans and desperately wanted to live a private life.” Public obsession with Jackie’s private grief represents a cultural trend in the United States; while such publicized mourning could be viewed as an appropriation of the grief of the President’s family, it can also be seen as a demonstration of the public’s investment in the President’s life and its desire to “participate in the nation.”

This fascination with objects tied to national tragedies is not new; a similar collective outpouring of grief occurred following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln in 1865. Fueling some of this “national deluge of grief” was a funeral train running from Washington D.C. to Lincoln’s birthplace in Springfield, Illinois. Over two weeks, the train offered thousands of mourners a chance to gaze upon the face of the President and add tokens of their grief and admiration to the train. It would seem, then, that collective adoption of a family’s tragedy in order to participate in the construct of the nation was not a new trend beginning with the Kennedy assassination; the national mourning was likely similar to that occurring with the death of Lincoln, though on a much larger scale thanks to the more advanced media of the day. Jackie recognized the precedent of the Lincoln assassination and its relation to her own situation; while waiting for her husband’s autopsy results, Jackie called family friend and artist William Walton, asking him “to consult a book of sketches showing Lincoln’s lying in state at the White House”

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as “she wanted her husband’s viewing and funeral modeled after Lincoln’s.”  

Jackie recognized that the ceremony and ritual of another president’s assassination would provide a frame of reference for mourners and would cement her husband’s place in history by associating him with another famous and greatly admired president.

One major point of difference between the Lincoln assassination and the Kennedy assassination lies in the public display of mourning objects following the tragedy. While the suit that Lincoln was wearing during his assassination is displayed at Ford’s Theater, Jackie Kennedy’s suit remains tucked away in pristine condition (aside from the bloodstaining) out of the public eye. Even once the hundred-year time period stipulated by Caroline Kennedy passes, the agreement states that the Kennedy family must still provide their approval before the suit can actually be displayed. The primary reason for this secrecy is to avoid any “undignified or sensational use of the materials (such as public display) or any other use which would tend in any way to dishonor the memory of the late President or cause unnecessary grief or suffering to members of his family.” Such concerns mirror those about the Zapruder film in the aftermath of the shooting; its delayed release was credited to the need to guard the Kennedy family and protect the American public “from the disturbing moving image.” Though the censorship of such grief objects may be related to the dichotomy of public and private in a highly visual office

31 Gillon, The Kennedy Assassination, 195.
32 Horyn, “Jacqueline Kennedy's Smart Pink Suit.”
33 Kaye, “Jackie Kennedy's Pink Suit.”
like that of President, the much more delayed release of the suit compared to the Zapruder film likely relates back to the different natures of the two objects.

As an article of clothing, the suit provides a much more intimate connection to the assassination than the film; according to Margaret Gibson in her article “Melancholy Objects”, this is because clothing “is imprinted with the shape, size, and odour of the lived body” and “has a power of immediacy that perhaps photographs lack.”

36 To see the iconic pink suit that Jackie Kennedy lived, breathed, and moved in as her husband was shot to death in front of her eyes seems like a transgression against the First Lady herself. Despite the communal reaction to the Zapruder film and the public’s well-intentioned desire to share in Jackie’s grief, the extreme emotional ramifications of the tragedy she experienced cannot be translated via the medium of film. Jackie faced debilitating bouts of depression following the assassination, even revealing to her priest Reverend Richard McSorley that she had contemplated suicide.

37 Her personal article of clothing would provide a viewer with a much more tangible, heart-wrenching perspective on her quiet suffering and the private mourning that she was denied as a public figure. However, in our modern culture’s media climate, the suit could likely be sensationalized in much the same way that the Zapruder film was. If the suit is ever displayed, the conditions of its display must walk the fine line between presenting a melancholy object that allows the American people to continue moving toward acceptance after a direct attack on their nation’s democracy while also avoiding romanticizing or sensationalizing the tragedy yet again.

According to Erika Doss in her book *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*, “The material culture of grief… embodies the faith that Americans place in things to negotiate

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complex moments and events, such as traumatic death."

With this in mind, the continued interest of the American people in Jackie Kennedy’s pink suit even today demonstrates the importance of having a concrete material symbol in a time of rupture. Once a symbol of the glamour and the unique perspective that Jackie Kennedy brought to the White House, the suit evolved into a representation of tragedy paving the way for a grieving public to participate in the nation through media portrayals of both the assassination and the pink suit itself. By offering a much more graphic view into the gory chaos that Jackie faced, the bloodstained suit provides a different perspective on the assassination than the highly publicized Zapruder film that now represents the event in the country’s collective consciousness. After the assassination, Jackie confided in her friend, journalist Theodore H. White, that “I’m not going to be the widow Kennedy in public; when this is all over I’m going to crawl into the deepest retirement there is.” Whether or not Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy’s iconic pink Chez Ninon suit will ever emerge from its retirement is a question that only time can answer.

39 Brower, First Women, 203.
Appendix: Images

Fig. 1 Jackie wears her pink suit upon her arrival in Dallas (Ponic).

Fig. 2 Suits from the 1961 Chanel collection; the third look from the right likely inspired Jackie’s suit (Glamourdaze).
Fig. 3 Chez Ninon was the American fashion house that created Jackie’s Chanel-inspired suit (Galindo).

Fig. 4 Jackie in the aftermath of the shooting, with blood evident on her tights and dress (Ponic).
Fig. 5 Jackie wearing the suit with John Jr. on a prior occasion in 1962 (Galindo).

Fig. 6 A still from the famous Zapruder film (Ponic).

Fig. 7 Pop culture portrayals of Jackie’s pink suit in the past six years alone (from left, not a complete list): Lana del Rey as Jackie reacting to the assassination in her 2012 “Born to Die” music video (LanaDelReyVEVO), Ginnifer Goodwin in the 2013 TV movie Killing Kennedy (Radish), Natalie Portman in the 2016 film Jackie (Johnson), Katie Holmes in the 2017 TV miniseries The Kennedys After Camelot (Hinckley), and Portman on Saturday Night Live in 2018 (Shepherd). The multiple portrayals of the iconic outfit demonstrate its impact on popular culture even 55 years after the shooting.
Images Works Cited


LanaDelReyVEVO. "Lana Del Rey - National Anthem." YouTube. September 05, 2012. 


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