

## { BODY POLITIC }

## SHE GOT HILLARY'S VOTE

*Susanna Chung Forest has carved a niche for herself by dressing powerful businesswomen and socialites in polished, conservative style.*

BY KAVITA DASWANI,  
Special to The Times

**G**OOGLE "Hillary Clinton's pantsuits" and the thousands of pages that come up are an amalgamation of gentle mockery, a modicum of flattery and all-out derision. Punch line and rallying cry, those suits have been seared into the public consciousness. (Who can forget the bright tangerine number the former presidential candidate wore on the opening day of the Democratic National Convention last month?)

But lost in the clamor was the designer. Turns out that many of Clinton's signature campaign suits were stitched on the first floor of a boutique in the heart of Beverly Hills by Susanna Chung Forest, who has made a name -- and a sizable business -- for herself by dressing female execs of Fortune 500 companies and Holmby Hills socialites.

In the workshop she runs at the Susanna Beverly Hills boutique, she keeps a photo album stuffed with glossy shots of Clinton in some of the designer's pantsuits, a mannequin made to the senator's measurements and reams of sketches and fabric swatches.

Forest, a native of Korea who has had her Beverly Hills boutique for 32 years, says she first met Clinton last summer at a fundraiser hosted by billionaire Ron Burkle. The designer and the senator were introduced by mutual friends and started talking clothing, and Forest was invited to Clinton's Los Angeles hotel suite to take her measurements.

"She actually has a beautiful shape, very womanly," says Forest, who went on to make a permanent mannequin based on Clinton's body, as she does with all her clients. (This joined a lineup of several she keeps in her atelier, the individual customer's name scrawled on the front with a Sharpie. One mannequin simply boasted the appellation "Sultan" -- as in, "of Brunei.")

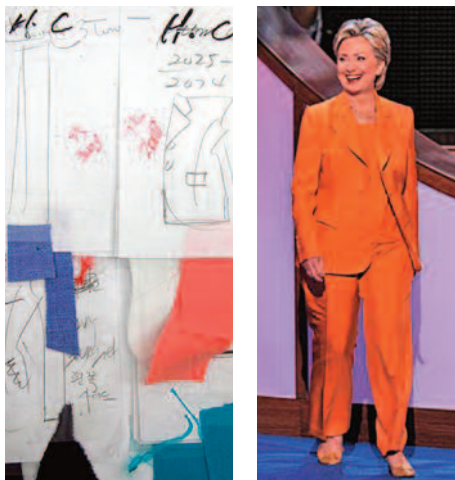
After researching the kinds of outfits Clinton had worn in the past, Forest created a few different pantsuits, all in earth shades, and sent them off to the senator's office. The ensembles would become a template: tailored pants, longer jackets that skim the hip, a



**POLISH:** Forest is putting finishing touches on a Hillary Rodham Clinton pantsuit.



**PRIMETIME:** Senator Clinton wearing a Susanna design on "The Late Show with David Letterman".



**VA-VOOM:** From cutting room sketches to the stage of the Democratic National Convention.

matching shirt underneath.

"I knew they had to be classic and conservative but also a little fitted, to show her shape, her power." Shortly after, Forest was watching David Letterman's show one night and applauded when Clinton came on, clad in one of the new suits, a flattering mocha number worn with a crisp white shirt.

"I used this," Forest says, pulling out a bolt of fabric from the dozens that are stacked around the room. "I started with the soft and natural colors, but then wanted to add the va-voom colors," she says, alluding to the reds, tangerines and cobalt blues Clinton has been seen in since then. Although Forest declines to reveal just how many pantsuits she's added to Clinton's wardrobe, her album catalogs several dozen varieties. In July, Clinton wrote a note of thanks to Forest, adding, "Your hard work, professionalism and wonderful designs kept me comfortable, picture perfect and feeling great!" (The Clinton camp declined to comment -- and Forest herself stayed discreetly in the background until her client was out of the race.)

Forest continues to send packages containing three or four suits at a time to Clinton on the road. She is finishing a bright red silk suit and has already sent along a black ensemble with a skirt instead of pants.

"Her size is always the same," Forest says. "Even during the campaigning, the traveling, everything she has been through -- it never changes. I would meet her at her hotel here for fittings, at 7:30 in the morning, and she's dressed, ready, surrounded by stacks of papers. In front of the cameras she has to be a little reserved, a little serious. But one-on-one, she's very warm and funny. We laugh and giggle like friends."

### Cool and collected

**D**OWNSTAIRS IN the boutique, a couple of Clinton staples take pride of place, among them a brown nubby tweed jacket and a canary yellow version with black trim. These are

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just two in a compact selection of Forest's offerings, daytime jackets on one side, evening wear on the other.

The styles are unfettered and streamlined: a black silk trench coat with a wide collar, an unlined jacket in camel suede, a black wool dress with a shawl collar and nothing more ornate than a faux pearl and rhinestone brooch at its neck (which will, no doubt, be switched for the real thing when purchased). A floor-length gown in pewter silver with ribbon detailing on one shoulder is perfect for a red carpet event.

There is little to demarcate the clothing from one season to the next; a sculpted and embroidered lace jacket is going to look pretty much the same year after year, which is Forest's point. She has never courted young Hollywood trendsetters, even though, in the earliest days of her boutique, she created the signature rich-girl looks on Aaron Spelling's "Dynasty." (Spelling's widow, Candy, is said to be a friend and customer.)

The clothes aren't cheap. Jackets are about \$3,000, shirts run to \$1,350 and pants hover around the \$2,000 mark. For first-time clients, there is a minimum three-suit requirement, simply because it costs so much to make the mannequins.

Forest is betting on the return of the polished-sophisticate look as an antidote to all the boho chic. Next year, she is planning to launch a mass retail version of her signature suits, once she finalizes the financing.

"I'm thinking about the girl right out of college, someone who is 22, someone who has to start somewhere to become a CEO one day," she says. "I look around at the other stores, and everything is sexy little cami tops and jeans. That won't work in the corporate world. I want there to be a revolution — a tight black skirt, a crisp white shirt, black pumps, for someone who is a receptionist or a secretary, earning \$35,000 a year, and who can wear beautiful business looks that are affordable," by which she means \$20 to \$60.

And when they're ready to move up, Forest will no doubt be there, mannequin and Sharpie at the ready. ■