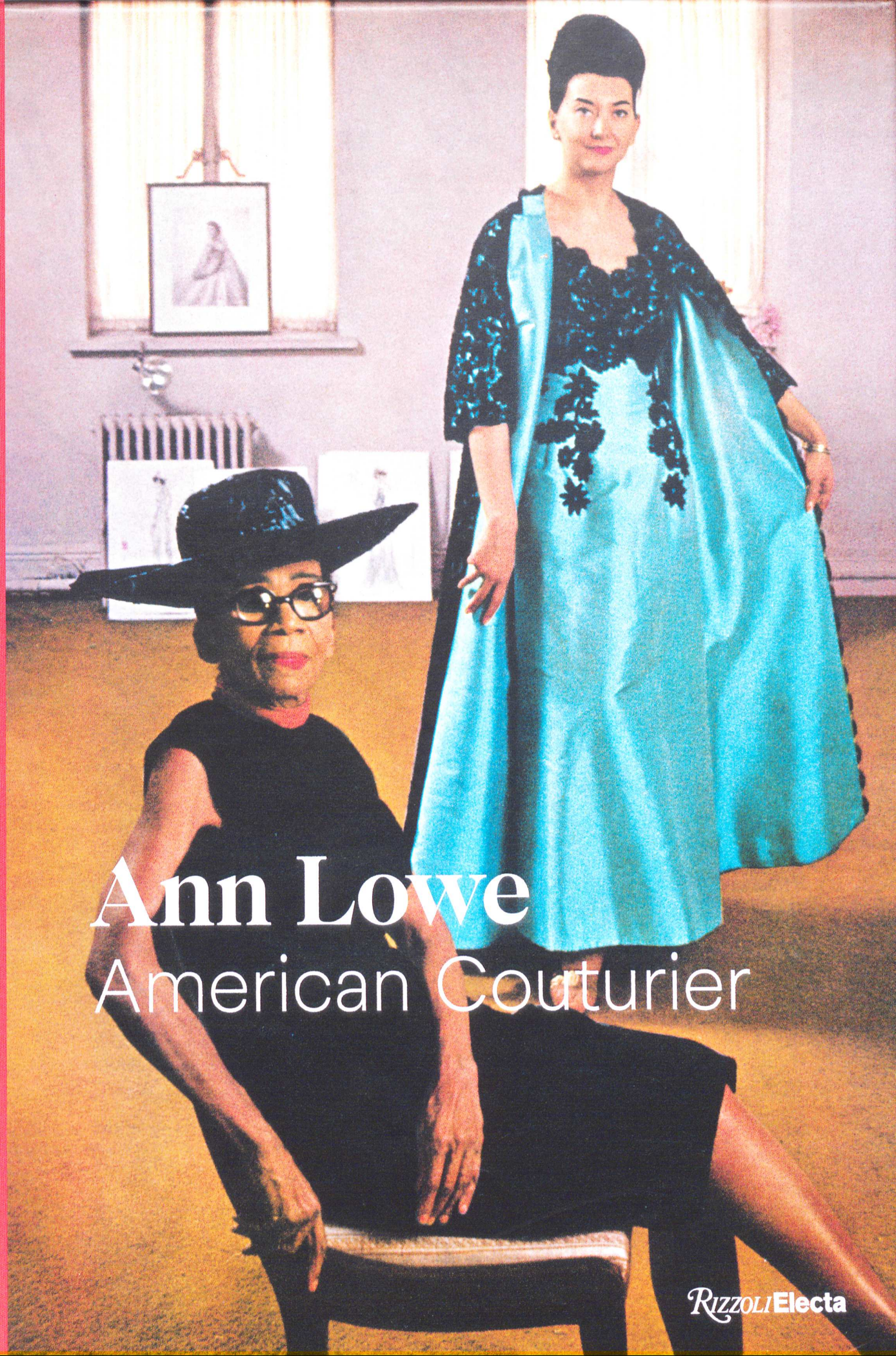

Ann Lowe
American Couturier

Rizzoli Electa

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Elizabeth Way *with contributions by*
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ON THE FRONT COVER: Ann Lowe (foreground) with model Judith Guile photographed for *Ebony*, December 1966. Johnson Publishing Company Archive. Courtesy Ford Foundation, J. Paul Getty Trust, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and Smithsonian Institution.

ON THE BACK COVER: Ak-Sar-Ben countess gown by Ann Lowe for Saks Fifth Avenue, 1961. Collection of the Durham Museum, Gift of Ann Lallman Jessop.

FRONTISPIECE: Ann Lowe fitting wedding dress on mannequin, photographed for *Ebony*, 1966. Johnson Publishing Company Archive. Courtesy Ford Foundation, J. Paul Getty Trust, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and Smithsonian Institution.

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ELIZABETH WAY

Ann Lowe in Context

Margaret Powell's scholarship on Ann Lowe's extraordinary life and career has recovered Lowe as a major American fashion designer, one whose creative work was widely admired—and decimated—by the press, local and national, from the 1920s through the 1960s. That she has not been recognized previously as one of the most important American designers to create in an elite, custom fashion space does not diminish her impact or the breathtaking beauty of her gowns. The term *haute couturier* is technically reserved for members of the French fashion governing body, the Chambre syndicale de la haute couture. However, Ann Lowe's design creativity and the quality of her work place her on the level of a couturier, as her client, the powerful businesswoman, socialite, and philanthropist Marjorie Merriweather Post, recognized when she introduced Lowe to a couture fashion crowd as "head of the American House of Ann Lowe."[1]

As a Black woman in Jim Crow America, Lowe took a very different path to the status of elite fashion designer than her French and white American counterparts. She was part of an important legacy of Black American fashion makers, including forebears such as Elizabeth Keckly (1818–1907) and contemporaries like Zelda Wynn Valdes (1905–2001). Keckly was a highly respected dressmaker who used her fashion skills and ingenuity to buy her freedom from slavery, and she worked her way up to become the most sought-after mantua-maker (dressmaker) in 1860s Washington, D.C. Wynn Valdes, like Lowe, lived in Harlem, and she, too, created high-end custom gowns. Her work also garnered national attention, though she specialized in fashion and stage costumes for the leading Black performers of the twentieth century, including Josephine Baker, Dorothy Dandridge, and Ella Fitzgerald, as well as white performers like Mae West. These Black fashion makers, as well as countless others, known and unknown to history, contributed significantly to American fashion culture. Lowe, as an exemplary Black fashion designer working in the couture tradition—high-end, intricately constructed, and custom-made for individual clients—was not singular. A history of Black fashion makers from the antebellum period, and likely before, can be told through the story of Lowe's own family. Her grandmother Georgia Cole "was sewing before freedom,"[2] and she, with Lowe's mother, Janie Lowe, used dressmaking to support their family in Alabama during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras, when the vast majority of Black southern women were restricted to low-status, low-paying jobs in agriculture and domestic service. They instilled technical dressmaking skills in Lowe and nurtured her artistic creativity from early childhood—Lowe much later recalled, "The first thing I can remember is making flowers."[3] Georgia Cole and Janie Lowe's interactions with elite white women such as Elizabeth Kirkman O'Neal, the wife of Alabama's governor in 1911, were informed by generational experiences of how Black women could navigate relationships with wealthy white people to their benefit, and this too, was important knowledge that they passed to Ann Lowe.[4] These tools equipped her to practice freedom in an environment steeped in racism and sexism generally, but one that was also personally restrictive: she was a very young wife and mother with an unsupportive husband when she first set out for Florida in 1916, away from all that was familiar to her in Alabama. Historian Saidiya Hartman notes that for Black people in the Jim Crow South, "Locomotion was definitive of personal liberty."[5] When presented with an opportunity, Lowe exercised her personal liberty and moved, first to Tampa and then to New York City. Scholarship on Lowe's biography and examinations of her work are valuable in fashion studies for creating a more accurate and holistic picture of American fashion. But Lowe's personal history also illuminates an extraordinary account of a Black woman who navigated employment and relocation within the Jim Crow South, participated in the Great Migration, weathered the Great Depression and war years, and grew her business and her public profile during the civil rights era. Lowe herself would likely not consider her role so historically; however, her story humanizes Black American experiences during a tumultuous twentieth century, bringing these cultural shifts to the human level.

Ann Lowe (foreground) with model Judith Guile. From Gerri Major, "Dean of American Designers," *Ebony*, December 1966. Johnson Publishing Company Archive. Courtesy Ford Foundation, J. Paul Getty Trust, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and Smithsonian Institution.

Powell and journalist Judith Thurman note that Lowe's reportage of financial figures tended to be inflated—for example, Lowe stated that she paid $1,500 for fashion school tuition in a period when Harvard's tuition was $150.[6] However, it is clear that her financial position in New York was rarely, if ever, secure enough to allow her substantial wealth. Powell outlines the deficiency of education available to Black children in Lowe's childhood Alabama that perhaps accounts for her lack of business acumen, as well as Lowe's preference for the creative aspects of her work over the monetary. In this, however, Lowe is similar to countless designers who divorce themselves from the quotidian aspects of running a business. Thurman states, "Some of the greatest designers have been hopeless with money. Paul Poiret and Charles James both died destitute. Yves Saint Laurent was a financial imbecile."[7] And like other designers who lacked shrewd partners and backers (Yves Saint Laurent's business was guarded by the savvy Pierre Bergé, and, notably, the company survived both partners), Lowe did not find significant financial success, nor did her label outlive her. And yet, the value of her work is undeniable.

In most cases, a Lowe dress is recognizable, with hallmarks of design and construction that identify her as the creator (see "Identifying Lowe's Work," page 97). Her later work from the 1950s, and especially the 1960s, survives in greater numbers than her early work from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and this later work is dominated by wedding and debutante dresses. Gowns for these traditional, nostalgic events—deemed some of the most important occasions for elite white women in a period when advantageous marriage was their ultimate aim—were never meant to be vanguard fashions. Lowe created garments to enhance the beauty and confidence of women at important moments when they were expected to command attention and perform their ascribed societal roles. An "ex-debutante" related to the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1964, "I was no beauty when I was eighteen . . . but when I put on my Ann Lowe dress, I felt I owned the world."[8] Although Lowe's designs were not typically avant-garde, she did create cutting-edge fashions in certain contexts. Her work consistently reveals her as a highly sophisticated designer who was enmeshed in fashion culture and well aware of its changes and trends. This is easily apparent in her eveningwear designs but also in the evolving details of her traditional gowns. Lowe worked with women, one-on-one, to design dresses that embodied the designer's signature feminine beauty but also the clients' wants and needs. Historian and fashion scholar Tanisha Ford notes that during "the peak years of Jim Crow segregation, when black seamstresses were largely low-wage earning service industry workers, the title 'designer' or 'couturier' was typically reserved for esteemed white men. Seamstresses were deemed problem solvers, while couturiers were lauded as genius innovators."[9] Ann Lowe *was* a problem solver and a skilled seamstress. She was also an extraordinary and creative designer.

Lowe transformed the skills her mother and grandmother passed down to her into something bigger and more modern. She moved to New York City and established several design houses over the course of her career that collectively became a sought-after brand. She labeled her dresses with her own name, invoking the power of the label, described by theorists Pierre Bourdieu and Yvette Delsaut as "a simple word stuck on a product, [that] is without a doubt . . . one of the most economically and symbolically powerful words amongst those in use today."[10] Lowe claimed authority and expertise in fashion, as well as a deep and innate love for design. When she made statements to the press about the joy she experienced while designing, divine inspiration, the gowns she dreamed of making, and the countless ideas still in her head, Lowe positioned herself as a fount of fashion talent that could not be restrained by age or illness—a creative genius, a born couturier.

Six Decades of Design

Lowe began sewing and designing garments at a very young age, and she developed her style over the decades that she was in business. Influences on her design aesthetic were likely wide-ranging, though she, like Christian Dior, had an affinity for nostalgic, nineteenth-century femininity and

Light teal and black lace evening ensemble by Ann Lowe, ca. 1966. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Florence I. Cowell, 1980 (1980.433.2a, b).

flowers. She referenced an "old-fashioned ball gown like one her mother had made for a Montgomery belle,"[11] when she sketched a design for Jacqueline Bouvier's 1953 wedding gown—her most famous work. And many of her surviving garments feature a tight-waisted, full-skirted silhouette (or an elongated, higher-waisted variation in line with 1960s styles) with her signature three-dimensional floral embellishments or similarly elaborate decoration. "Typical Ann Lowe,"[12] the gowns show a small stylistic sample in her range. These wedding and debut gowns were likely worn once or a handful of times, and, as they marked important events, they were saved and donated to museum collections. Lowe's work before the 1950s is less available to contemporary audiences, although some exist as extant garments and in photographs.

Powell's early research on Lowe led her to the Lee family archive, which shows photographic examples of Lowe's work for the family. A young and stylishly dressed Ann Lowe caught the eye of Josephine Lee in an Alabama department store in 1916, and Mrs. Lee, the wife of a wealthy citrus businessman, hired Lowe on the spot to work as a live-in dressmaker for herself and her four daughters outside of Tampa, Florida. Lowe remained close to the Lees throughout her life. Besides their 1917 wedding gowns, Lowe created chic daywear for the Lee twins, Rosemary and Louise, including blue broadcloth traveling suits for their trousseaux. These suits embody the fashionable and practical styles of the World War I era with narrow skirts and long jackets, while incorporating a luxurious touch through fur trim. Lowe also made a white day suit for younger sister Grace around the same time. Its full-length skirt and long jacket are again in line with the fashionable silhouette of the war years and a sensible choice for the college student. The white color may be a functional choice for the Tampa heat, or a preference for the styles made popular by women's suffrage advocates.[13] These examples show that Lowe could tailor garments as well as construct intricate ball gowns, though none of her suits seem to have survived.

As early as 1925, Lowe, under her married name, Annie Cone, drew press in Tampa for her wedding gowns. The *Tampa Sunday Tribune* described her as "one of Tampa's dressmakers most in demand" for wedding gowns and trousseaux, as well as many of the wedding guests' gowns. The society correspondent notes "she executes lots of new styles and some original ones too,"[14] implying that Lowe copied styles from sources of new fashions, likely magazines, at the request of her clients, and she created her own designs. In 1926, the *Tampa Daily Times* featured an article on Lowe. She and her Jefferson Street dress shop were pictured in the paper (see "The Life and Work of Ann Lowe," page 26), which noted that she employed eight to twelve seamstresses but "does much of the finer work and always puts the finishing touches on her beloved wedding gowns and veils."[15] The article highlights her paradoxical position as a demanded Black dressmaker. The reporter notes Lowe's expertise in draping, cutting, and sewing, establishing her years of experience between Alabama and Tampa beginning with her first project, a quilt completed at the age of five, and totaling more than one hundred fifty wedding gowns. Lowe is also established as a style expert. She deems the *robe de style*, with its defined waist and full skirts, the most appropriate style for brides and states, "I enjoy sewing for anyone who can and will wear youthful clothes." She adds that she coaxes older women into the new styles, convincing them that they will

OPPOSITE: Lee twins in broadcloth suits, 1917. Apthorp Collection, Courtesy, Tampa Bay History Center. ABOVE: Ann Lowe with dress form. From Dorothy Dodd, "Ancient Wedding Formulae Ignored by Modern Bride," *Tampa Daily Times*, March 27, 1926.

look good in the modern fashions. However, the article also sharply brings the environment of the Jim Crow South into focus, describing the "dainty white cap and apron of a lady's maid" that Lowe wears to attend her brides' weddings to make final adjustments on gowns before the ceremonies.[16] Both articles note that Lowe attended the Montgomery Industrial School for Black girls and that she studied dressmaking in Chicago with a Madame Seabrook. The *Tampa Daily Times* wrote that for nine years, she spent her summers designing for a manufacturer in New York, and the *Tampa Sunday Tribune* stated that she spent three years in New York before returning to Tampa. None of these details appear in her later press from the 1960s.

