The Politics of Fashion

At my internship at Marie Claire Magazine this summer, I was repeatedly asked “so why are you here?” upon admitting that I am a political science major. At Washington University, my friends in Styleta often forget that I am not in the fashion school. Some may even assume that my parents are forcing me to go to law school, but fashion is really the passion that I have cultivated in secret, reading Vogue and Marie Claire under my covers at night. For most, fashion and politics seem to be at opposite ends of the academic spectrum; to have an interest in one, one must completely ignore the other. If Michelle Obama and Anna Wintour have taught us anything, it is that fashion and politics are not mutually exclusive.

After taking several political science classes at Wash U, I realized that my academic interest was in governmental structure, constitutional law, and political histories. I furthered this interest by examining women’s roles in the law, eventually declaring a minor in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Parallel to my academic journey into political science was a creative journey down the fashion rabbit role. I became involved in Styleta during my first semester in college and was hooked; I always knew I loved style, shopping, and fashion, but had never taken such an active role before. As a former charity organization, Styleta seeks to get fashion-minded students interested in community service through clothing drives and other fundraising events. Working my way up the sartorial ladder from Stylist to President, I styled and organized photoshoots and runway shows, partnering with local boutiques and student models, photographers, and make-up artists in order to raise money for charity. It hasn’t been difficult for me to live this “double life”; what was difficult, however, was trying to find a way to make it just one. It finally occurred to me, after immense introspection based on pressure to “figure out what I was doing with my life,” that I don’t have to choose one over the other.
Though it can be seductive to be a part of the glitz and glamour of fashion, what interests me, however, is often what is happening behind the scenes: the trademark infringements, labor disputes, and even the political leanings of fashion’s most powerful. I followed the Louboutin vs. Yves Saint Laurent dispute with much interest, often considering how I would decide the case. On the political side, I’ve started thinking about how voters respond to well-dressed candidates (and candidates’ well-dressed wives). Clearly, there has been a push in politics for stylish companions: Sarah Palin’s infamous clothing budget during the 2008 elections, Michelle Obama’s ever-classic and always-talked-about style, and Ann Romney’s Oscar de la Renta dress at the Republican National Convention all demonstrate the attention given to the sartorial choices of the political elite.

What is lacking, however, in the discussion of fashion and politics is the hope that the two can, together, do some good. We often read about the harmful sweatshops in remote countries that American designers are using to produce their goods, or how the fashion industry is promoting anorexia through unhealthy images of models. What I’ve learned from being a part of Styleta, and studying the political process, is that there must be understanding before there can be improvement. For the fashion industry standards to change, there must be more politically active people making the effort to not just slap a designer on the wrist for violating labor laws, but to work with designers all over the country in finding better and safer labor practices. There must be more people, like Diane von Furstenberg and Steven Kolb of the CFDA, who are enforcing health initiatives for models during fashion week.

This is why I became so interested in Styleta; I got to partake in the glamorous side of fashion and styling, but also the more realistic everyday activities that must happen for an event (like a fashion show) to take place. Moreover, the knowledge that I am actually doing some good
for some people makes Styleta even that much more important to me. Additionally, working at
Marie Claire showed me that there are other civic-minded fashionistas out there; the magazine
doesn’t just discuss runway trends, but it includes important articles that discuss topics like
underage sex trafficking and how it is being handled by the legal system. So, when a fellow
fashion intern makes me feel out of place for not majoring in design, I remind myself that my
aspirations involve being a different type of fashionista: the politically active one. I also remind
myself that, at the very least, my two interests will produce a stylish and civically responsible
member of society.