

# Whose 'nude'? Fashion debates a loaded color term

By SAMANTHA CRITCHELL  
The Associated Press

When you hear the word *nude* what do you picture?

In fashion, it's a common description of the shade a little darker than champagne, lighter than sand and perhaps with a hint of blush or peach.

But when Michelle Obama wore, in the words of designer Naem Khan, a "sterling-silver sequin, abstract floral, nude strapless gown" to a state dinner at the White House — and it was reported as such — that sparked questions about the definition of *nude* and its relation, if any, to the wearer's skin color.

The Associated Press called Mrs. Obama's dress color "flesh" and got immediate reports: "Whose flesh?" one newspaper editor asked. "Not hers." The description was revised to "champagne."

"We talk of nude now, and there is no one color. It's politically incorrect," says Gale Epstein, creative director and co-founder of undergarment brand Hanky Panky. "There is a wide range for skin-tone colors. Human skin tones are a whole color palette unto themselves."

Epstein says she realized years ago that the brand would need a full range of skin-tone shades. The middle ground of Hanky Panky's dozen or so neutrals is probably taupe, which falls somewhere between the very light chai, which is also the best seller, and the much darker espresso.

Designer Pamela Roland, best known for her evening-wear, also treats *nude* as a broad color category. "Nudes are a group of elegant shades, but there are a lot of specific shades," she says. "I can't describe a single specific color for nude."

That champagne-sand hue, though, is usually what the word is used to describe in fashion shows, stores and the pages of fashion magazines. A quick search for "nude" in the online color finder for Pantone, the company that largely sets color-formula standards for fashion and home-goods manufacturing, turns up a light beige.

It's a popular color in decorating, says Anthony Noberini, design director for Iconix's home brands, including Waverly, but, logically, the names are linked back to where the shade is being used. In the kitchen, for example, the neutrals are oatmeal or flax. When it comes to the increasingly popular coffee shades, Noberini says he'll hear directly from consumers if they think his latte is too light or dark roast too dark.

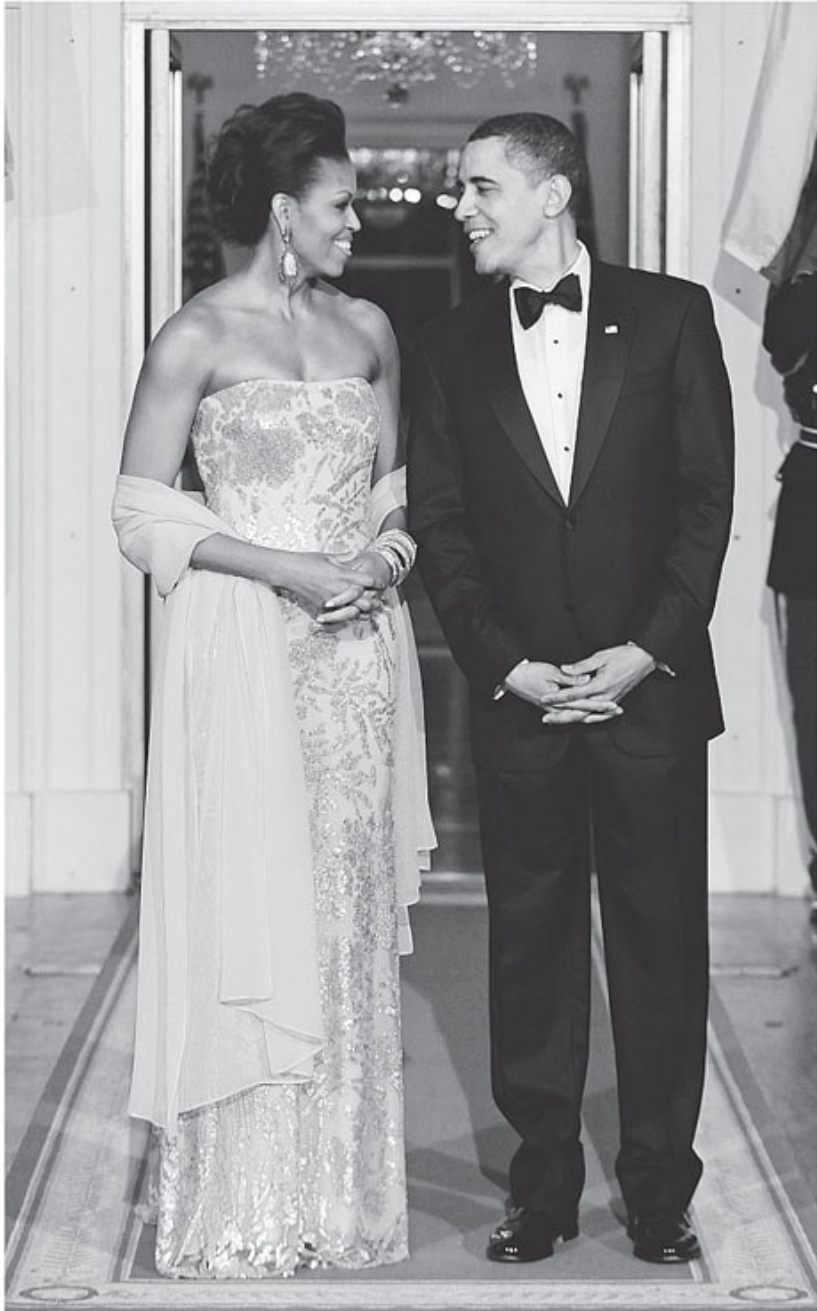
They're not unlike skin tones, he says, in that everyone thinks the color should reflect the one they personally are most familiar with.

