



Dean of fashion designers is 67-year-old Ann Lowe of New York City, who has been creating beautiful dresses and hand-made flowers since she was a child of six. With her is London model Judith Palmer, wearing Lowe theater gown and coat of Italian Mecado silk, with black lace reembroidered in black soutache.



In her Madison Avenue salon, Ann Lowe inspects wedding dress of white peau d'ange, styled like a redingote and trimmed with half-moons of satin. Underskirt is of white satin and petticoat of white taffeta edged with sheared tulle and caught at intervals with blue bows for "something blue." She also made bride's debut dress six years ago.

DEAN OF AMERICAN DESIGNERS

Frail New Yorker has spent 50 years creating fashions for nation's top society

BY GERRI MAJOR

IN THE world of fashion, a frail 67-year-old dynamo is living proof of the fact that a Negro can become a leading American dress designer. She is Ann Lowe, who describes herself as "an awful snob."

"I love my clothes," explains Miss Lowe, "and I'm particular about who wears them. I am not interested in sewing for cafe society or social climbers. I do not cater to Mary and Sue. I sew for the families of the Social Register."

Miss Lowe, herself, is named in the *National Social Directory*, an 800-page book which lists families and individuals noteworthy for their accomplishments and interest in the arts and sciences, business and professions, and for "the dignity of their way of life." She is also included in the *Who's Who of American Women*. Though virtually unknown



Flowers, which took 12 days to make for "second wedding" dress, are specialty of Miss Lowe. In workshop she is assisted by (l. to r.). O'Kell Noel, Lea Traugutt and Contesse Mascha Kamarousky. Right, Ann puts finishing touches on debut dress for Alberta Wangerman, whose father is the executive vice-president of Hilton Hotel Corp.



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"First Lady" dolls of Evyan Collection, Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson (l.), and Mrs. John F. Kennedy, wear gowns made by Miss Lowe who has dressed six sets in authentic copies. Right, Mrs. Kennedy wears wedding gown Ann made for her from 50 yards French silk chiffon taffeta. Gown required millions of tiny stitches.

DEAN OF DESIGNERS *Continued*

to the man-in-the-street, her reputation is so great among the aristocratic millionaires to whom she caters that today she is creating dresses for the granddaughters of many of her earliest customers.

An accident of birth may account for her respect for people of quality. Miss Lowe is the great-granddaughter of an Alabama plantation owner and a slave woman. Both her grandmother and mother sewed for the first families of Montgomery. When a child of six, she learned to make the beautiful fabric flowers for which she is famous. Using scraps from the gowns her mother was making, she patterned her work from flowers growing in the garden. A recent debutante ball gown was returned to Miss Lowe for repairs. An ardent swain had snipped a beautiful silk carnation from the dress for a memento.

Miss Lowe's struggle to fulfill her dream of becoming a great designer is a saga of pathos and tragedy, interwoven with courage and an indomitable will. When she was 16 years old, her mother died, leaving four unfinished ballgowns for the First Lady of Alabama. Ann completed the dresses, and a 50-year romance with beautiful clothes was born.

Exclusivity is the Lowe trademark. Her clients are the bluest of the blue bloods—the DuPonts, Roosevelts, Posts, Biddles, Rockefellerers, Auchincloss—for whom she has been sewing for two and three generations. No two of her creations are alike. Her materials are the finest and most difficult to obtain. Each gown requires long hours of delicate hand work—weeks to make flowers, weeks to bead and fringe. She is famous for expensive hand-sewn formal gowns, each so superbly constructed and fitted with built-in bras that the wearer just steps into one and is ready to go.

"All the pleasure I have had, I owe to my sewing. I enjoy it so much, I wish I were physically able to do all the work myself,"



says Miss Lowe. "I used to turn out an average of 1,000 gowns a year, had a staff of 35 and grossed \$300,000 annually." Today she has a house of exquisite clothes—Ann Lowe's Originals, Inc., at 540 on New York City's smart Madison Avenue. The walls of the main salon are covered with photographs of the *Social Register* set. Sketches of Lowe designs stand in piles around the baseboards. A small rack holds the beautiful, finished articles, protected by long covers of plastic.

"Right now I do not have the money to carry out my ideas. I would like to have a formal showing of 15 gorgeous gowns, but I soon will have the money," declares Miss Lowe. This year between March and September, she completed 35 debutante ballgowns. Her output also included nine gowns for summer weddings. Currently her salon is filled with orders for fall weddings and dresses for the December International Debutante Ball. Last year she made 10 gowns for that ball.

