

THE LIFE AND WORK OF ANN LOWE:
REDISCOVERING "SOCIETY'S BEST KEPT SECRET"

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Lowe's dresses were selling to a growing group of elite (white) women throughout the country. Along with "Ann Lowe's" on Madison Avenue, Lowe was also selling her custom gowns through several exclusive department stores throughout the United States.⁵⁰ Department stores served local client bases during the 1950s and 1960s. These arrangements allowed her to expand the reach of her gowns away from the East Coast and along with the New York stores her designs were available in I. Magnin, Neiman Marcus, and Montaldos. Neiman Marcus was the best way to reach her client base in Texas and I. Magnin expanded Lowe's work to California. When a Lowe debutante gown appeared in an editorial article in *Vanity Fair* in 1967, Lowe was credited as the designer but the dress was said to be available through Montaldos.⁵¹

Lowe was associated with high quality couture work for a select group of clients, and throughout the decade she would create debutante gowns for hundreds of attendees of the top balls in New York, all dressed, as one *New York Times* fashion writer of the period described after visiting Lowe's studio "in one-of a kind gowns that look like kissing cousins at a distance."⁵² Along with her custom work, wholesale designs became a part of her overall business plan by the middle of the 1950s. She advertised for dressmakers who were "capable of draping and making an expensive line of custom and wholesale gowns" in 1957 although more precise information about the details of this early wholesale work is not known.⁵³

Lowe was best known for her bridal and debutante work, but she also designed special occasion gowns for high profile clients like Marjorie Merriweather Post, sole heiress to the Post Cereal fortune.⁵⁴ Lowe proudly recalled an incident that occurred in

Paris when she and Mrs. Post attended the same fashion show. Lowe was visiting Paris on a trip as a reporter for the *New York Age* in the early 1950s. She made a habit of not identifying herself as a fashion designer during these trips, although the reasons behind her modesty are unclear. Upon running into Mrs. Post at one of these shows, she was deeply surprised to watch her client introduce her to acquaintances around the room as "Miss Lowe, head of the American House of Ann Lowe."⁵⁵ It is notable that someone of Mrs. Post's social status would feel comfortable introducing her African American dress designer around a fashion house in Paris with a manner that suggested that Lowe's work was of the same quality as French designers. Lowe recounted this story in several interviews and was clearly amused by the encounter.⁵⁶

Mrs. Post had many occasions to wear formal clothes, and while she purchased gowns from a wide range high quality stores and designers such as Saks Fifth Avenue and Hattie Carnegie, her patronage of Lowe's work is representative of the interest socialites of all ages held for Lowe Originals throughout the major metropolitan centers of the East Coast. This incident also suggests a warm working relationship between the two women, although specific examples of confirmed Lowe gowns in the Post collection have not been determined. *

One gown at Hillwood has been identified as a possible Lowe design. The gown, which has been attributed to Lowe by Howard Kurtz, Hillwood's textile curator, is an unmarked gray silk faille evening gown in the collection of Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens (Figure 30).⁵⁷ Exact documentation about the gown's designer is not known to exist, however the date of the gown can be confirmed as 1952 because of its appearance in the Douglas Chandor portrait of Mrs Post (Figure 31).⁵⁸ Chandor was not

available to take the commission until the fall of 1952.⁵⁹ Details of the gown's construction suggest that it was designed specifically for the portrait and executed quickly.⁶⁰ This gown was designed a few months before the wedding gown of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, and it displays many hallmarks of the "tremendous typical Ann Lowe gown" requested by Bouvier in her first meetings with Lowe in 1952.⁶¹ A comparison of design elements in both gowns and further discussion of Lowe's work style support the gown's attribution.

The Post evening gown is made from gray silk faille. The fabric is thick with a small waffle weave (Figure 32a) and its selection would have been helpful in supporting the sculptural detail of the scrolls that are used on the skirt and bodice. Hillwood's curatorial file for the gown, prepared by Kurtz, describes the characteristics. "The portrait neckline is ruched and pleated at the center of the bodice and tucked scrolls create the small cap sleeves. The overskirt is decorated with six large versions of the tucked scroll motif."⁶² Several details of the Post gown suggest that Ann Lowe was responsible for its design. The gown features a portrait neckline, the most popular neckline used in Lowe's most intricate ball gowns. Several of the gowns in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art feature a portrait neckline. The portrait neckline of this gown (Figure 33) shares a strong resemblance with the portrait necklines of Jacqueline Bouvier's 1947 debut gown (Figure 27) and 1953 wedding dress (Figure 1). Lowe was known for selecting expensive and high quality fabrics. The body of this fabric makes it a perfect choice to enhance the gown's sculptural details. The Kennedy wedding gown features unusual bands of circular tucking, which is also enhanced through the use of a silk fabric with a heavy body. Lowe was known for her unusual decorative techniques, which were

inspired by the work of her grandmother, Georgia. Georgia, whose freedom had been purchased by her husband in 1860, worked as an independent dressmaker during the Civil War, when luxury goods throughout the South were scarce. Dressmaking techniques used during that period created dramatic elements with the economical use of fabric.⁶³ The pleated scrolls on the Post gown (Figure 32b) are also created through a unique process.

