

"This is Miss Lowe, Head of the American House of Ann Lowe!"

Megan Martinelli, Associate Curator, Textiles, Apparel, Jewelry, and Accessories



Portrait of Marjorie Merriweather Post

Douglas Chandor (English, 1897-1953), Texas, 1952, oil on canvas, (51.156)

For many guests and volunteers alike, the Douglas Chandor (1897-1953) portrait hanging above the marble fireplace in Marjorie Merriweather Post's bedroom is a point of interest. The portrait is compelling for its unfinished quality, as the artist passed away at age fifty-six before resolving many of Post's features in the lower half of the painting, but also for its ability to capture the essence of Post around the time of her life at Hillwood. Her swirling up do, resplendent jewels, delicate lace shawl, fur stole and petit orchid posy are all familiar features---complemented by the dramatic off-the shoulder scrolls at either edge of her silk gown. The gown, possibly made by Black American fashion designer Ann Lowe (c. 1898-1981,) and part of Hillwood's apparel collection today, continues to evade a definitive answer as to its creator. Similar to the portrait, aspects of the gown are unfinished, picked apart, and do not reflect the skillful craftsmanship seen in other examples of Lowe's work.



Portrait gown

Attributed to Ann Lowe (American, c. 1898-1981)
New York, 1952
Silk faille, cotton, synthetic horsehair, tarlatan
(48.106)

Late fashion scholar Margaret E. Powell (1975-2019), an intern with Hillwood during her pursuit of a Master's degree from the Corcoran program in 2011 included the gown in her extensive research of Ann Lowe for her thesis. Powell studied Lowe gowns from private collections and institutions across the country, and her impressive survey was the genesis behind the special exhibition at Winterthur. We are grateful for her astute research on Hillwood's gown, and her dedication to elevating the work of Lowe in American fashion history. Below, I summarize some of the major points in Powell's study of the portrait gown, and add some additional discussion related to the subsequent recommissions to complete Post's portrait:



Detail of hand gathered scroll on the portrait gown's skirt, 48.106

With its Shirred center front bodice, draped back shawl collar, and carefully gathered scroll work at the shoulders and bodice sides, and a continuation of the scroll work over its double, polonaise-style skirt, the gown certainly employs the ornamentation techniques and aesthetics seen in known examples of Lowe's designs. These trademarks include clever hand sewn manipulation of textile, and a romantic spirit. The textile choice--a delicate, complex weave of pale grey and white silk yarns is also on par with Lowe. However--the hem is uneven, the inner bodice unfinished, the skirt is unlined. Some of these finishing details could have been lost in the rush to complete the dress as Chandor may have been known to be ill. As previously suggested, Marjorie Post also commissioned additional artists to recreate the portrait following the death of Chandor. Communications around these commissions suggest the dress was shipped to be worn by stand-ins for Post. These sitters may have required alterations--several seams have been unpicked, and the bodice has been expanded, which might explain its "unfinished" interior and the brazen 3-inch swatch clipped from a skirt seam allowance.



Documentary snapshot of seam allowance where swatch was removed on the interior lower skirt, 48.106

Without a maker's label or archival documentation about the dress's origins, we cannot definitively declare this an "Ann Lowe Original." However, a well-documented and believable anecdote about Post and Lowe has not been lost. In a December 1966 interview with *Ebony* magazine, Ann Lowe recalled encountering Post at a fashion show in Paris during the 1950s. Lowe, who contributed fashion reports to the *New York Age* and often did not identify herself while on assignment, recalls Post introducing her to attendees-- "This is Miss Lowe, Head of the American House of Ann Lowe!"¹



Documentary snapshot of crudely finished interior bodice lining of 48.106.

¹ Major, Gerri. 1966. "Dean of American Fashion." *Ebony*, December: 139.

Fortunately, magnificent extant examples of Lowe's work exist in other collections, including the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Museum of the City of New York, all on view at Winterthur. The exhibition is guest curated by Elizabeth Way, Associate Curator of Costume at FIT, and includes more than 40 examples of Ann Lowe's work. It also includes examples of contemporary fashion from designers inspired by the designs and legacy of Ann Lowe. Rizzoli Electa releases its accompanying publication on September 5. Way will be sharing her research at Hillwood as the [2023 Frederick J. Fisher lecturer](#) on Thursday, November 16.

Further reading:

Ann Lowe: American Couturier, Exhibition website, Winterthur:

<https://www.winterthur.org/ann-lowे-american-couturier/>

Thurman, Judith, "Annals of Fashion: Ann Lowe's Barrier Breaking Mid-Century Couture," *Newyorker.com*, March 22, 2021

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/03/29/ann-lowes-barrier-breaking-mid-century-couture>