In addition to the families for which she continues to create, Miss Lowe has added a few "name" stores—the Lillian Montaldo chain, Henri Bendel, Inc., in New York; Neiman-Marcus in Dallas, Tex.; I. Magnin in San Francisco. Her gowns begin in the hundreds and run into the thousands of dollars, but as one client expresses it: "Lowe dresses are

worth more than they cost. They are works of art—timeless, feminine, beautiful, always the most flattering gown a woman could choose."

In her workroom, three to five assistants cut, sew and fit. Miss Lowe, who always wears simple, high necked, black dresses and a hat ("my hair is so thin," she explains), talks and creates with her hands. Because she has lost one eye from glaucoma and has only limited vision in the other, she dictates sketches to a skilled illustrator, corrects the first draft and turns it back to the artist for completion.

Miss Lowe talks without bitterness about prejudices, financial mishaps, ill health, and domestic problems which have plagued her for a half-century. She lost two husbands because she placed sewing above her interests in them or a home. She left her first husband when a Florida socialite invited her to Tampa to make a wedding dress and trousseau for her daughter. Laughed Miss Lowe: "My second husband left me. He said he wanted a real wife, not one who was forever jumping out of bed to sketch dresses."

To obtain a diploma from a school of design in New York City, she was isolated in a room apart from the other students. She was only 18. By the time she was 21, she was head of the leading dress shop in Tampa, Fla. She saved \$20,000 and in 1927 moved to New York to



Thousand-dollar gown is shown to Ann for inspection by assistant designer Noel. New Yorker Pickett Huffines made double debut in it at two prestigious assemblies.



Mrs. William B. Chappell has a fitting for emerald green brocade gown she wore in wedding at St. James Episcopal Church, which is noted for its society weddings.



Margaret Palmer models Lowe creation of ceil blue satin with a full-length cape of matching fabric. Mrs. W. Emlen Roosevelt wore it at her daughter's debut.

DEAN OF DESIGNERS *Continued*

set up shop in a third-floor loft. She was an immediate artistic success and the name Lowe became synonymous with fine gowns for elegant ladies.

Of the many misfortunes she endured, the best known story surrounds the gowns she designed and made for the wedding of Jacqueline Bouvier and Sen. John F. Kennedy in 1953. A week before the wedding, 10 of the 15 gowns were ruined by water that flooded Miss Lowe's Lexington Avenue workroom. Fortunately, the supplier from whom she had purchased the silk chiffon taffeta for the wedding dress and the pink silk faille and red satin for the bridesmaids' dresses had enough of the materials left to replace them. Miss Lowe and her staff worked day and night from a Thursday to Thursday. The bride's wedding gown, which originally had taken eight weeks to make, was duplicated in only two days of cutting and three days of sewing. That Friday, she and her dresses boarded a train for Newport, R. I., where the wedding was to take place. Remaking the dresses had turned a \$700 profit into a \$2,200 loss, but she never mentioned the accident to the bride's mother, Mrs. Hugh Auchincloss.

Losing money on her beautiful gowns is a Lowe failing. She is more interested in the creation of clothes, who will wear them and where they will be seen, than in what they cost and what her profit will be. She is a great designer and an indifferent business woman who, as a result, worked herself into bankruptcy, into trouble with the Internal



Expressive though frail, Miss Lowe sits in her salon surrounded by sketches that have been executed from her ideas. She occupies unique spot in world of fashion in that she has never charged prices equivalent to effort that has gone into her work.

Revenue service and in and out of a number of self-owned shops, partnerships, and commissions arrangements. As long as her son Arthur, by her first husband, kept books for her, she managed, but in 1958 he died as a result of an automobile accident.

Disaster struck. In a year, she owed \$1,000 to tradesmen who supplied the expensive materials and was \$3,000 in arrears in taxes. Saks offered her the use of a workroom, hoping to lure her blue blood clientele. Miss Lowe paid her staff, purchased her materials, and Saks bought her output. "Too late, I realized," says Miss Lowe, "that dresses I sold for \$300 were costing me \$450. I left Saks, but couldn't compete with them in salaries for key people on my staff. Only my sister, an expert fitter, left with me."