Most of the evidence of Lowe's 1920s designs are photographs of wedding dresses or of gowns for Tampa's Gasparilla festival. Both types of dresses followed their own stylistic codes with traditional or fantastical aspects that separated them from everyday fashion. Yet Lowe and her clients clearly engaged in the fashionable influences of the period. The youngest Lee daughter, Nell, married in 1926, and her dress of white crepe romain, embellished with crystals and pearls, featured a handkerchief hem, full headpiece, and long-trained veil, all stylish elements for brides of the mid-1920s.[17] Photographs of the Gasparilla court between 1924 and 1928 show the festivals' various annual themes—Egyptian and Chinese themes play to fashionable, Western-imperialist trends of the decade—and Lowe incorporated costume versions of cultural dress elements into the gowns. Some years' dresses resemble more typical eveningwear fashions—1927 and 1928 Gasparilla court portraits show an arrangement of sleek, sequined "flapper" dresses and ruffled, tiered, and tulle *robe de style* gowns. The 1928 Gasparilla queen, Emala Parkhill, was photographed on her throne in a white velvet *robe de style* with a form-fitting bodice and a full skirt, appliquéd with three-dimensional flower buds and blooms. Lowe named this dress "My Rose Dream," and the embellishment is clearly recognizable as her work (see "The Life and Work of Ann Lowe," page 19 [flowers]). The Henry B. Plant Museum in Tampa holds two Gasparilla dresses from the 1920s: a 1924 gown worn by Gasparilla queen Sara Lykes Keller (the earliest known extant Lowe garment) and a 1926 court gown worn by Katherine Broaddus. The earlier dress is a sleeveless chemise style more in keeping with contemporary fashion than the Egyptian theme of Gasparilla that year—it was not Keller's presentation gown but was made for one of the festival's many dances. Powell has noted that the floral beading—applied in strings and not individually—was unusual for Lowe's craftsmanship, though the hemline beading is applied individually in Lowe's usual style. Keller's family attributed the design to Lowe, who also made Keller's wedding dress.[18] The 1926 lamé gauze dress has an asymmetrical bodice with a defined waistline and "an ornate starburst design decoration made of hand-sewn rhinestones, red sequin beads, and red jeweled stones,"[19] showing more fantastical design elements mingled with 1920s style.

Lowe and her assistants turned these "tremendous show pieces" out from her workroom in Tampa, located behind the

ABOVE: Grace Lee in white suit by Ann Lowe, ca. 1918. Courtesy of Elinor Keen Boushall. OPPOSITE: Sarah Lykes Keller, Gasparilla queen in Egyptian costume by Ann Lowe, 1924. PAGES 78–79, LEFT: Gasparilla gown worn by Queen Sarah Lykes Keller (Mrs. W. Frank Hobbs), 1924; RIGHT: Gasparilla court gown, 1926. Photos on pages 77–79 Courtesy, Collection of Henry B. Plant Museum Society, Inc., Tampa, Fla.

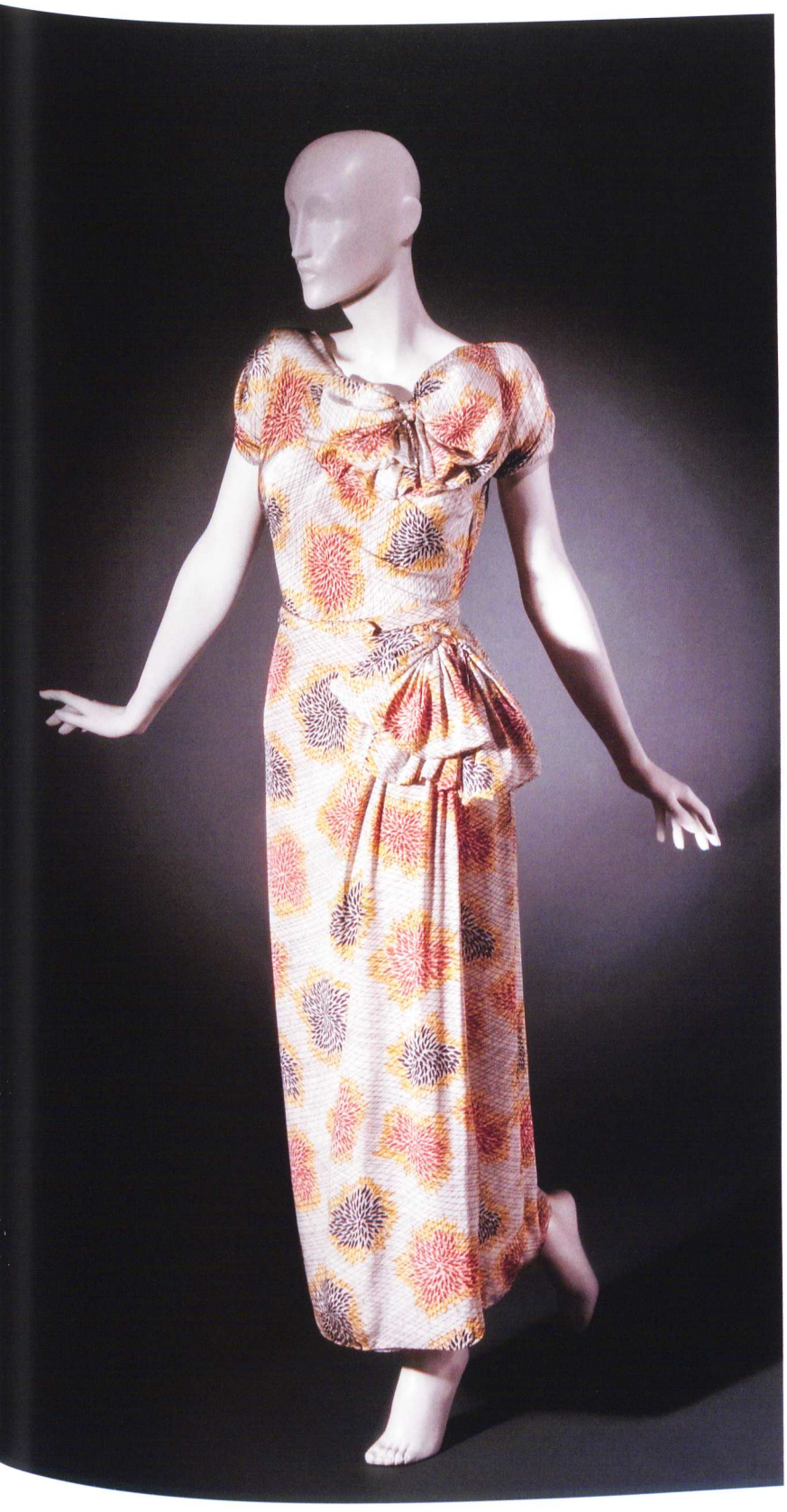
home she shared with her husband, Caleb West, and remarkably, her clients—socially prominent young white women—would stream in and out of the atelier to try on and pick up their orders.[20] Lowe fondly described their familiarity compared to the "cold way" of New York women: "I missed the friendly way the girls here [in Tampa] have of running in all excited and saying, 'Annie, you just must make this dress for me.'"[21] Much of the press written during the 1960s on Lowe's time in Tampa during the late 1910s and 1920s remembers her as a vital part of the socially elite community, a favorite and reliable dressmaker who brought an incredible creative talent to a relatively remote regional American city. Lowe was a big fish in a small pond and "felt compelled" to move to New York to truly test her potential.[22] However, she also remembered her time in Tampa fondly as a period in which she was appreciated and respected. Gasparilla gave her a unique opportunity to unleash her design fantasies, in addition to creating more typical fashionable attire for an eager clientele.[23]

One of Lowe's earliest existing fashion garments is an organdy afternoon dress made for Josephine Lee. The dress was in the private collection of the Lee family until the Tampa Bay History Center acquired it as an important example of early twentieth-century fashion and Lowe's work in the city. Although the dress has previously been dated to the mid-twenties, its features—graphic, contrasting black lace inset in bold zigzags; a waist seam positioned at or slightly above the natural waistline; and full, floor-length skirt—more likely place its creation in the first half of the 1930s or possibly later in the decade. The romantic reference to lingerie dresses of the 1910s might have appealed to the middle-aged Josephine Lee, yet the trimness of the silhouette and the puffed sleeves are more in line with 1930s silhouettes.[24] Lowe would have been living in New York by the 1930s, though Powell notes that she maintained her relationship and business with the Lees and others in Tampa.[25] This early dress is unlined, though an undergarment would have been originally worn with it, and like the Lee daughters' suits, it gives an example of Lowe's dressmaking range. The delicate organdy is handled expertly—tiny handstitched gatherings, narrow hem finishes, and hook-and-eye-closures under covered buttons all accommodate the lightweight fabric. Hidden details such as lingerie straps to hold a slip in place and horsehair sleeve caps to add fullness to the puffed sleeves are high-quality finishes.[26]

Lowe struggled in 1928 during her transition to New York. Competition would have been stiff in America's fashion capital, especially for a dressmaker with few connections in the city. The Great Depression descended in 1929, forcing her to close her first shop. Lowe found work on commission for other dressmaking shops, but also managed to build up her own clientele. Three unlabeled 1930s gowns, for example, were given anonymously to the Cincinnati Art Museum in 1999. Chief Curator and Curator of Fashion Arts and Textiles Cynthia Amnéus notes that the donor gave his mother's dresses and attributed them to Ann Lowe. Later comparisons to a labeled dress confirmed Lowe as the maker. The wearer of the dresses likely commissioned them directly from Lowe and not a third-party dressmaking shop if the designer's name was remembered well enough (or documented) for over six decades to pass down to the son who later recognized their value and donated them to the art museum.[27]

These dresses illustrate the height of 1930s chic. Fabricated from printed silks and all featuring flowers, they

OPPOSITE: Josephine Lee dress, ca. 1930. Courtesy of Tampa Bay History Center.
ABOVE: Sleeve of Josephine Lee dress.

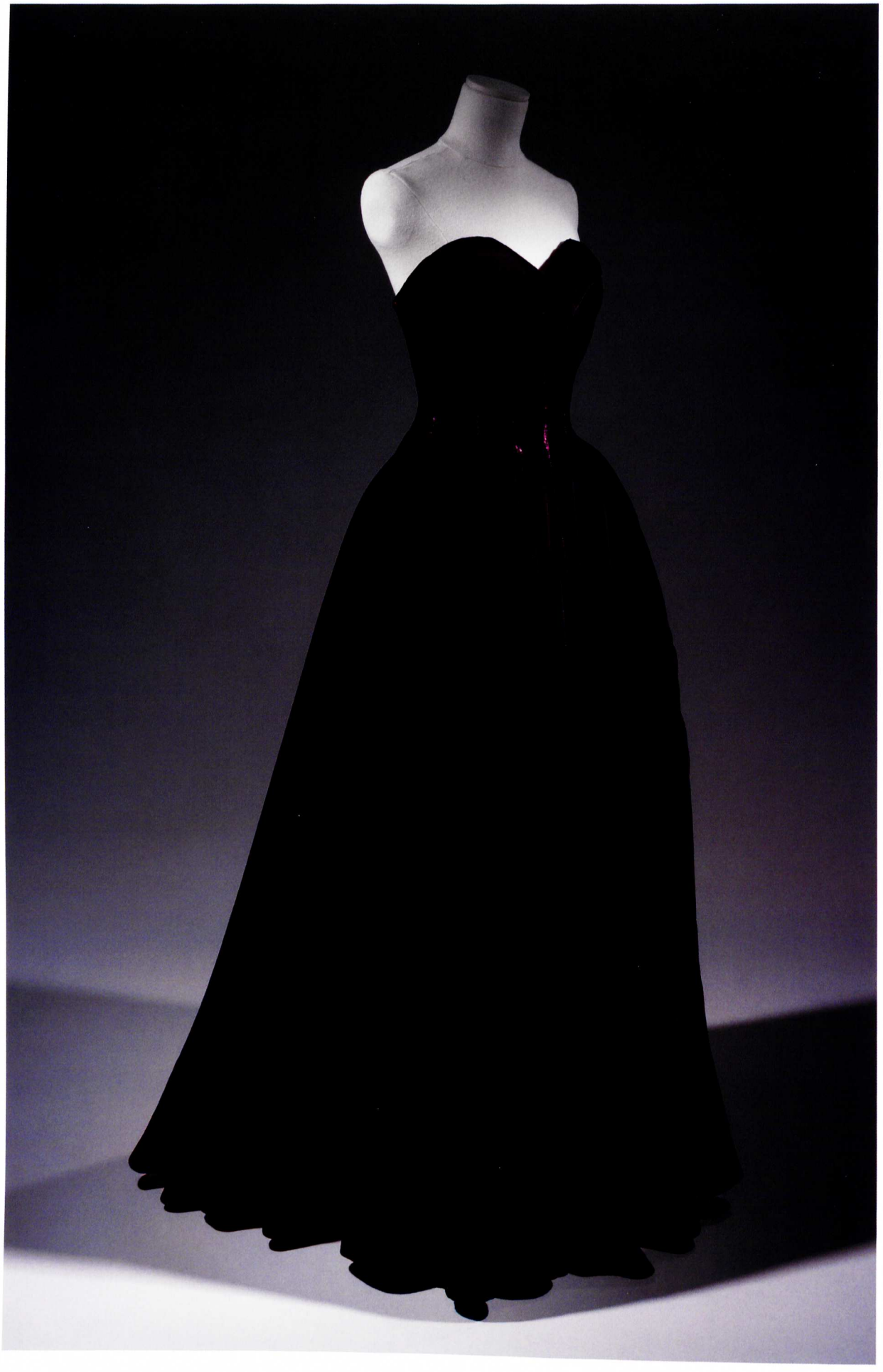


OPPOSITE: Red dress and belt by Ann Lowe, 1930s, Cincinnati Art Museum, Anonymous Gift, 1999.810a–b. ABOVE LEFT: White printed dress and belt by Ann Lowe, 1930s, Cincinnati Art Museum, Anonymous Gift, 1999.811a–b. ABOVE RIGHT: Blue printed jacket, dress, and belt by Ann Lowe, 1930s, Cincinnati Art Museum, Gift of Fashion Design Department, University of Cincinnati, 2016.83a–c.

show a number of defining details for fashions of the period. Daniel Cole and Nancy Deihl summarize, "Embellishment was reduced during the early 1930s, with visual interest often provided by details," including asymmetry, self scarves (and belts), oversized bows, peplums, matching jackets.[28] Lowe deftly administered these design elements to infuse both the modernism and whimsy of 1930s fashion into these pieces. A white dress with matching belt (1935–38), printed with a "Japonesque version of the chrysanthemum,"[29] features a large bow at the neckline, mirroring a swag at the hip, also placed on the left side, and emphasizing the subtle drape of the bodice and skirt. A deep-blue 1930s dress with thin straps is paired with a matching cropped jacket on which the floral print is accentuated with matching lines of sequins. Both dresses illustrate Lowe's penchant for building up the fabric with three-dimensional elements in more or less overt ways. The third dress (1930–34) is cut with a peplum, set off with a matching belt. The sleeves are draped softly from the bodice and extend into looped streamers at the back. The truly extraordinary element of the design is the couture detailing of the hems, neckline, and open T back. The red printed poppy flowers are cut out and finished to create a floral trim from the fabric (a technique called *fussy cutting*). Although these gowns are as stylistically different as dresses from the 1930s and 1950s would be—Lowe's design philosophies are present and recognizable in these and later works.

