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In New York, Mrs. Obama Praises Arts as Vital to U.S.

By [RACHEL L. SWARNS](#)

The first lady, [Michelle Obama](#), visited New York City on Monday to promote the arts, celebrating opening night at the [American Ballet Theater](#) and the reopening of part of the American Wing of the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#).

Mrs. Obama described the nation's creative spirit as critical to its ideals and its identity, and said the arts needed to be nurtured even during difficult economic times. She noted that her husband had included \$50 million in his economic [stimulus package](#) for the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).

"The arts are not just a nice thing to have," she said, adding that the arts "define who we are as a people."

It was Mrs. Obama's first foray into New York's glittering world of high culture as first lady. And she addressed star-studded crowds that included prominent figures from the political world, as well as from the arts and the fashion scene.

The designer [Ralph Lauren](#), the former model Iman, and [Anna Wintour](#), editor of Vogue, sat in the front row in the audience at the Metropolitan Museum. And Mrs. Obama shared the stage there with Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) and several members of New York's delegation to Congress.

At the American Ballet Theater, Mrs. Obama and her husband, [President Obama](#), were listed as honorary co-chairwoman and chairman for Monday night's spring gala, along with the designer [Carolina Herrera](#), [Renée Zellweger](#), [Caroline Kennedy](#) and others.

The first lady seized her moment in the limelight on the grand stage of the [Metropolitan Opera](#) House to call on institutions and philanthropists to make the art world readily accessible to children.

She praised the Metropolitan Museum and the American Ballet Theater for involving children of diverse backgrounds in their programs.

"My husband and I believe strongly that arts education is essential for building innovative thinkers who will be our nation's leaders of tomorrow," said Mrs. Obama, who introduced a performance by a multiracial cast of young dancers.

Mrs. Obama served as the official ribbon cutter at the reopening of the Metropolitan Museum's [Charles Engelhard Court](#) and the American period rooms, which showcase American furniture, sculpture, stained glass, ceramics, silver and other artwork. The wing, which has been closed for two years of construction and renovation, will reopen to the public on Tuesday.

“The president and I want to ensure that all children have access to great works of art,” said Mrs. Obama, who spoke to an audience at the museum that included dozens of public schoolchildren.

“This is your place, too,” she told the children.

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