"I opened another shop but I couldn't get trained help so I couldn't fill my orders," she continues. "One morning I woke up owing \$10,000 to suppliers and \$12,800 in back taxes. Friends at Henri Bendel and Neiman-Marcus loaned me money to stay open, but the Internal Revenue agents finally closed me up for non-payment of taxes. At my wits end, I ran sobbing into the street." An anonymous friend paid the \$12,800 debt. She has never known who the friend was, but knows Mrs. Kennedy was told of her troubles. Miss Lowe filed a declaration of bankruptcy. She still owed \$10,000, but suppliers from whom she had purchased thousands of dollars worth of goods did not complain.

For 30 years, Miss Lowe has lived in a ground floor apartment on Manhattan Avenue in Harlem. Once a prestigious neighborhood, her building still has relics of elegance—a mosaic tiled entrance, high ceilings and sound proof walls. She shares the two-bedroom flat with her older sister (by seven years) Mrs. Sallie Mathis, who in no way resembles Miss Lowe—except one. She is also a super-expert needle woman and dress fitter.

So fair that she would have to pass for colored, Mrs. Mathis speaks with the soft R-less diction of the South, and never seems to be in a hurry. She is devoted to her sister. Their home life is simple but not dull. It is filled with warmth and tenderness. As soon as Miss Lowe opens the apartment door, she calls out: "Is my dinner ready?" "Even when we come in together," laughs Mrs. Mathis, "after I have worked with her in the shop, she still will ask—'is my dinner ready?'"

"I don't know a thing about cooking," admits Miss Lowe, "and since my eyesight has failed, I can't help my sister. She says I get in her way, but she prepares the things I like—rice, plantain, tossed salads, fish and chicken. I don't care for heavy, rich foods." On "bad" days, Miss Lowe takes a pill to pep up her appetite and nibbles for hours on a meal. A dinner started at 6:30 p.m. may not be completely consumed before 10:30 p.m.

After Miss Lowe's hot bath and dinner, served in bed to conserve her strength, the sisters settle down for an evening of catching up on



Art of making delicate flowers has been passed on to Mrs. Charles Alexander, whom Ann taught dressmaking and affectionately refers to as her adopted daughter. Devotion to her work is so great designer could not succeed in her two marriages.



Designer examines sketches to see how closely they coincide with her ideas. During the next stage, she describes what she wants to Camel Ross, a professional artist, and touches up the first draft. Miss Lowe once made her own living by sketching.



Telephone is key to business for Miss Lowe. It is difficult for her to travel unescorted, since battle to preserve sight has been as great as financial struggle. She orders fabrics by phone, chats with clients and dickers with trade people.