Dresses from the 1940s show Lowe's continuing design evolution in line with changing styles and cultural shifts. A 1941 wedding gown worn by Jane Tanner Trimingham in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art is made from "art silk," or rayon, a fiber that rose to prominence for fashion as World War II placed restrictions on silk and other fibers.[30] The gown's Queen Anne neckline, long sleeves with volume at the shoulders, and silhouette that skims the body to the hipline show a style current for the early 1940s. There is little evidence of Lowe's early and mid-1940s designs apart from this wedding dress—for much of this period Lowe continued to work for other manufacturers, and her designs would bear their labels. Two designs that Lowe created in the late forties suggest that she quickly embraced the "New Look" styles with the complex construction and hourglass silhouettes that would have been familiar to her from her grandmother's training. Lowe was not immune to American fashion's reverence for French couture—many American designers and manufacturers, such as Lowe's one-time employer Hattie Carnegie, established their popularity on the ability to copy haute couture. When postwar collections in Paris revealed a major return to nineteenth-century femininity, most American designers followed suit. This change seemed to be exactly in line with Lowe's design sensibility. During the 1960s, Lowe claimed credit for a 1947 dress she created while working for Sonia Gowns. It was worn by Olivia de Havilland to that year's Academy Awards in March. Christian Dior's legendary New Look collection was shown in Paris in February 1947. While Lowe most definitely kept herself abreast of the changing fashion trends, Dior's singularity in reviving the

ABOVE: Best Actress Olivia de Havilland (*To Each His Own*, 1946) wearing a design by Ann Lowe for Sonia Gowns, with presenter Ray Milland at the Nineteenth Academy Awards ceremony in 1947. Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. PAGES 85–87: Wedding dress by Ann Lowe, 1940s. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. K. Fenton Trimingham Jr., 1975 (1975.349a, b).



LEFT: Burgundy velvet evening gown by Ann Lowe, ca. 1955. The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Gift of Eleanor Cates, 77.60.1. OPPOSITE: Ball gown in Chantilly lace over silver-white duchesse silk satin, by Ann Lowe, 1957. Museum of the City of New York, 2009.2.2.

tight-waisted silhouette is overstated—hourglass silhouettes had toured the United States in the Théâtre de la Mode, an exhibition of doll-sized Parisian couture fashion in 1945 and 1946. Furthermore, these styles picked up where French fashion had left off in the late 1930s. Valerie Mendes and Amy de la Haye note that, "Designers understood the psychological need for change and were beginning to move away from the boxy wartime profile towards softer, longer lines."[31] It is likely that Lowe was considering her customers' needs and wants as much as Parisian designers, and this dress is evidence. It is an unapologetically sweet, feminine, and youthful gown, hand-painted with flowers from the ruffle-trimmed sweetheart neckline to the hem of the full skirt.[32]

The last 1940s design discussed here explicitly illustrates Lowe's connection to Parisian couture. The Black newspaper the *New York Age* sent Lowe to Paris as its couture correspondent in August 1949. She reported on the fall fashion presentations from the leading houses, including Christian Dior, Balenciaga, and Jacques Fath, and, inspired by the trends she observed, designed an exclusive look that was photographed and published for *Age* readers. The caption describes it as a black silk faille taffeta cocktail dress with an asymmetrically draped skirt appliquéd with dahlias and a standing wing collar accenting "a deep plunging neckline."[33] Compared to the girlish, strapless ball gown designed for de Havilland, this cocktail dress is mature and sophisticated, recalling the effortlessly elegant dresses she designed in the 1930s. Lowe could clearly create cutting-edge fashions when called upon to do so.

The 1950s and 1960s found Lowe at the height of her career in New York. She had established an exclusive list of clients through word-of-mouth connections, and she consistently found business within New York's tight circle of elite socialites. A small sample of her eveningwear designs from this period show both her consistency and the influence of fashionable trends of the period. One of the more dramatically understated and heavily structured gowns in her known repertoire is a strapless deep-burgundy velvet gown in the collection of The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT). The weighty dress from the early to mid-1950s features a pronounced hourglass silhouette and a deep sweetheart neckline. Its interior construction follows Lowe's typical bodice assemblage (see page 95) and also contains additional interior support around the waist and deep reinforcements throughout the skirt and hem to maintain the structured shape. It is notably devoid of further embellishment. A ball gown in the collection of the Museum of the City of New York dates to 1957 and also features an hourglass silhouette and a strapless neckline, but this white duchesse satin gown boasts a front overlay of black Chantilly lace and an enormous bow falling from the back waist among the folds of satin, creating a bustle effect. Large red cabbage roses adorn the sides, creating striking pops of color. Both of these gowns show a distinctive sex appeal that is not often associated with Lowe's work, as well as the range of her embellishment style from the minimal to the highly adorned. The velvet dress is sensual and elegant in its sharp silhouette, while the graphic contrast of the black lace that ends cleanly at the side seams, the back drapery, and the bright roses, visible from virtually all angles, creates a surprisingly cohesive effect of three divergent elements. Both show Lowe's mastery of design.

Asian textiles and silhouettes have had an ongoing influence on Western fashion for centuries, and trends for adapting Asian silk fabrics and motifs consistently reoccur, as seen in Lowe's designs for the 1925 Gasparilla court inspired by imperial Qing court dress and much later examples of designs utilizing Asian textiles. These later dresses show another way in which Lowe engaged with fashions of the 1950s and 1960s and likely worked with her clients to create styles that captured their tastes and interests. Lowe designed a strapless evening gown with matching cropped jacket for Florance Colgate Rumbough Trevor during the 1950s. The neckline and waistline are defined by bands of fabric, and the waistband curves into narrow side panels accented with self-fabric bows. The volume of the skirt creates a columnar shape that lies smooth in front and gathers into pleats at the

OPPOSITE: Sari dress by Ann Lowe, 1966–67. PAGES 92–93: Teal brocade dress and cropped jacket designed by Ann Lowe and worn by Florance Trevor, 1950s. Both: Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of the Black Fashion Museum founded by Lois K. Alexander-Lane.

back. The short-sleeve jacket has a wide collar that creates a portrait neckline and closes with a bow at center front. This ensemble likely dates to mid-decade and was probably made after Lowe made Florance Rumbough's 1951 wedding gown (see photo, page 115, top left). The evening set is made from a teal silk brocade with a floral design. The fabric's selvedge edge remains intact, and a manufacturer's mark reading "Singchon H.K." is visible on a seam allowance. It is possible that Florance Trevor acquired this fabric as a souvenir while visiting Hong Kong or received it as a gift and took it to Lowe to have the ensemble made. This would have been a fashionable choice at the time that simultaneously displayed the wearer's worldly sophistication and ability to travel. The fabric could have also been simply imported. Many fashion articles from the 1950s confirm the popularity of Chinese brocade and Chinese-inspired fashions and accessories. The reporting on a consular ball in Chicago in 1955 points to many trends that this ensemble incorporates, including Chinese inspiration "in fabric rather than actual design," metallic elements in the textile, a silhouette of "restrained fullness," "sheath profiles . . . broken with . . . back treatments," and "fichu effects" covering "strapless decolletage."[34] The small details of this ensemble, including the intricate construction of the waistband falling to the sides, the gusset construction of the jacket sleeves, and interior details such as fabric-covered dress weights, along with the layers of petticoats and linings to hold the skirt shape, all show Lowe's thoughtfulness and attention to detail. Two other surviving Lowe designs also show Asian influence. A plum satin evening coat that was modeled on *The Mike Douglas Show* when Lowe was interviewed on December 31, 1964, shows a simple, but full, flared silhouette with sleeves just below elbow-length and a padded lining covered in contrasting cream satin. The coat's shape and the floral-and-leaf hand beading around the neckline and down both sides of the center-front opening recall Middle Eastern caftan designs. The coordinating dress mirrored the embroidery and beading in a wide waistband, but not the Asian influence. It featured a columnar silhouette with double spaghetti straps and a self-fabric band around the neckline.

A 1966–67 evening gown made from a blue-green and gold sari uses the original garment's rich metallic borders for the high-waisted bodice, which is edged in the fabric's fussy-cut leaf motifs. Lowe also incorporated a wrapped effect at the back referencing the original sari. Deihl notes, "In 1962, the fashion world experienced a brief infatuation with silk saris, inspired by Jacqueline Kennedy's trip to Pakistan and India where she purchased several to have made into dresses."[35] Continuing interest in Southeast Asia driven by countercultural movements and popular music also fed this trend. This dress was made for Barbara Brooke Baldwin during her debut season (see photo, page 90) under the brand A. F. Chantilly, Lowe's last company, a partnership with designer Florence Cowell. Thurman notes that "by the late nineteen-sixties society girls were interested in shacking up with rock stars and jetting off to ashrams. Coming out was a charade of purity that many endured to placate their mothers."[36] This dress and another made under the A. F. Chantilly label—a circa 1968 teal one-shouldered evening dress with a matching sheer overlay and two bands of silver floral embroidery—show Lowe adapting to the changing American culture. Her designs are pared down, less structured (at least on the outside), and more modern. They engage with styles and cultural influences that would have attracted younger women of the late 1960s. As Thurman indicated, the debutante tradition was fading as elite young white women expanded their education, interests, and options in line with the growing women's liberation movement. Lowe's specialties in extravagant and feminine couture eveningwear were in less demand as even the French haute couture market gave way to high-end ready-to-wear. Lowe's career seemed to align with the changing culture—by the late sixties, her failing eyesight was her major concern, and she retired in 1972.

Lowe's Construction

One of the most recognizable features of Lowe's work from the 1950s onward was the way she built the interior bodices of her gowns. These included layers of fabric, boning, elastic, and non-elastic bands to hold the dress and the body of

Interior details showing Lowe's bodice construction: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: On loan from the Delaware Historical Society, 2003.028, Gift of Ann Bellah Copeland; Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Mo. (top right and bottom right); Collection of the Durham Museum, Gift of Ann Lallman Jessop.

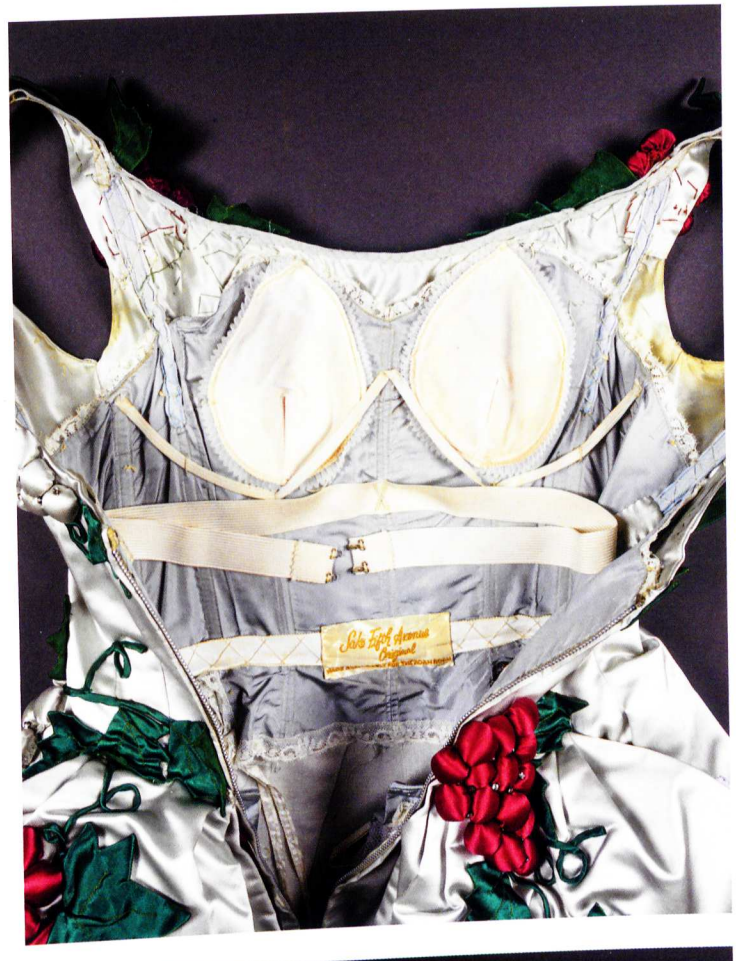



PHOTO BY
J. M. MOSLEY

the wearer in place. She created this "built-in long-line bra, so that the wearer 'can just put on a panty girdle and slip into the dress.'"[37] This technique was likely learned in basic form from her grandmother and mother, who were used to creating interior bodices with boning and waist stays, though Lowe standardized the construction to become a hallmark of her later garments. In other ways, she continued to experiment with construction techniques. For example, she cites "30-15" sleeves as her invention. These were "shoulder sleeves that permit the girl to move her arms around more without splitting the underarm material of the dress" and named for the thirty hours and fifteen minutes the first set consumed.[38] These dressmaking techniques as well as others, such as built-in petticoats, lace-finished seams, hems reinforced with gathered tulle, and perfect custom fits, mark Lowe's gowns as couture quality. A particular dress examined here illustrates this quality over ready-to-wear garments, showing the care Lowe took to create each gown to best fit the needs of the client.