It's not unprecedented for color names to change with the tastes of society. In the 1960s, for example, Crayola changed its flesh color — which resembled white skin — to peach. The company attributes the switch on its website at least partially to the civil rights movement.

*Nude* as a term is too generic at this point, says Epstein. "When you find the right color or name, it means more to the customer. It's more literal."

At the high-fashion house of Calvin Klein, which favors a neutral palette, color names are more specific than *nude* and used as internal shorthand. While the sometimes esoteric labels can be a guessing game for the fashion insiders at its runway show — *ether*, a light silver, was a favorite for spring — they mostly keep the production team from getting confused, explains women's creative director Francisco Costa.

A sparkly neutral number is a best seller for reality show star-turned-designer Whitney Port, who says she



SUSAN WALSH | The Associated Press

In fashion, the word *nude* is most often used to describe a shade that is a little darker than champagne, lighter than sand and perhaps with a hint of blush or peach. First lady Michelle Obama and President Barack Obama are shown here before they welcome India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his wife Gursaran Kaur to a State Dinner at the White House. The color of Michelle Obama's gown was described by some as "nude."

was finding herself so drawn to "flesh tones" when shopping for herself that she made them a big part of her Whitney Eve clothing line.

"I pretty much call it flesh tones. I use the word *nude*, but there's really an array of shades that covers — it could be mustardy, cream or blush," she says. "They're colors that look great on any color skin; it's a group of universally pleasing colors."

Celebrity stylist David Zyla breaks down the nude spectrum into five categories — whites, pinks, yellows, beiges and browns — and offers more than 30 narrowed-down names, including porcelain, tawny beige and toasted golden brown.

"There is nothing on a woman more beautiful than having them wear their essence or skin tone," says Zyla, author of *The Color of Style*. "It's about the woman and this drape of fabric around her, not about a jeweled collar or puffed sleeve or big skirt."

Roland says she considers *nude* a range of shades, and loves working with the palette. "Colors are loud. Nudes are a soft whisper — a sexy and

elegant whisper. *Nude* allows a woman to wear her dress instead of the dress wearing her. It's very elegant."

The woman who wears *nude* is suggesting what might be underneath, expressing "her most basic self," Zyla says. And perhaps that's why changing the name — or using many — makes sense.

"We're in a place in fashion where women are wanting to express their own unique selves," Zyla says. "This array of essence colors is very individual."

## Film

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When McBride enrolled in the hands-on class, her plan was to tell the story of meth-addicted homeless youth in Salt Lake City. Six months into the course, the story had yet to get anywhere.

Then she realized she needed to turn the lens on herself. There was plenty to talk about. She had been sexually abused as a child, been a teenage mother, been involved in abusive relationships and was a meth addict.

"I've always had the passion to be able to help others. Being in the situation and going through all of it, other addicts have a better understanding when listening to a recovering addict," McBride said of deciding to tell her story "The Dark Side of the Lake."

Seven documentary films from the 2009-10 class had their first screening at Episcopal Church Center, May 12. Some of the students are graduates of the Venture Course in the Humanities, a program originally launched through the Utah Humanities Council.

University of Utah instructor Jeff Metcalf, who taught for Venture, proposed the Humanities in Focus program for students wanting to continue to study. He worked with the U., the Salt Lake City School District, local organizations and individuals to launch it. Not knowing a thing about filmmaking, he brought Wirth, a documentary film producer, on board.

Through word of mouth, the program has taken off. This year, 28 students enrolled, with more on a waiting list. "We're already full and I haven't even started advertising," said Metcalf, the HIF director.

Students can work individually or in groups. They learn how to write scripts, use a camera, do interviews and edit film. The novice filmmakers spend hundreds of hours putting their final product together. In the beginning, the class was held one night



STEVE GRIFFIN | The Salt Lake Tribune

Jeff Metcalf, of Humanities in Focus, gets a hug from an emotional Jeannette Villalta, as she is recognized for her documentary "You Could Be Next" at the Humanities in Focus Film Festival at the Episcopal Church Center in Salt Lake City.

a week. By the end of the year, students were spending three or more nights in the classroom.

Juanita and Ruben Ventura focused on Kausachun Peru, a dance school they created to preserve their Peruvian heritage.

Lucia Chavarria, Hector Sanchez and Jose Leon told the story of "Esmeralda," a young woman's journey of leaving a gang. The team hoped that if teenagers heard Esmeralda's real-life story, they might avoid following a similar path.

A returning student, Maricruz Jaurez, made a sequel to her first documentary about dealing with domestic abuse.

Jeannette Villalta gave a teary thank-you after "You

Could Be Next," her film dedicated to a friend who died of AIDS.

By the end of the showing, some students were discussing the changes they wanted to make to their films. Others were sharing ideas for future films. All received diplomas of completion.

"It's important for these voices to be included in our community," Metcalf said. "What we are trying to do is help students explore what is true in their lives, what is just and moral."

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