→ It is likely that a more conventional northern trained dressmaker of the period would create this type of design through the use of a standard appliqué, stitching an additional piece of fabric (already tucked and stitched into the desired shape) to the overskirt to create each dimensional motif. The technique used by this dressmaker involves a sophisticated series of cuts, tucks and stitching to the original fabric of the overskirt. These techniques were executed from the interior of the skirt (Figure 32c). No additional fabric has been applied to create the heavy sculptural design. It is possible that this kind of technique developed out of a need to reduce the amount of fabric used. The ruched detail of the bodice is created with a series of gathers (Figure 32d). The use of gathers (instead of pleats) is another 19th century method practiced in the Southern United States that allowed for a more economical use of fabric.⁶⁴ Lowe had been able to turn fabric scraps into realistic flowers since she was a small child, and it is conceivable that a dressmaker who developed those kinds of sophisticated decorative methods would have used this style of decoration.

Even with all of these connections, a few unexplained features could be used to form an argument against the Lowe attribution. ^① First, the Post gown does not have a dressmaker's label. Lowe dresses were not always labeled therefore an unlabeled gown can still be a Lowe gown. The 1964 wedding gown of Ann Copeland, which is confirmed

to be an Ann Lowe gown, also does not have a label. ²Second, while Lowe gowns were celebrated for their impeccable finishing, the finishing techniques used on the Post gown are extremely rough. A look at the inside of the bodice (Figure 34) shows that the dress was unlined and features many exposed seams and raw edges (Figure 35). When compared to the bodices of two gowns that will be discussed in Chapter 4, (Figure 38 and Figure 39), the interior of the Post gown appears to be unfinished. The number of raw seams present is alarming if this dress is to be identified as the work of someone known for creating gowns sewn with such “elaborate construction (in each) bodice so that the wearer need never use extra undergarments.”⁶⁵ Lowe was known for finishing the seams of her work “with delicate white lace.”⁶⁶ The boning (Figure 36) on the Post gown is exposed in some areas while carefully lined with additional gray silk faille in others. Although the use of cross stitches on the grosgrain ribbon covering the boning (most visible on Figure 37) is consistent with the stitching used on the lining of later examples of Lowe’s work (Figure 38), the overall raw finish is problematic. The detail of the overskirt is also unlined, and the raw edges of the scrolls are visible from the underside. The Kennedy wedding gown, which is a confirmed example of Lowe’s work, also features the heavy use of sculptural detail. It has a thick lining of “two to three layers including buckram” that covers the unfinished side of the design.⁶⁷ ³Finally, the Post bodice also shows signs of being taken in under both arms while Lowe was known for fitting her gowns in a nearly flawless manner. The possibility of needing to alter a Lowe gown after its final delivery was unlikely.

The Post gown, however, was ordered for a very specific purpose, and further exploration into the busy schedule of the portrait artist may support the Lowe connection.

Correspondence between the Post family and the artist's agent suggest that Chandor's schedule appeared to be uncertain.⁶⁸ In that case, a dress that looked finished on the outside was probably the best that could be completed on short notice. It is doubtful that Post ever intended to wear the dress for anything but a portrait sitting. Marjorie Merriweather Post loved clothing, and her wardrobe was exclusively couture. Mrs. Post was also very interested in documenting her life through photographs and no photographs of Post in this gown (either in newspaper clippings or family albums) have been discovered. It is highly unlikely that a stylish woman like Mrs. Post would want to wear a gown memorialized in her self-portrait to any event at a later date.⁶⁹ If this dress was only created for a portrait sitting and it was never actually worn in public, the incomplete interior finishing and rough fit begin to make sense. A couture dress was needed quickly, and Lowe may have been the only designer in her class who was up to the challenge. During her Tampa years she was able to create a gown in a day, "as she did for a number of young women who awoke in the morning with a yen for a new frock, went downtown to buy material and bring it to Ann's home, and by nightfall had another original."⁷⁰ Even the Kennedy wedding dress needed to be completely recreated within one week when a water pipe burst in Lowe's studio overnight and destroyed most of the gowns for the Kennedy wedding.⁷¹ A team of seamstresses worked overtime to finish them.⁷² The wedding gown was neatly finished on the inside and labeled with an Ann Lowe label, most likely because of the great importance of the event.⁷³ On the Post gown, the finishing was probably the place where Lowe cut corners to save time.⁷⁴ The gown's decorative elements may have also been designed for quick completion. Large scroll designs created a striking visual design that covered a lot of surface area and were

relatively quick to construct. They would provide an effective point of interest when interpreted in a painting.

Confirming this gown as the work of Ann Lowe represents an exciting area of possible future scholarship. Supporting documents about the gown's commission or payment would need to be uncovered in order to make a definitive identification about the couture dressmaker who was behind this gown's creation. A thorough study of Mrs. Post's wardrobe may reveal other examples of Lowe's work. Shortly after Mrs. Post's death in 1973 her closets were a part of a large renovation at Hillwood and Mrs. Post's clothing was placed into storage trunks. Mrs. Post's clothing collection was documented at Hillwood several years after the family's documents were transferred to an archive at the University of Michigan. The textile curators at Hillwood studied these gowns years later, and moved the garments from their storage trunks.⁷⁵ The definite attributions of other designers in the Post clothing collection, such as Hattie Carnegie and Saks Fifth Avenue have been possible because of the presence of labels. It is not possible to confirm the Post gown as the work of Ann Lowe at this time, however the details described in this chapter create a very strong case in favor of the Lowe attribution.⁷⁶

The heavily sculpted details present in the Post gown could signal a connection to Jacqueline Kennedy's Kennedy wedding gown. The Kennedy gown was designed about six months later. Its style is in sharp contrast to the simple "Jackie Look" established by Mrs. Kennedy during the height of her fame. In the early 1960s, Mrs. Kennedy was known for her sophisticated and simple fashion sense with bright colors and classic lines. She used a small group of American designers including Oleg Cassini in order to create this look. These designers also produced American made copies of French designs during