Lowe made a blue satin-and-lace concert dress for pianist Elizabeth Mance around 1966 or 1967. Mance was one of Lowe's few documented Black clients, and Lowe also created her 1968 wedding dress (see photos, pages 116–21). A talented musician, Mance attended the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Ohio and the Royal Conservatory of Music in Brussels and performed both in the United States and internationally.[39] Lowe created this performance gown to stun viewers both up close and from a distance. The satin base fabric is overlaid with a lace that is couched with cording to outline the floral design. Although the lace was likely manufactured with the corded embellishment, it was aptly chosen by Lowe, who used it to stabilize the flowers, fussy cut from the lace, to form decorative edges where it overlaid the satin and where the lace was cut to mold to the silhouette. She also cut flowers from the lace to trim the neckline and armholes. Translucent crystal-cut drop beads and seed beads were added to the lace at various points to catch the stage lights while Mance played. Slim darts to fit the lace to the satin base were placed on the diagonal to better hide them from view. All of these techniques are typical of Lowe's high-quality construction. What is remarkable is that Lowe designed this gown especially for Mance to sit in and to be viewed from her right side as she played piano from a stage. The lace covers most of the dress except for a diagonal swath from under the right hip down to the left side of the skirt above the hem and a vertical swath to the right of the center back seam. The more flexible satin was left exposed to accommodate Mance as she sat at the piano. Lowe placed several deep pleats to the right of the center back to facilitate the graceful drape of the skirt, and a large satin bow is also placed to the right of center back to be best seen by the audience. By the 1950s and 1960s, quality off-the-rack evening gowns were widely available, yet Lowe still attracted as many clients as she could handle because she created dresses to specifically fit the needs of her clients. Debutantes and brides came to her for one-of-a-kind gowns that would not be seen on others and for the fast-waning experience of having a custom gown made especially for them.

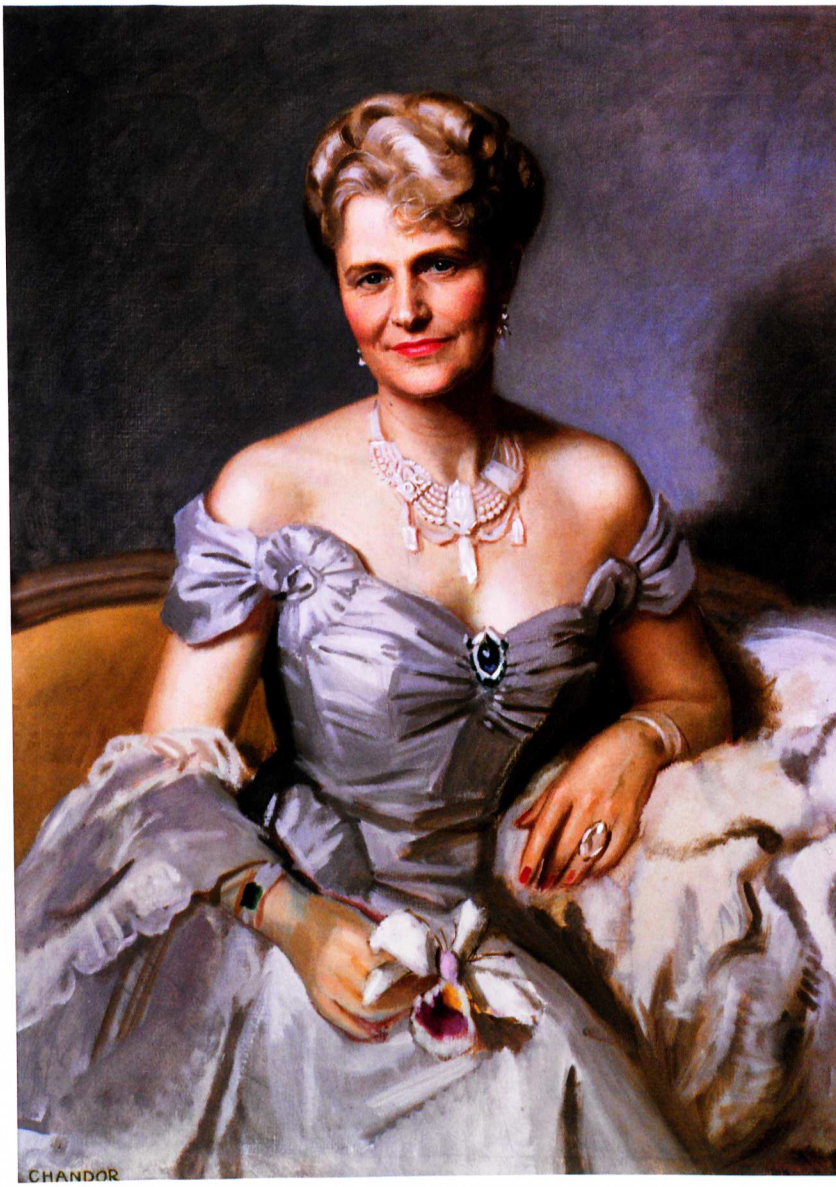
Elizabeth Mance wearing Ann Lowe concert gown, 1960s. Elizabeth Mance de Jonge Collection.

Identifying Lowe's Work

Ann Lowe created literally thousands of garments throughout her long career, and although dozens are preserved in the collections of museums around the country, there are likely many more, unidentified in private collections. Certain markers such as Lowe's distinctive bodice construction and use of floral embellishment are good indicators of a Lowe attribution (though they are not always conclusive). A good example is a wedding dress (shown on pages 102–3) held in the private collection of designer and fashion scholar Adnan Ege Kutay that was made in the Adam Room, the custom salon at Saks Fifth Avenue, as indicated by the label. The style of the dress—an hourglass silhouette with a slightly raised waistline that dips down at the back, a relatively flat front skirt with more pleating at the back, and the structured silk fabric with floral appliqué-covered sleeves and accents on the skirt—indicate an early 1960s design. The simple bow at the front waist and the wide bateau neckline are further indicators. This estimated date would align with

PAGES 98–101:
Elizabeth Mance concert dress by Ann Lowe, 1960s. Elizabeth Mance de Jonge Collection.

Wedding dress by Ann Lowe for Saks Fifth Avenue, early 1960s. Details, opposite. Adnan Ege Kutay Collection.



Lowe's time at the Adam Room (1960–62), and the interior details strongly indicate Lowe as the maker. Her signature bodice construction style, the gathered tulle at the interior petticoat's hemline, and lace-bound seam allowances are all features found on other Lowe gowns. The floral lace appliqué enhanced with drop crystal beads (similar to the Mance concert dress) is further proof, though, of course, these embellishments were not exclusive to Lowe. Thoughtful details, such as a small fabric butterfly on the interior petticoat and a long train from the waist that could be detached after the ceremony, may have been requested by the bride.

More of a mystery is Marjorie Merriweather Post's 1952 gray silk faille gown. Post was a known Lowe client, though the collection of her wardrobe held at the Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens does not contain any labeled Lowe garments. The gown in question is unlabeled and had been attributed by Hillwood as a possible Lowe design. The interior of the gown does not show typical Lowe craftsmanship; in fact, it appears to be hastily made, and the interior is largely rudimentarily finished. This may be because the gown was made specifically for a portrait of Post painted by Douglas Granvil Chandor. Post sat for the portrait in Texas, where Chandor was based because he was in ill health. The artist was only able to accept the commission in 1952, and he died in January 1953, leaving the portrait unfinished. Post had the portrait copied by artist Frank Salisbury in 1953 and again by artist David Swasey in 1966. A letter from Post to Swasey, dated June 30, 1965, indicates that Post sent props to Swasey to aid him in his copy—while Chandor finished Post's face, much of the other details, including the dress, were unfinished.[40] The multiple locations of the paintings' creators may account for the unusual construction of the dress. Both the skirt and bodice have been expanded and additional panels of the original fabric were added to the bodice. If Chandor was working on a tight timeline, the dress may have been made as quickly as possible and sent directly to Texas, where it was fit to Post (or perhaps another model acting as a stand-in) by another dressmaker—this might account for the rudimentary interior finishing as adjustments were anticipated. The dress also could have been altered in Swasey's care to fit a stand-in model while he created his copy. The same method might also have been used by Salisbury. This dress was clearly created to be used only for the portrait sitting—it would have needed more interior finishing to stand up to more standard wear, yet the outside presents a beautiful, elegant gown fit for a painted portrait.

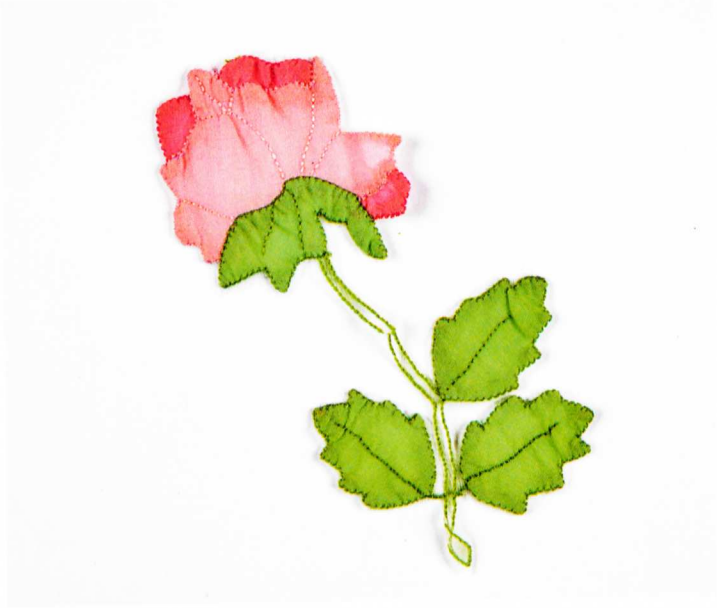
Powell notes features of the dress's design, including the portrait neckline and the intricate scrollwork, which may point to Lowe as designer: The gathered, sculptural embellishments on the sides of the bodice and the front and back of the skirt are created with "a sophisticated series of cuts, tucks and stitching to the original fabric of the overskirt [and may have] . . . developed out of a need to reduce the amount of fabric used." Powell hypothesizes that such techniques may have been used by Georgia Cole, who "worked as an

OPPOSITE AND FOLLOWING SPREAD: Evening dress worn by Marjorie Merriweather Post, 1952. Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens. ABOVE: Marjorie Merriweather Post portrait by Douglas Chandor, 1952. Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens.

independent dressmaker during the Civil War, when luxury goods throughout the South were scarce," and passed to Lowe.[41] These details offer tantalizing connections to Lowe. Post obviously respected her work. Lowe's elegant historically inspired style may have been the perfect choice for a portrait painted in the Gilded Age tradition; however, the attribution is incomplete.

Flower Embellishments on Debutante Gowns

Lowe employed a number of embellishment techniques throughout her career, including intricate fabric manipulations, pleating, appliqué, embroidery, beading, fussy cutting, the use of lace, and countless others. Many of these incorporated flowers, which, more than any other element, are a signature of her style. She spoke of her first design experiences as replicating flowers with fabric, and by the time she designed her own gowns, her floral work showed confidence and a lush, luxurious sensibility. Previous gowns discussed here, including the 1928 "My Rose Dream" Gasparilla dress, the early 1930s red poppy–printed dress, and Olivia de Havilland's 1947 Oscar dress, all use floral embellishment in different ways and show Lowe's true artistic talent—on the de Havilland dress, Lowe hand-painted the multicolored roses without a stencil.[42] Yet, the three-dimensional flower appliqués Lowe used to adorn certain gowns may be the most stunning examples of her work. The "American Beauty" dress from 1966–67 in the collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture was made for Barbara Brooke Baldwin's debut and was first collected by the Black Fashion Museum's founder, Lois K. Alexander. The pink satin American Beauty roses that cling to green satin vines and leaves appear as buds and opening flowers at the shoulders and travel down the sides of the dress to the front hem. They seem to originate at the back waist, where full open blooms highlight the deep-scooped back neckline. The ivory dress has a high empire waistline that dips lower toward the back to accommodate the backless design. It was made for, and perfectly embodies, youthful beauty.



OPPOSITE: White velvet debutante dress by Ann Lowe, 1965. The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Gift of Judith A. Tabler, 2009.70.1. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Flower and leaf samples from Ann Lowe's workshop. FIRST FOUR: Ann Lowe / Madeleine Couture Archives, 1962–67. Courtesy of Sharman S. Peddy in memory of Ione and Benjamin M. Stoddard; RIGHT: Collection of Ms. Margaret E. Powell.

"American Beauty" designed by Ann Lowe and worn by Barbara Brooke Baldwin, 1966–67. Detail, opposite. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of the Black Fashion Museum founded by Lois K. Alexander-Lane.

Debutante dress designed by Ann Lowe and worn by Pauline Carver, 1967. Detail, opposite. Division of Cultural and Community Life, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

Pauline Carver's debutante dress from the same season seems simple from the front. The high-waisted white silk shantung dress features velvet rose buds in a vibrant fuchsia set off against deep green leaves and vines that drape about the neckline. Again, the roses reach full bloom at the back waist where they cluster atop deep pleats lined in the same fuchsia velvet. It is easy to see from these examples how a debutante's date might mistake these fabric sculptures for real flowers.[43] By the time Lowe was designing these dresses, she had been making flowers for decades. Sharman Peddy, whose parents employed Lowe during the early 1960s at Madeleine Couture, remembers watching Lowe roll fabric roses with one hand.[44] Lowe herself noted the trend she started, stating in 1965, "All the flowers in New York are copied from mine."[45] These dresses and others, such as Judith Tabler's 1965 debut dress in the collection of The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, are demurely simple from the front with delicate details mostly at the necklines. These only hint at the explosion of floral embellishment at the back. Again, Lowe designed with her clients in mind. Debutantes traditionally wore white, and group photographs seem to depict identical women in identical dresses. By incorporating unique and eye-catching floral appliqués, Lowe helped debutantes stand out from the crowd. The young women would spend their night dancing. Facing a partner, extensive embellishment on the front of the dress would go unseen—back details, including the fullness Lowe added to each of these gowns, would create movement and visual interest, ensuring the gown was noticed. By the 1960s, debutante balls—events that advertised wealthy young women as open for marriage—were considered passé by some (including some participants). Lowe updated her gown designs to appeal to young women while paying homage to the debutante dress genre. The silhouettes of these gowns followed the 1960s A-line style and, besides the floral embellishment, were simple and structural in keeping with modish fashions. Lowe also included scandalously low backs on her gowns at this time, which did not go unnoticed by mothers. She joked that it was "To save my beautiful dresses; I want to keep the hands of the boys from getting them so dirty when they dance,"[46] but the low backs also embraced the more body-exposing styles of the decade.

