

Inaugural clothes meant to be worn more than once

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NEW YORK — Many big fashion players are getting in the game of creating inauguration-themed clothing. It's like wearing school colors to rev up spirit ahead of the big pep rally - in this case, the swearing in of Barack Obama as president on Tuesday.

Those producing T-shirts, tote bags and scarves range from runway darlings Derek Lam and Narcisco Rodriguez to everyday folks with a good sense of humor.

Lam says the design of his shirt for the Presidential Inaugural Committee with graphic rows of zeros and "Obama" and "01-20-09" at the bottom was inspired by tickertape. "It's dialing back to zero because we're starting fresh."

It's purposely not a very political design. "At this point in time, we've hopefully moved past the partisanship and we're all celebrating the inauguration of a new president."

He adds: "And, if nothing else, it's just a great item to have from a fashion point of view."

Bill Jemas is using the inauguration as a platform for his new peace-focused brand Intelligent Design. It's a chance to promote fashionable activism at a time when activism has become fashionable, says Jemas.

The underlying message of many of the shirts is reconciliation.

"This inauguration is hitting people differently than they have in the past. People feel like they have power again and they feel proud to wear something about how they're feeling," explains Farrah Gross, Intelligent Design's graphic artist.

At Zazzle.com, an on-demand retail Web site, apparel has been the best-selling Obama category, but the company also reports brisk sales of hats, shoes, skateboards and other paraphernalia. Since the holidays, there's been a 50 percent uptick in sales of presidential items week over week, says spokeswoman Karen DeMarco.

There are a total of 113,000 Obama-inspired products on the site, according to DeMarco, with more than 30,000 dedicated to "Yes We Can" or "Yes We Did."

Jana Eggers, CEO of Spreadshirt, a personalized apparel company, meanwhile, has seen an increasing number of items with Obama's face on it. "I've noticed now, more than at any other time during the election, it's about an image of him. His face is the focus of the design. It's like he's ready to be carved into Mount Rushmore."

Inaugural T-shirts are on Spreadshirt's home page now, but election items weren't.

"We focus on apparel, so we didn't really focus a lot on the election," Eggers says. "Often election T-shirts are worn once and then go into the old T-shirt pile. ... But I think the inauguration is an event that people will wear over and over again. We're trying to coin a phrase for a shirt that you'll wear for four years."

Jemas also predicts long-term wearability. "Change isn't a one-day event. It'll be a 20-year event and I want people to wear the shirts that long," he says.

His favorite is a simple purple map of the United States with the word "inaugurate."

Beth Katznelson, of Hoboken, N.J., bought the shirt a few weeks ago. She says she was looking for a "unifying item," not something that was necessarily pro-Obama.

She's worn it once - and she plans to wear it Tuesday. The reactions she's had so far range from curious to positive, but nothing negative.

"I think this whole year is the time to wear it. It's not a one-time purpose. That's why it's different than just the Obama or just McCain shirts," Katznelson says.

There are official products sanctioned by the Presidential Inaugural Committee that includes wine glasses and children's coloring books as well as the stylish Runway to Change apparel collection with shirts by Lam, Donna Karan and Zac Posen, among others.

"These designers have all offered their unique talents and vision to capture the excitement and anticipation around the Inauguration of President-elect Barack Obama," says committee spokesman Brent Colburn in a statement. "We are very thankful for their designs and grateful for their contributions."

Designer Rachel Roy didn't think twice about participating. "It's probably one of the biggest honors I've been asked to do since I've been designing and that's almost 16 years."

Her "I (heart) my president" shirt - with a graphic heart that goes from red to purple to blue - is a sign to Obama that her "hope and prayers are with him," she explains.

Roy, who is married to hip-hop mogul Damon Dash, previously designed a scarf for the campaign.

She hopes to make it to Washington next week but work commitments might keep her home. No matter what, she says, she's sending her 9-year-old daughter with relatives to witness history.

"She'll wear the shirt. I also bought her Narciso's Runway to Change T-shirt and she wears that to school, and I got her Marc Jacob's bag. And, for my mom, I bought the Diane von Furstenberg bag.

"I'm supporting friends and getting the message out," Roy says.

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