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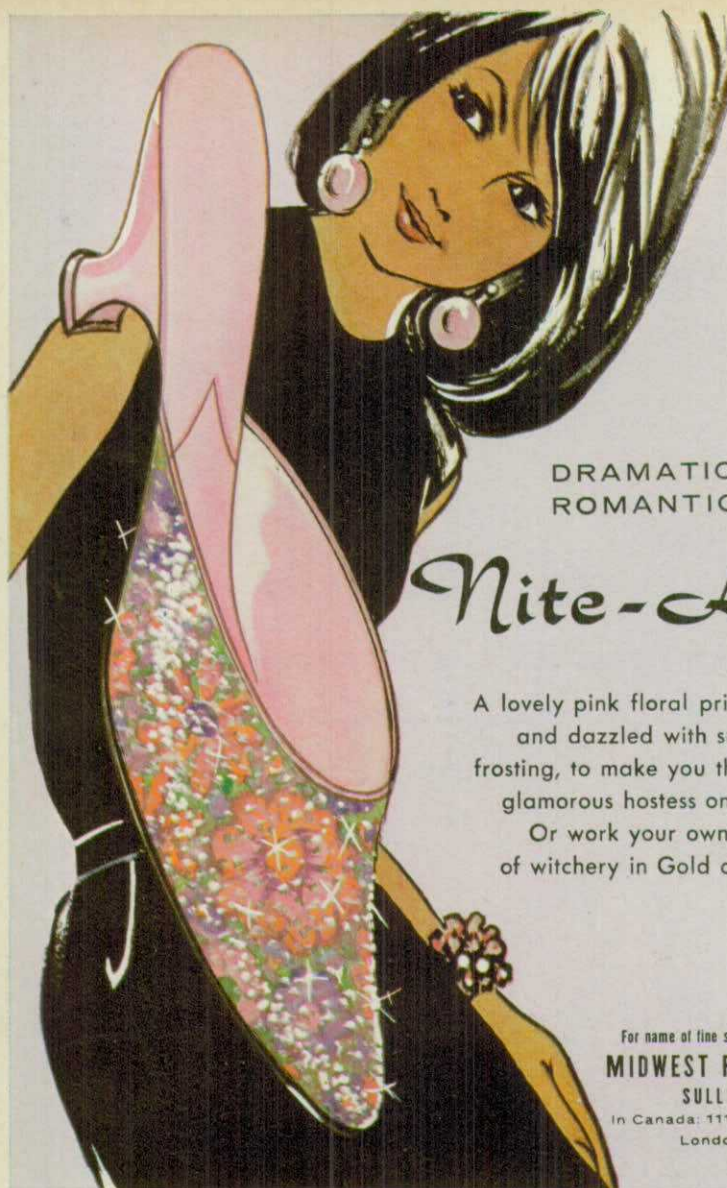
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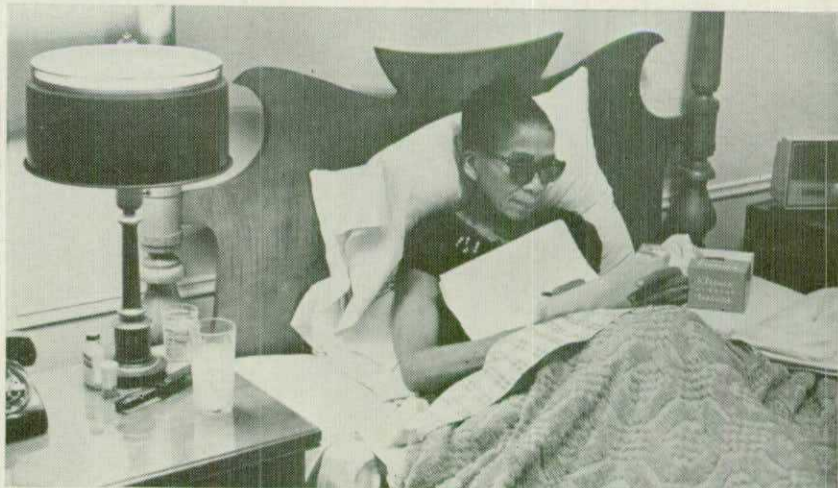
Dinner in bed is the rule for Miss Lowe, who is so frail she must retire as soon as she arrives home evenings. To conserve designer's impaired eyesight, her sister, Mrs. Sallie Mathis, reads the newspaper to her after serving her evening meal.

DEAN OF DESIGNERS *Continued*

the news of the day and viewing television. A woman of strong convictions, Miss Lowe has very definite likes and dislikes about TV. "I don't like a lot of singing and dancing. My favorite is sophisticated comedy," she declares. When Ann's eye flares up, Mrs. Mathis reads to her sister, who takes a pill to assure a full night's rest, and sleeps propped up in bed.

Miss Lowe has no hobbies and few friends beside her customers. "I am so wrapped up in my work, I never have time to meet new people," she explains, "and so many of my former associates have died or moved away. I belong to St. Mark's Church, and try to go sometimes, but it is hard for me to get home. The last time I went, no one seemed willing to help me get a taxi." Once a month, she and her sister go to a cemetery in Hartsdale, N. Y., where Arthur is buried. Pictures of him as a chubby baby in girl's clothes, as a little boy, and handsome man hang in her bedroom. "I really wanted him to be a girl," she confesses, "so I could make beautiful dresses for him." Their last public appearance was in 1953, when Arthur escorted his mother to a ball given by Harlem's fashionable Alpha Bowling Club. Miss Lowe has not been to a dance or social affair since then.

Miss Lowe's clothes have traveled over the world. At a ball in Paris, Christian Dior greeted Joan Dillon, daughter of our Ambassador to Paris, with "Who made this gown?" When Miss Dillon answered the dress was made by Ann Lowe, Dior said, "Give her my love." Recalls Miss Lowe, "I had tea with him later in Paris." She often attended showings in Paris, not to buy, but to see what other designers were creating. She traveled as a writer for the now defunct New York Age, but never admitted she was a designer. At one afternoon showing, she ran into a client, Mrs. Marjorie Merriweather Post, who greeted her warmly and proudly announced: "This is Miss Lowe, head of the American House of Ann Lowe."



Exhausted by effort of getting through yet another day due to physical problems linked to nervousness and underweight, Miss Lowe sketches ideas in bed as they come to her. She is never too tired to think about still more beautiful things.

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