Bridal Gowns

Brides were another important customer base for Lowe, and women such as Jacqueline Kennedy and Judith Tabler returned to Lowe for wedding dresses after the success of their debutante gowns. Bridal gowns may be, collectively, the most collaborative of Lowe's work since opinions from the bride, as well as the bride's family and friends, could contribute to the design. While these gowns in Lowe's body of work are traditional—all are white, full length, and recognizable as bridal wear—they also incorporate the changing fashions of the decades and the client's requests, emphasizing Lowe as a dynamic designer. The bridal gowns of Nell Lee and Jane Trimingham both show the distinctive styles of the twenties and forties, respectively. Florance Rumbough's 1951 white satin gown follows a fifties silhouette yet shows nineteenth-century historical inspiration with its off-the shoulder neckline and short, puffed sleeves, as well as an open-front skirt with "a panel of flounces of heirloom, rosepoint lace down the front" that demonstrates eighteenth-century revival. This is one of several examples of Lowe's use of lace—this time the gown incorporated an antique piece from the bride's grandmother, likely requested by Rumbough.[47]

In contrast, Ann Bellah Copeland's 1964 dress was minimal—she had worked in fashion in New York and "felt the days of the big skirted, fussy flowers, ruffles and embroidery were over. I was also bored by the idea of too much lace."[48] Copeland browsed department stores for a dress reflecting her sophisticated style, but only found "fluffy" styles "with lots of flounce and bows." She decided to visit Lowe's atelier on Lexington Avenue and spoke with Lowe. Although Copeland remembers Lowe as fragile with age and her failing eyesight, Lowe "understood the concept that I wanted, and she made it." The silk faille gown features clean lines and

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Bridal portraits: Florance Rumbough, 1951. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of the Estate of Florance Rumbough Trevor; Ann Bellah Copeland, 1964. Courtesy, Ann Bellah Copeland. Bridesmaid gown for Elizabeth Mance's wedding by Ann Lowe, 1968. Courtesy, Mrs. Bette Davis Wooden. Ann Bellah Copeland wedding dress by Ann Lowe , 1964. Delaware Historical Society, Gift of Ann Bellah Copeland. 2003.028.

ABOVE: Maid of honor Dianne Mance (left) and bride Elizabeth Mance in Ann Lowe gowns, 1968. OPPOSITE: Elizabeth Mance, wedding photograph, 1968. Ann Lowe can be seen behind the bride and her father being escorted to the church. Photos from the collection of Elizabeth Mance de Jonge. PAGES 118–21: Elizabeth Mance bridal gown by Ann Lowe, 1968. Elizabeth Mance de Jonge Collection.

a simple bow belt, as well as a court train emanating from the shoulders, unusual for wedding gowns of this time. Copeland recalls, "I ended up with exactly what I wanted." Copeland also wanted to commission dresses for her eight bridesmaids and her flower girls, but Lowe's assistant subtly signaled that Lowe was not up to such a large order at that time.[49]

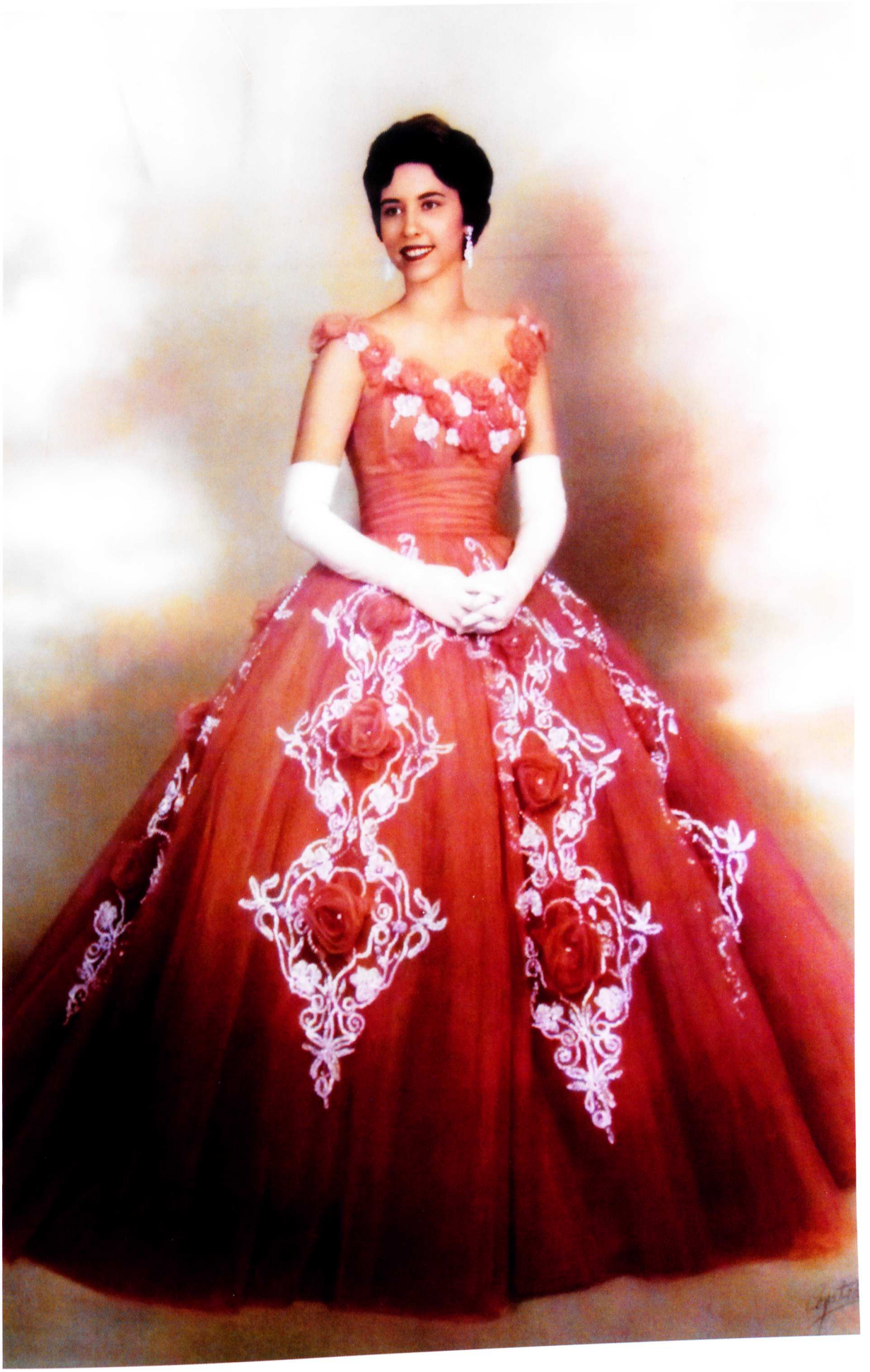
One of the latest extant Lowe wedding gowns was made for Elizabeth Mance's 1968 wedding. Lowe was chosen by the bride's father, the distinguished doctor and international church leader Dr. Robert Mance, who is remembered by bridesmaid Bette Wooden as a man with exquisite taste in women's fashion. Lowe attended the wedding and was captured in the day's photographs. The gown was a modern mix of contemporary fashion and traditional wedding dress elements. The bodice was made up of horizontal bands of lace around a band of vertically pintucked organza. The neckline was trimmed in bold floral appliqué, as were the cuffs of the long, sheer sleeves. The high-waisted columnar skirt also featured bands of lace, pintucking, and appliqué. An open-front overskirt extended into a cathedral-length train and was similarly edged in lace, pintucking, and appliqué. Lowe drew from a sixties countercultural and vintage-inspired style for this gown yet added all the formal elements that the large church wedding required. Lowe also created the bridesmaids' dresses—strapless tight-waisted white gowns with high-necked and long-sleeved sheer overlays, worn with short veils and wide pink satin belts. Maid of honor Dianne Mance's gown was distinguished by a pink underlayer. Bette Wooden, herself a fashion student and later a fashion designer, recalled meeting Lowe in her Madison Avenue studio when she arrived for her fitting. Sibyl Gant, another bridesmaid sent her measurements to Lowe, and the dress was made, sent, and sent back for alterations.[50] A *Tampa Bay Times* article on the Mance wedding party gowns notes the importance they served in Lowe's distinguished career, calling them "the most meaningful," as the Mances were a prominent Black family. The article also noted that the wedding gown served as "an effective closing chapter in Miss Lowe's memoirs, which are currently being written."[51] Unfortunately, no such autobiography was published.

Fantasy Gowns

Lowe's designs for festivals and themed balls represented a unique aspect of her work. These occasions gave freer rein to Lowe's imagination. True to the nineteenth-century training she received from her grandmother, Lowe did not experiment wildly with silhouette, but rather turned to embellishments to create the fantasy characteristics of these gowns. As Elaine Nichols, supervisory curator of culture at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, notes, "Lowe was 'helping young, wealthy white women (and their parents) live in a world of fantasy.'"[52] Besides her 1920s and later work for Gasparilla, including a 1957 Jewel Court gown, Lowe designed queen, princess, and countess gowns for the 1961 Ak-Sar-Ben Coronation Ball in Omaha, Nebraska. The ball, dating to 1895, and hosted by the Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben, a civic group

ABOVE: Rebecca Davies Smith wearing Ann Lowe gown in the Jewel Circle at Gasparilla Coronation Ball, 1957. Courtesy, Collection of Henry B. Plant Museum Society, Inc.

OPPOSITE: Ann Lallman Jessop wearing Ann Lowe gown at Ak-Sar-Ben Coronation Ball, 1961, Omaha, Neb. Collection of the Durham Museum.



of local businessmen, was held in "celebration of Nebraska's prosperous agricultural industry,"[53] and Lowe was commissioned through Saks Fifth Avenue to make thirty-three extravagant tulle gowns. Each gown contained twelve layers, plus petticoats and hoops, and each was hand beaded. Lowe designed seven over-the-top styles in all: four princess styles, two countess styles, and a queen's gown. The college-aged women selected as the Ak-Sar-Ben Court were transformed; a countess recalled to Powell, "I delighted in my gown. The style was so elegant. I've always referred to it as my Cinderella gown."[54]

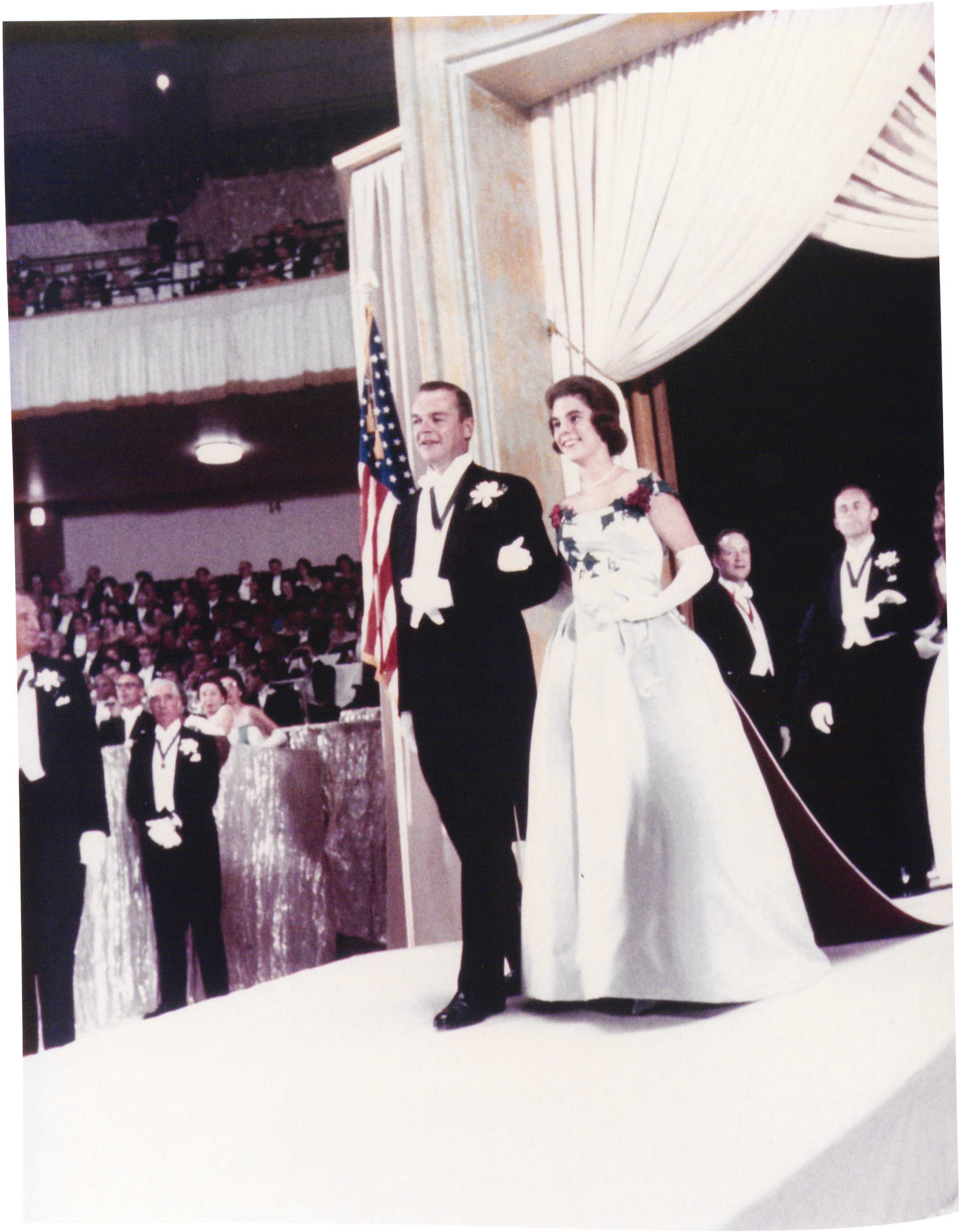
Lowe also designed a maid of honor debutante gown for Susan Celeste Peterson for St. Louis's Veiled Prophet Ball in 1963. The Veiled Prophet secret society was formed in 1878 by former Confederate soldier Charles Slayback. Journalist Scott Beauchamp describes its activities as white elites' "response to growing labor unrest in the city, much of it involving cooperation between white and black workers."[55] The group intimidated working-class people, excluded Black and Jewish St. Louisans, and featured a secret Veiled Prophet, whose costume closely resembled a Ku Klux Klan uniform. While Ak-Sar-Ben clearly celebrated Nebraska's industrial leaders and featured women economically privileged enough to attend college in the early 1960s, the Veiled Prophet Ball showcased much more sinister aspects of white elitism. Whether Lowe knew the history of the Veiled Prophet organization when she took Peterson's commission is unknown; however, it is likely that she did not. The ice blue satin dress embellished with grape vines, leaves, and dimensional satin grapes was also sold through Saks Fifth Avenue. Peterson also wore it to a debutante party months later, and she commissioned an additional white debutante gown from Lowe at Saks that was embellished with leaves and rosettes for the Fleur de Lis Ball that season, where she was presented to the local Catholic cardinal.[56] Lowe's design talent drew clients to her for these initiation balls, parades, and debuts that served as markers of elite status for white society around the country. They indicate a class system of exclusion that ironically relied on the creative genius of a Black southern woman. She could provide the "fairy-princess look" that made young women feel special, and each surviving gown shows the extensive range of her design variation and exquisite craftsmanship that significantly contributed to the celebratory atmosphere of these events.[57]

The Changing Fashion Business: Dressmaker to Designer

Ann Lowe played varying roles in the American fashion industry over the course of her career, and she witnessed both fashion and cultural evolutions. The United States had been a pioneer in ready-to-wear clothing production since the mid-to-late nineteenth century, and as the garment industry centered in New York City, the strength of American manufacturing only increased. By the 1910s, women could purchase any article of their wardrobe off the rack.[58] And by the 1960s, custom-made clothes were generally a rarity. Ann Lowe worked in a separate sphere of American fashion. When she first began working with her grandmother and mother in Alabama, dressmakers were much more common, especially in locations away from the shopping options of major city centers. Department stores were available—Lowe likely worked in a department store in Dothan, Alabama, in 1916, though she may have worked as a seamstress making alterations or whole garments, as opposed to a salesperson.[59] Yet, for elite women who wanted unique, fashionable, and high-quality clothing that fit them perfectly, going to a trusted local dressmaker was an obvious choice. The clients whom Lowe's family served needed embellished ball gowns in addition to a stylish daily wardrobe, and this seems to have been the Lowe family specialty. As Lowe's earliest training and expertise were in custom dressmaking, she was intimately familiar with the process, which involved orders from clients with a more or less precise idea of what they wanted in the finished product. Therefore, in addition to technical skill, a successful dressmaker needed to know when and how to guide her clients to the best possible outcome and make sure they left happy. The stylish, well-fit dresses would serve as the dressmaker's calling cards and create word-of-mouth advertising, an essential component

PAGES 125–28: Bright coral pink Ak Sar-Ben countess gown by Ann Lowe for Saks Fifth Avenue (bodice, detail, and front), 1961. Collection of the Durham Museum, Gift of Ann Lallman Jessop.

