

## Visuality, Role, and Representation: The First Ladies at the Smithsonian

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The National Women's History Museum "currently raises awareness and honors women's diverse experiences and achievements through its dynamic online museum, educational programs, scholarship and research" ("About Us," 2014, p.1). However, this museum does not exist in physical form. In an 18 year effort to create a material reality, progress was made in May of 2014 when the House of Representatives passed legislation to form a Congressional Commission on the Potential Creation of a National Women's History Museum in D.C. ("House of Representatives," 2014). Despite the commission being a bipartisan effort and passing 383 to 33 in the House, forward movement has slow and controversial. Given the current debate over its physical creation, the public and scholars alike must continue to ask questions about the role and visibility of women in our public spaces.

The Smithsonian's exhibit on the First Ladies, located in the American History Museum, offers scholars an interesting site from which to investigate our public celebration and commemoration of the role, as well as women's role in history. In considering why this exhibit remains so popular a century after its creation, former curator Edith Mayo speculates that it is because women have few choices where they can go to see themselves playing an active role in history (Hufbauer, 2005). Though more representation is obviously needed, the First Ladies Exhibit at a minimum should be offering the public an educational and detailed representation of women's prominence throughout American history; this representation remains problematic.



My current essay on the exhibit addresses only a small piece of the already too small space that houses the First Ladies in the AHM, the entrance. I argue that the exhibit entrance largely confines the role both in visibility and power. This includes the lack of signage, the protruding Presidential artifacts, as well as well as the exhibit name announcing it as a “gallery” (where artifacts are viewed as beautiful and unchanging).



Though life size photograph wall calls for pause and consideration, it is clear that the women pictured stand to represent a commemoration and commodification of the role, not the individual women who fill it. The cropping of the photographs, as well as the choice to picture them in inaugural gowns, reduces their agency to the role of “national hostess” concealing their considerable influence in social and political matters. Likewise, it creates a visual space in which all first ladies are similar: in size, in dress, in influence. They First Ladies are represented as the “one woman, every woman.”



With Vats and Nishime (2013) reminding us of the dangers of containment through nostalgia, it is alarming that while the museum continues to evolve with time and society, much like the First Ladies, the representation remains inconsistent and antiquated. Perhaps Edith Mayo was correct when she mused that it may take a “first man” to change our conceptions about the First Lady. As it stands today, their representation is largely ceremonial. As Haskins (2003) notes “artifacts of memory have a problematic relationship with history because they identify and amplify certain people and events and consign others to oblivion” (p. 2). Instead of interacting with their political and social identities and individual contributions, visitors to the First Ladies exhibit learn their history through the medium of clothing, and while the gowns on display are certainly works of art in themselves, they do not fully begin to represent the complicated nature of the role.

## References

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