PAGES 129–31: Pale pink Ak-Sar-Ben countess gown by Ann Lowe for Saks Fifth Avenue, 1961. Collection of the Durham Museum, Gift of Lynn Robertson Evert.



OPPOSITE: Susan Celeste Peterson wearing Ann Lowe gown at Veiled Prophet Ball. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Mo. ABOVE AND FOLLOWING SPREAD: Veiled Prophet ball gown (back, front, and detail) designed by Ann Lowe for Saks Fifth Avenue and worn by Susan Celeste Petersen, 1963. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Mo.

of building a custom business. Lowe's first husband did not support her career, and she stopped working for a time, but enthusiastically resumed when offered a job in Florida. Lowe began as a live-in dressmaker for the Lee family, as mentioned above, and eventually established her own shop, trained her own assistants, and achieved the status of the best dressmaker in Tampa, the go-to for society weddings and the Gasparilla festival. Lowe worked in Tampa for more than a decade and could have easily excelled in her role there for the rest of her life. She seemed to be making a good amount of money through her business, and she was surrounded by clients who valued her and her work. Yet, Lowe might have felt stifled in the small city, and she dreamed of bigger things. Lowe's move to New York signaled the beginning of her transition from a highly skilled dressmaker to a "fashion designer," a perception of her that had more to do with her location and branding than a change in her design work. While Lowe's work in Tampa spoke in dialogue with a wider fashion world, in her decades in New York, she established herself as a creative talent who took an active part in shaping fashion culture on a national scale—though this was not recognized until the end of her career. This transition was made possible by her extraordinary skill and talent, both in design and in connecting with her clients, and through recognition in the press. The latter was due in large part to Ione and Benjamin Stoddard, the owners of Madeleine Couture, where Lowe worked from 1962 to 1965.

The fashion industry that Lowe sought to break into in New York during the late 1920s was dominated by manufacturers who employed designers mostly to copy French couture. A design house like Hattie Carnegie—one of the highest-end labels in New York fashion—employed a stable of designers who worked anonymously under the company's name. American fashion did not value the artistic creativity of individual designers as the French industry did—fashion was, first and foremost, a business. A young Norman Norell, who would later become one of the most prominent mid-century ready-to-wear designers on Seventh Avenue, also worked for Hattie Carnegie during the late 1920s and 1930s. He, like

OPPOSITE: Fleur de Lis ball gown designed by Ann Lowe for Saks Fifth Avenue and worn by Susan Celeste Petersen, 1963. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society.

ABOVE: Idella Kohke in Easter dress designed by Ann Lowe, *New York Age*, April 20, 1957.


Ann Lowe

RIGHT: Evening dress by Ann Lowe, ca. 1960. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lucy Curley Joyce-Brennan, 1970 (1979.144).
OPPOSITE: Detail of label.

Lowe, offered to work for free to prove his talent, illustrating the position designers held in relation to manufacturers. When offered a partnership with manufacturer Anthony Traina in the early 1940s, Norell negotiated a lower salary in exchange for the clothing label to read "Traina-Norell."[60] Having his name on the label with the manufacturer's name made him an exception, and he paid for it. When Lowe's first shop failed in the wake of the Great Depression, she turned to this same fashion system at a distinct disadvantage as a Black woman. Looking back, she was perhaps bitter at the exploitative nature of the industry. In the context of her 1960s interviews, when American fashion designers garnered much more respect, she stated, "For the 20 years I worked for others, I rode one person after another to glory on my back."[61] In regard to one of her most photographed designs, Olivia de Havilland's 1947 Oscar dress, she stated, "Its picture was printed in a national magazine, but another designer was credited with its design because my name was not acceptable."[62] Lowe rarely discussed the racism she experienced throughout her career, and this is perhaps a comment on it, though it would have been standard practice for the dress to bear the name Sonia Gowns after her employer, Sonia Rosenberg.[63] Lowe's experience in Tampa as the respected head of her own atelier no doubt left her anxious to reestablish her own company as soon as possible, though she was clearly taking private commissions during her tenure as a designer-for-hire among New York manufacturers.

Powell traces Lowe's various companies and partners from the 1950s to her retirement in 1972. During this period, she slowly built her reputation as a fashion designer through her brand of feminine beauty and exquisite embellishment and through her recognition in the press. Lowe was denied the significant press on Jacqueline Kennedy's 1953 wedding dress, though she was credited in *Vogue* in 1955 for Nina Auchincloss's debutante dress. Lowe also seemed to be well known among Black New Yorkers. In addition to her selection by the *New York Age* for its 1949 couture correspondent, Lowe was the only designer credited among the creators of four Easter ensembles pictured in the paper in 1957. Her beaded dress of black French satin for the Black Harlem socialite Idella Kohke features a large, appliquéd rose on the full skirt in her signature style.[64] Much of Lowe's press focuses on her white clients, but she clearly also designed for fashionable and elite Black clients.

Creating a Legacy

Ann Lowe spent the majority of her career as "society's best-kept secret," as the *Saturday Evening Post* would dub her in 1964. Yet by the early 1960s, Lowe was more than ready to claim her accomplishments. She participated in promotional events that garnered press, such as the Evyan Perfumes First Ladies miniature doll collection. Lowe reproduced multiple sets of inaugural gowns of more than a

ABOVE: Ann Lowe with Evyan Perfume dolls. From Gerri Major, "Dean of American Designers," *Ebony*, December 1966. Johnson Publishing Company Archive. Courtesy Ford Foundation, J. Paul Getty Trust, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and Smithsonian Institution. OPPOSITE: Ann Lowe fitting dress for fashion show, 1962.


UNITED

dozen First Ladies beginning with Mary Todd Lincoln. The dolls toured department stores and other venues as a part of a promotional campaign for Evyan Perfumes and were gifted to the Congressional Club in Washington, D.C., in 1961.[65] However, Lowe was largely able to promote her illustrious career through the help of Ione and Benjamin Stoddard. In the fall of 1962, Lowe began working for Madeleine Couture, which had been founded by Benjamin Stoddard's mother, Lillian Stoddard, during the 1920s or 1930s.[66] His wife Ione Stoddard was a registered nurse but attended fashion school and transitioned careers to run the shop in 1961, after Lillian Stoddard's death in 1947 and the retirement of the shop manager. Lowe called Madeleine Couture after her disastrous deal with Saks (see page 48 and 57), telling the Stoddards that she had inquired about a position twenty-five years prior, but at that time, the shop only made suits and daywear. Recognizing Lowe's talent—she was a competitor and shared customers with Madeleine Couture—they hired her and played to her strengths by offering evening, debutante, and wedding gowns.[67] They also decided to promote Lowe widely. By December 1962 the Stoddards organized a society fashion show of Lowe's work at the Berkshire Hotel. Benjamin Stoddard sought help from a friend in advertising, and the Stoddards secured major national press for Lowe, including the *Saturday Evening Post* profile and her appearance on *The Mike Douglas Show*, both in 1964. The Stoddards' daughter, Sharman Peddy, holds a significant personal archive of Lowe's papers collected and preserved by Ione Stoddard, which includes a photograph of Lowe with Ione Stoddard at the airport on their way to Cleveland for Lowe's television appearance. It also includes correspondence between the Stoddards and various newspapers and magazines. The press generated by the Stoddards is one of the most significant resources on Lowe's life and career for contemporary scholars. They hired a press agent in 1963 to write a press release on Lowe's life and secured her appearance in the 1966–67 edition of *Who's Who in America*. Further, Ione Stoddard's experience as a nurse helped her recognize Lowe's painful eye condition when she was first hired. Stoddard strongly encouraged Lowe to seek treatment, which resulted in glaucoma surgery for Lowe that fall.[68]

Through the Stoddards' efforts, Lowe was gaining a national profile, yet she might have felt stifled in her position at Madeleine Couture. Peddy's archive contains Lowe's 1962 contract with the company. It specified that Lowe would earn a ten percent commission on the dresses she designed that were sold through Madeleine Couture and would work exclusively for the company for five years. Yet on June 13, 1963, a designer named Roberta Reuter received a letter from Madeleine Couture's lawyer informing her that her work with Ann Lowe was in breach of Lowe's contract with Madeleine Couture.[69] Reuter was a designer who worked between Tyler, Texas, and New York and for years had worked with designers and dressmaking shops across the country to create the Queen's Court coronation gowns for the local Texas Rose Festival.[70] Lowe's extravagant gowns for the festival are held in the collection of the Tyler Rose Museum.

In January of that year, Benjamin Stoddard drew up a contract to act as Lowe's "agent, advisor, manager and representative," for which he would receive twenty-five percent of her "gross compensation." This did not apply to Lowe's design work, perhaps at her own insistence.[71] In January 1965, it was reported that Lowe was working at Madeleine Couture in addition to her own shop that was run with a friend named Ida Mitchel, and in June 1965 Lowe was working with two other design firms. Benjamin Stoddard's management would earn proceeds on other projects—a June 1965 article on Lowe in *The Milwaukee Journal* mentioned Stoddard's hope for a book and a motion picture on Lowe.[72] By June 4, 1965, however, Benjamin Stoddard wrote a letter

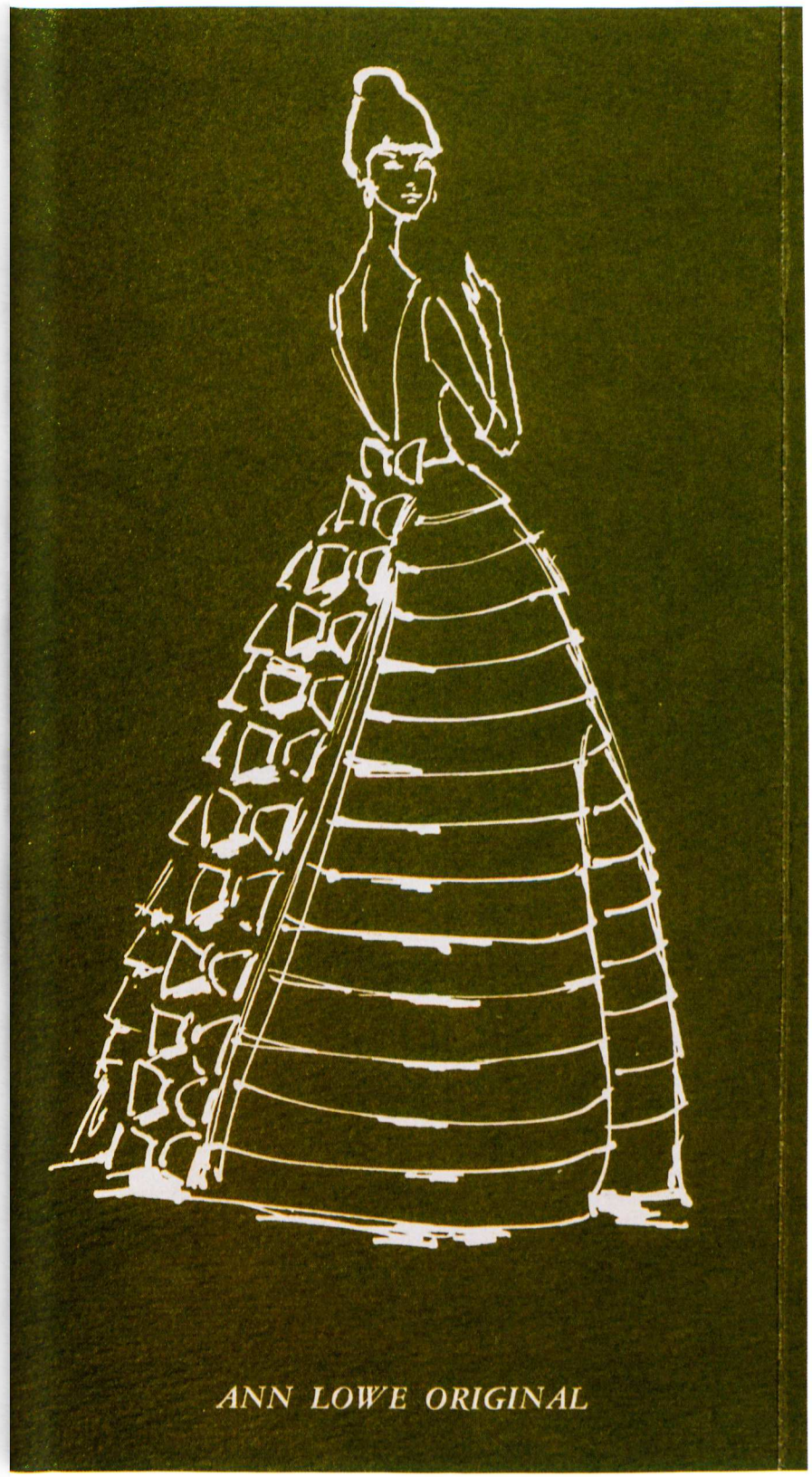
OPPOSITE: Ione Stoddard and Ann Lowe traveling to *The Mike Douglas Show*, 1964. ABOVE: Sharman Peddy, wearing Ann Lowe confirmation dress, with parents Benjamin and Ione Stoddard. BOTH: Ann Lowe / Madeleine Couture Archives, 1962–67. Courtesy of Sharman S. Peddy in memory of Ione and Benjamin M. Stoddard.

to Lowe's lawyer in answer to a May 28 letter that attempted to break Lowe's contract—Stoddard told the lawyer that during a press preview at the shop that very day, Lowe responded to her lawyer's May letter by saying, "I never told him to say that."[73] Lowe may be correct or might have simply changed her mind on terminating her contract with Stoddard after the successful press preview, but in any case, Lowe stopped working at Madeleine Couture that year. By July she had established A. F. Chantilly with Florence Cowell. However Judith Guile, a London model who came to New York in 1963 and worked in Lowe's small A. F. Chantilly atelier with five to six other seamstresses for two years around 1966, recalls that Lowe maintained a relationship with Ione Stoddard and Madeleine Couture.[74] Guile sometimes modeled dresses for clients, and she appears with Lowe in the first photograph in *Ebony*'s 1966 article, modeling an evening dress and coat that she helped make. Guile remembers Lowe as "charming . . . she was so elegant and gracious . . . as gracious as her [high society] customers . . . she was so beautifully spoken, very correct, and immaculate in her dress and immaculate in any garment that went out. She was very proud of her work." Guile notes that by the late sixties, though Lowe still sewed and inspected every dress made in the shop, her eyesight was failing to a significant extent. Her financial situation was dire as well, and she and Florence Cowell experienced financial and legal confrontations. True to Lowe's gracious personality, however, Powell notes that Cowell's son, who was involved in the business, remembered Lowe fondly, a sentiment echoed by Sharman Peddy on behalf of Ione Stoddard.[75]

Conclusion

Looking purely at the material culture, Ann Lowe's legacy is easy to establish. She was an extraordinary designer who was creative, adaptable, and highly skilled. Piecing together the details of Lowe's life is more difficult. Misinformation and contradictions abound in the numerous press articles written during and after her lifetime. In some cases, Lowe herself seems to give conflicting or erroneous information—Lowe's statements of monetary figures are a prime example. In other cases, journalists display sentimental, hyperbolic, or dismissive reportage. Margaret Powell began the meticulous work of sorting out these details. One of the most circulated is the story of Lowe's commission of Jacqueline Kennedy's wedding gown (see "Reproducing Jacqueline Kennedy's Wedding Dress," page 175). In April 1961, the *Ladies' Home Journal* published a story on the new First Lady. The reporter recalled her wedding and generously described Kennedy's bridal gown as a "fairy-princess creation of taffeta faille. . . . Each panel of the swooping skirt was swirled with a rosette of tucked faille. . . . Jacqueline, as a bride, looked adorable." However, any flattery or pride that Lowe might have found in this description was wiped out by her credit from the reported: "The bride's gown and those of her bridesmaids

ABOVE: Elaine Smith, Renne Jarrett, and Marisol Rothschild in Ann Lowe–designed debutante dresses. From Thomas B. Congdon Jr., "Ann Lowe: Society's Best-Kept Secret," *Saturday Evening Post*, December 12, 1964. OPPOSITE: A. F. Chantilly brochure. Ann Lowe/Madeleine Couture Archives 1962–67. Courtesy of Sharman S. Peddy in memory of Ione and Benjamin M. Stoddard.



ANN LOWE ORIGINAL

THE SECRET IS OUT — ANN LOWE IS BACK.

You remember Ann Lowe. She is the designer of tha magnificent ivory taffeta bridal gown worn by Jacqueline Bouvier when she became Mrs. John F Kennedy at Newport.

Again, Ann Lowe is creating gowns of breathtaking beauty for the world's most fashionable women. Her debutante gowns whirled through the 1965 national and international debutante balls.

ANN LOWE
Wedding, Ball and Debutante
Gowns

Miss Florence Cowell, custom designer of couture suits and coats, and hats, is known throughout the world for her fashions that are exquisite in their simplicity of line. Miss Cowell has become a partner in design with Miss Lowe.

FLORENCE COWELL
Couture Suits and Coats
Hats

Now, our secret is yours. Miss Ann Lowe and Miss Florence Cowell can be found at A. F. Chantilly Inc.

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were designed by a colored woman dressmaker, not the *haute couture*."[76] This description of Lowe was and remains dismissive and offensive, and several subsequent articles and essays on Lowe attribute it to Kennedy herself. Powell's careful research into the comment reveals her dedication as a scholar. She dug up letters in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum archives that clarify the situation and also reveal Lowe's position as a designer at this time.

Lowe wrote to Kennedy expressing "how hurt I feel as a result of an article. . . . I realize it was not intentional on your part but as you once asked me not to release any publicity without your approval, I assume that the article in question, and others, was passed by you."[77] Lowe wanted to be referred to as "a noted negro designer," adding, "which in every sense I am." She asks Kennedy to try to have the statement corrected, stating, "I have worked hard to achieve a certain position in life which has been considerably more difficult due to my race. At this late point in my career, any reference to the contrary hurts me more deeply than I can perhaps make you realize."[78] In her sixties, Lowe had been sewing for nearly six decades and had made hundreds of gowns to adorn the wealthiest, most privileged women in the country. She had little financial security or acclaim to show for it. Although she made many statements on her love of creating fashion, she was understandably turning her mind to her legacy. Lowe rarely discussed the setbacks she faced as a Black woman—the society and women's column reporters were likely not open to such narratives in any case. Even late in her career, when she was highly sought-after and producing gowns that were shipped all over the country, Guile notes the difficulty she had in securing her A. F. Chantilly salon and workroom on Madison Avenue because of the segregation practiced in the city. Powell points out that Lowe could not operate without white business partners and benefactors.[79] This letter to Kennedy reveals both the pride Lowe took in her accomplishments as a fashion designer and as a Black woman and how quickly that could be stripped away. Besides the unpreferred description of "colored," Lowe took exception to being labeled "not of the *haute couture*." Rollin Browne, a friend and legal advisor to Lowe, wrote to the Curtis Publishing Company to file a complaint and request a story in *Ladies' Home Journal* on Lowe outlining her accomplishments as a corrective to the injury the first article made to her business. Although Lowe was not named in the article on Kennedy, it was common knowledge among her client circle that she made Kennedy's wedding gown, and Browne stated, "I am sure that you can find out for yourselves, if you do not already know, that Ann Lowe has been for years very much of the *haute couture*" (emphasis original).[80] Further documents in the archive show that Kennedy's press secretary called Lowe on April 10, 1961, to apologize, but also to explain that Kennedy had not reviewed the final version of the *Ladies' Home Journal* story and was not responsible for the reporter's words.[81] Kennedy was not made aware of the situation, and no corrective article was issued by the magazine.[82] It was perhaps this incident that prompted Lowe to partner with the Stoddards to garner more positive publicity and recognition of her life's work. Lowe lived in a complex era of immense change for Black Americans, for women, and for American fashion. That she has been largely forgotten is not surprising (Hattie Carnegie, Elizabeth Hawes, and Norman Norell—American designers mentioned throughout this book—are hardly household names), but it is important that she is remembered for her extraordinary life, significant impact on fashion, and the joy and beauty she channeled through her work.

Lowe holding up fabric. Courtesy of Ann Lowe / Madeleine Couture Archives, 1962–67. Courtesy of Sharman S. Peddy in memory of Ione and Benjamin M. Stoddard.

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Reproducing Jacqueline Kennedy's Wedding Dress

KATYA ROELSE

Context

Ann Lowe had been making dresses for families of the New York Social Register for more than thirty years when she was given the opportunity she had always dreamed about.[1] Janet Auchincloss, the mother of Jacqueline Bouvier, asked Ann to make her daughter's wedding gown for her upcoming marriage to John. F. Kennedy. Mrs. Auchincloss was a longtime client[2] and her daughters made their Newport debut wearing Ann Lowe creations, so it was a natural choice to select Lowe as the designer, and it would also be less expensive.[3]

Fresh off her stint at *Vogue*, Jackie had an eye for fashion and was just beginning to cultivate her "Jackie Look." As a debutante in society culture, it was natural that there would be many people involved in what kind of dress she should walk down the aisle in to marry the freshman senator in the "wedding of the year."[4] Joseph Kennedy certainly saw the wedding as a press opportunity for his son, and his influence was important. Jack Kennedy wanted something "more traditional."[5] However, Jackie remembered asking for a "tremendous dress, a typical Ann Lowe dress."[6] She also requested that the color complement her grandmother's rose-point lace veil that she planned to wear with it. Other accounts say that she had wanted a simpler, more modern dress that would complement her tall, slim figure but that she was overruled by her mother and father-in-law. "Miss Lowe reached into her childhood memories and sketched an old-fashioned ball gown like one her mother had made for a Montgomery belle."[7] Lowe later said, "She [Jackie] was very nice. All the way, I had the feeling that she considered me, and any other people around her 'on her level.' She didn't seem to consider herself as being superior. It was a pleasure working for her."[8] In the end, Lowe designed a dress with a portrait neckline and delicately draped pleats across the bodice, a cinched waist with overlapping bias strips, and a bouffant skirt with ten rows of bias-cut swags that culminate in seven swirling rosettes with mini bouquets of wax orange blossoms nestled into six of them. There is also a three-layer silk faille petticoat with hand-sewn gathered trim. Despite historians reporting that the dress uses *trapunto*,[9] there is no evidence of the stuffing technique anywhere in the dress. It took Lowe and her team two months to create the gown. Cutting it alone took two days. It cost $500.[10]

Despite her discussions with Lowe, Jackie purportedly disliked the dress and felt she "looked like a lampshade."[11] The snug bodice emphasized her modest bust, and the frills and silhouette were far too fancy and complex for her taste. She said, "It was the dress my mother wanted me to wear and I hated it."[12] Mini Rhea, a dressmaker in Georgetown from whom Jackie had commissioned several garments, said that Jackie "did not like to get the effect with side drapes or bunching of material because that would ruin the simple lines she preferred. She did not wear fluffy things—she didn't wear 'buttons and bows' . . . she didn't like ruffles."[13] Rhea continues:

> The wedding dress has tremendous ruffles and circles of ruffles repeated all around the voluminous skirt. These almost endless ruffles were what I most objected to. I counted eleven rows of ruffles around the bottom of the dress and above them were large concentric circles of ruffles which diminished at the center, where there were sprays of flowers. . . . The dress couldn't have been fancier. But I had the feeling that Jackie was trying to please everyone—to dress according to everyone's idea of a bride.[14]

Nevertheless, Lowe understood the assignment and expertly managed the expectations of all the stakeholders, as all haute couturiers know how to do.

Design and Creation and Signature Details

It is documented that Ann Lowe did not work from patterns but often worked from sketches.[15] She kept detailed information about her clients' measurements and was known to require very few fittings.[16] In the case of the Kennedy gown, Lowe met with Jackie several times the summer before the wedding for fittings and alterations.[17] However, Jackie never disclosed Ann Lowe's name during the process.

Wedding portrait of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, 1953.

Lowe wanted to be seen as a couturier, and this wedding dress demonstrates her exemplary sewing abilities and showcases many of her signature details. Her designs often featured a flower motif of some kind and in this wedding gown, there are miniature wax orange blossom sprigs, a traditional wedding flower associated with good fortune, nestled inside six rosettes. The rosette sewn on the center back is missing a sprig, presumably to avoid the discomfort of sitting on it and possibly destroying it.

The waistline treatment appears in many of her dresses as well. Although there is a seam in the understructure where the corset meets the petticoat, she eliminated the waistline seam on the outer layer and cut the skirt panels on the bias. This creates length and a more graceful line in the torso and beautiful volume and movement in the skirt.

The petticoat trim is a cleverly constructed signature detail. There is a six-inch-wide strip of gathered fabric at the hem that is hand-sewn in place and creates a sculptural effect. It causes the skirt to push away at the hem and helps achieve the "antebellum" silhouette.

The corset is constructed similarly to those in Lowe's other gowns, with the appearance of the delicate bust pleats, wiggle bones, and the zigzag elastic application across the bustline, which helps to cinch the corset in and create shape in the bust. There is also the familiar catch stitching across the waist stay and elastic at the underbust for further support.

The dress also features Lowe's ingenious "30-15" sleeve where the underarm sleeve seam is eliminated and replaced with a bias gusset that allows for more movement.

She regularly used fabric manipulation on the voluminous gowns to create visual interest and movement. In this case, she added bias pleating across the bodice in the front and back, and overlapping bias strips adorn the rib cage, tapering around to the center back into a V. Similarly there are ten rows of bias strips that are draped, layered, and slightly gathered across the hem of the ten skirt panels. They culminate in seven circular ruffled rosettes swirling in opposing directions throughout.

The main part of the gown is made from what Lowe called "silk chiffon taffeta." The color of the original dress is an off-white ivory meant to complement the veil and the bridesmaids' dresses. There are about thirty-five yards of fabric in the main part of the dress, and twenty of those yards go into making the bias trim for the swags and rosettes. The pleating in the bodice is also made from the same taffeta. The main dress is interfaced with a layer of light 100 percent cotton interlining or lightweight buckram. It is sometimes called "siri."

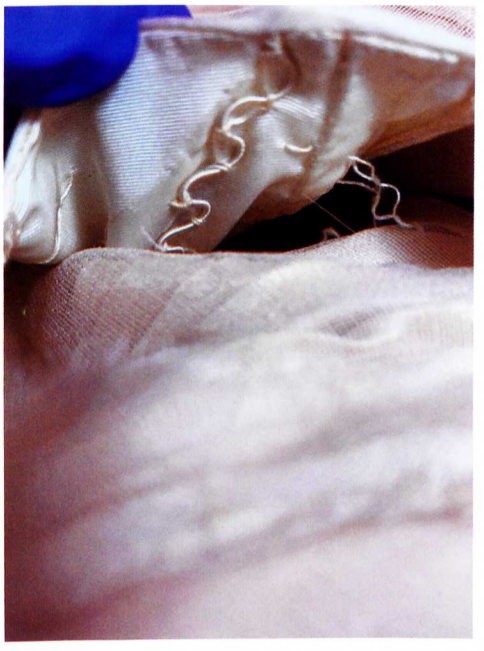
The understructure of the petticoat and corset is 100 percent white silk faille. The petticoat also has an outer layer of a lightweight beige interlining, and a stiffer, heavyweight interlining sits in between; together they are what help give the dress such volume. In the corset, there is a silk gauze layer that sits on top of the corset onto which the pleating is hand-sewn. There are also a variety of trims, such as petersham and double-satin ribbons, seam and twill tapes, elastics, boning, and hooks and eyes, that all go into the dress.

Delivery and Reception

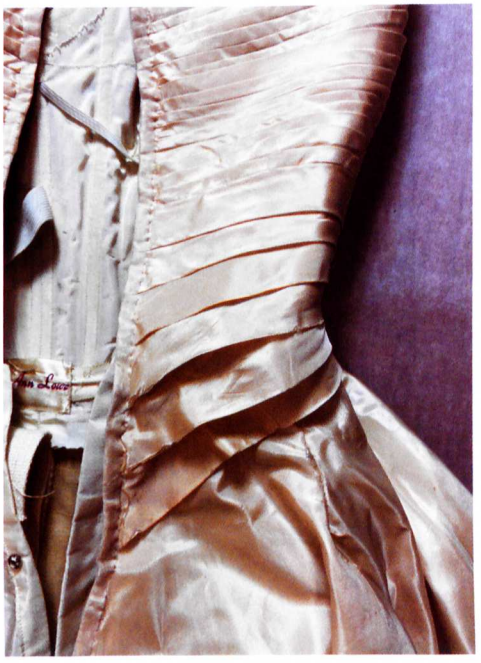
As the story goes, ten days before the wedding, a pipe burst in the ceiling of Lowe's workshop and destroyed Jackie's wedding gown as well as most of the fifteen attendants' dresses. Although understandably distraught over the circumstances, Lowe was reported to have said to her staff, "Girls, we've got to stop all this crying and get this place cleaned up."[18]

Lowe paid her dedicated staff time and a half to miraculously re-create the ruined dresses.[19] They remade the wedding gown in five days. When Mrs. Auchincloss called the Tuesday before nervously inquiring where the garments were, Lowe bought herself time and said, "I'm bringing them up to Newport myself. I'm afraid they'll get lost on the way," then escorted them by train to hand-deliver them in time.[20] This exchange was also fraught, for when Lowe arrived at the Auchincloss farm in Newport, Rhode Island, she was told that she must use the service entrance. She refused and said, "I'll take the dresses back,"[21] and was eventually allowed to enter through the front door.

TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: Details of wax orange blossom bouquet, petticoat treatment, and wiggle bones. CENTER, LEFT TO RIGHT: Details of corset finishing and catch stitching. BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: Details of "30-15" sleeve, back waist, and color matching.




Ann Lowe




PANTONE

The wedding took place on September 12, 1953, with more than eight hundred invitees. An adoring crowd of no less than two thousand people waited outside. International and domestic press covered the wedding. Ann Lowe was invited to the event as well, but was also there to assist Jacqueline with the dressing. Ann Lowe held the long, antique veil high above the ground so that it would not be trampled.[22] When Jackie walked down the aisle, there was an audible gasp from the invitees.[23] In the receiving line, Senator Kennedy said to Lowe, "Thank you for making my bride so lovely."[24] In more ways than one, the dress was a success, and Ann Lowe hoped this would be a turning point in her career.

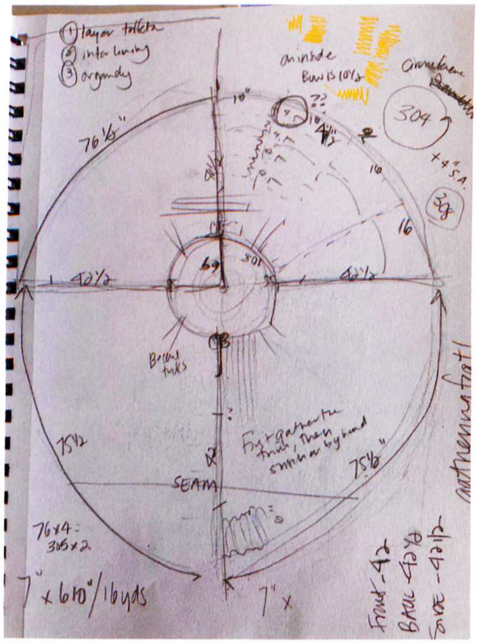
Lowe never told the Kennedys or Auchinclosses about the burst pipes and ruined dresses, and she ended up losing $2,200 on what should have been a $700 profit.[25] Those losses could have been recouped had her name actually been shared with the press. Only a *Boston Globe* article reported that the dresses were by "a New York dressmaker who has been her (Jacqueline's) mother's dressmaker for several years."[26] Years later, in a 1961 *Ladies' Home Journal* article about Jackie, Lowe suffered another indignity when she was referred to as "a colored woman dressmaker, not the *haute couture*."[27] As Margaret Powell wrote in her thesis, "thousands of dollars of free advertising for Ann Lowe's Madison Avenue dress salon disappeared into thin air."[28]

Today, Jacqueline Kennedy's dress is considered "the most photographed wedding gown in history"[29] and "one of the most iconic wedding-day looks of all time."[30] It regularly appears on "Best of" lists along with other gowns worn by celebrities, royalty, the politically powerful, and the wealthy. It has inspired designers and collectors for decades, and its likeness is frequently used to promote events and draw in the public.[31] A paper dress version was made by Belgian artist Isabelle de Borchgrave and her collaborator Rita Brown in 2004. Another paper version appeared at a Kennedy exhibit at the Palazzo Belloni in Bologna, Italy, in 2019.[32] The Franklin Mint issued a "Jacqueline Kennedy Heirloom Bride Doll" in 1998.[33] Given the cultural impact, one would hope to see Ann Lowe's name more prominently associated with the dress, but, most times, her name is missing.

Re-creation

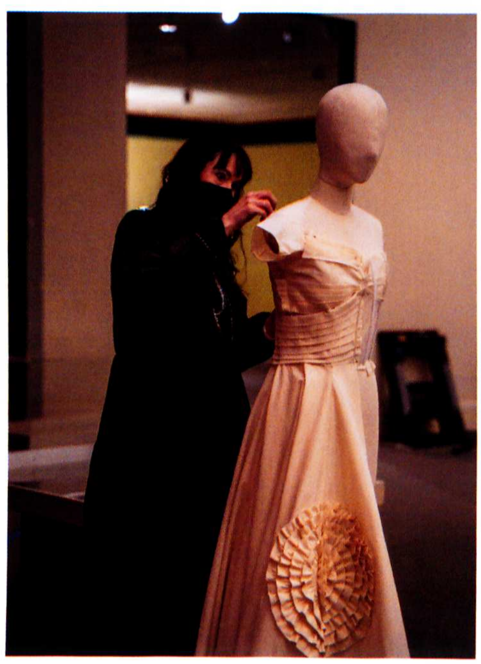
I was contacted about a dress project in the summer of 2021 by Laura Mina, a textile conservator at Winterthur at the time. I learned then that Jacqueline Kennedy's original wedding dress is not able to be shown and, therefore, could not be part of the planned Ann Lowe exhibition. Having already collaborated with Winterthur on other projects, I was asked if I would be able to make the reproduction. Although this was an incredible opportunity, I initially felt that a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color) designer should take on the project, and I shared a few personal contacts whom I thought would be interested in following in Ann Lowe's footsteps. Ultimately, Winterthur returned to me with the project, and I accepted if I could involve

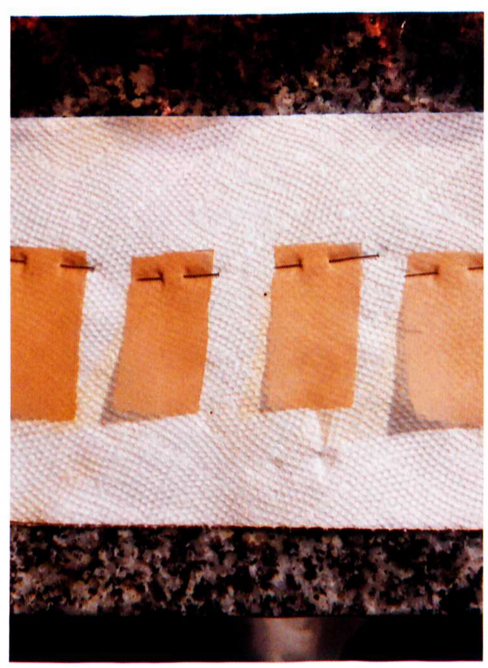
OPPOSITE: Finished bodice from Katya Roelse's reproduction of Jacquelyn Kennedy's wedding dress, completed in 2022. ABOVE: Paper version of dress, 2019. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.



(1) layer taffeta
(2) interlining
(3) organdy
SEAM

Lily





students in the process. As an educator and designer, it was important to me not just to teach the skills but to have students know Ann Lowe's story.

I have a lifetime of experience sewing and creating garments for myself, friends, and family, and many years of experience in the fashion industry. I have designed and created wedding dresses, corsets, and eveningwear garments for private clients. I have also worked as an alteration specialist and tailor's apprentice and have turned many garments inside out to repair and alter. I learned haute couture sewing and embellishment techniques as a graduate student at Drexel University by working for Frank Agostino in Narberth, Pennsylvania, and in Paris, at the Paris American Academy. My time in womenswear taught me the invaluable skill of copying garments by knowing how to take precise and proper measurements and how to draft a pattern without taking a garment apart. As a designer, I have become very familiar with many kinds of fabrics and trims, learned their properties and qualities, and found dependable industry sources.

In January 2022, I spent three days in the archives at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, evaluating, measuring, photographing, sketching, and taking copious notes on the dress. The last time it was on display was in 2003 for a three-month exhibition celebrating the fiftieth wedding anniversary. Years before it was accessioned in 2009, Caroline Kennedy reportedly found her mother's wedding gown "all crumpled up in a Lord and Taylor's box in the warehouse."[34] It was clear from even an initial survey why the dress could not be displayed. There are many tears at the waistline seams, and the fabric has deteriorated across numerous pleated edges of the bodice. In many places, the hand-tacked stitches had come loose or broken. The elastic in the corset could no longer recover its shape. The disintegration of all these details would only degrade further if displayed, and, although it is the original, it would not showcase Ann Lowe's skills accurately or respectfully.

All the documentation was completed with the dress lying on a large worktable. The skirt was so big that I had to sketch and take the bodice pictures upside down as this was the closest way I could access it, otherwise, the skirt would inevitably pull the gown off the table. It took at least two people to turn it over carefully to avoid any damage the handling might cause. I took hundreds of pictures of the seams, finishings, trims, and construction techniques. When a photograph could not successfully express the shape of a pattern piece or explain the construction or volume, I would sketch and draw diagrams to help better understand the steps Lowe took. There was no measurement too small to document. I took hundreds of specs and either documented them in sketches or took photographs that included a measuring tape or ruler. One small discovery would create a cascade of new questions about the construction and methods Ann Lowe used. My charge was to reproduce, not interpret, so every single part of the dress was investigated in order to be faithfully reproduced, inside and out.

After a comprehensive scan of the entire dress, I organized my documentation into five sections: the petticoat, skirt, swags and rosettes, bodice, and corset. I began with the petticoat because it appeared to be the most straightforward component. I always started by counting the number of pieces in each section and created a list of measurements to take. I measured the length of the center front, center back, the side seams, and then the circumference of the hem. I measured small details like the bow placement, trim dimensions, closure and seam details, and waist pleat depth. I also examined the grain of the fabric and noted if it was cut on the straight grain or on the bias. I repeated this process with the main skirt, taking special note of the waistline placement. In this gown, Ann Lowe eliminated the waistline seam to create an elongated silhouette and cut the ten skirt panels on the bias. This resulted in an elegant effect but is also where the gown gave way to the weight of the swags and began to tear. Next, I examined the swags, counting the number and widths of the ten parallel strips on each skirt hem panel. I took note as to how much gathering she used where the strips fold into one another at the seams and measured the seam allowances and length of the hand stitches. Then I measured the rosettes and documented the diameter, the

TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: Petticoat diagram; Katya Roelse at work; measuring the swags. CENTER, LEFT TO RIGHT: Detail of waistline deterioration; wax flower experiments. BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: Annotated photos; Roelse with muslin prototype; tea-dyeing experiments.

width of the exposed bias strip, and counted the number of revolutions the strip makes in each rosette. The bodice was the most difficult to document because it was not created with a pattern and the pleated bias sections were individually draped and finessed in a couture fashion. I could only get precise measurements of the "30-15" sleeve and document the construction techniques and finishings through drawings and photographs. The corset showcases Lowe's engineering skills and how the pieces all work in concert to hold the entire dress together. I made a list of all the pieces and then individually measured each one like a puzzle, making sure that each of the seams would align with the previous one when it was sewn together.

After returning home, I spent a few days organizing my notes and photographs, developing a supply list, a pattern list (cutter's must), and a sewing construction table. I decided to work from the inside out because the foundation of the dress is complicated and supports every other component. I also wanted to execute this part while my memory was still fresh. With every part of the dress, I would begin by conducting a deep review of my sketches and photographs of the specific part, and then check those against my measurements to see if the details aligned and made sense. It was not a linear process, though. Depending on the kind of documentation I used (photograph, drawing, specs), I would cross-reference every detail and look for inaccuracies or confirmation of my choices. This proved difficult if I happened to miss a detail, so I looked to other photographs and information to help me reason out what I had missed. I printed out numerous photographs of my own, and ones I found online, and used them as studies on which to sketch and annotate. I felt that although I was privy to the details of the garment, I was also creating one that was in the public's memory, and I worked to balance these expectations while creating an authentic, functional dress. I sought to meet this goal while photographing, filming, and documenting every step along the way.

I drafted the corset pattern first using basic pattern-making techniques while adhering to the specificities of Ann Lowe's design. Then, following the previously described process, I drafted the petticoat and main dress based on the measurements I took and then draped the gauze bodice layer to which the pleated pieces would be attached.

Along with an assistant, I cut and created a half-muslin prototype to check for proportion and overall pattern accuracy of these three parts (corset, main dress, and gauze layer). It was on this prototype that I tested the swags and rosette construction and figured out how much yardage would be needed. I began the sourcing and ordering of supplies at this time, too, as I anticipated supply chain issues and thought some supplies would be difficult to find. I also did not know the name of the "wiggle bone" wires she used in the bust cups, nor did I have a source for the kind of boning she used in the body of the corset. The silk proved to be the most stressful to obtain, and it took six weeks for the silk faille to arrive and twelve weeks for the taffeta.

I was able to determine and order the appropriate weights for the interlining, and I decided to tea-dye one of the petticoat layers to match the original. The cutting of the petticoat was the quickest part, and although the construction was straightforward, the scale and handling of the garment proved a challenge and much of the work was repetitive. I hand-tacked the three layers together and stitched the seams and skirt perimeter by machine. The silk faille could only be hand-basted to create the ruffle trim; this process took six hours. Placing and pinning took another six hours to distribute the gathers evenly. Hand-sewing the trim took an additional twenty. Adding the "something blue" bow at the hem was a sweet finish.

I constructed the corset next, and after testing different boning applications, I machine-sewed the boning and seams. The wiggle bones, waist stays, and bustline elastic are sewn with a catch stitch and hand tacks.

I researched different ways to re-create the orange blossoms and decided upon a slightly translucent Sculpey clay that was pressed into a silicone mold. The peduncle, or stalk, was shaped by hand, and a florist wire was added. It was then baked to cure. The stamen was painted with a yellow Sharpie pen, and then each individual flower was sealed

OPPOSITE, TOP: Hand-sewing the swags. OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Re-creating the rosettes.


STATE
CHAMPIONSHIPS
2015

with polyurethane. My assistant made about seventy little flowers for the six bouquets to eventually sit in the rosettes.

The bias-pleated bodice layer was individually pressed in twelve sections and hand-sewn onto a silk gauze layer that is tacked onto the corset. I took meticulous care to count how many pleats there were and the direction they draped across the bodice. Similar to the swags, the width and number are inconsistent, and some of the pleats grow wider and change shape as they cross the bustline. The pleated sections in the back drape continuously to the front and encircle the "30-15" sleeve. There is a catch-stitched elastic around the shoulders that is meant to secure the sleeves slightly off the shoulder. There is also a gauze strip that is hand-sewn around the interior of the neckline to cover the raw edge of the pleated sections.

The vertical seams of the skirt were sewn by machine and quickly came together. I machine-stitched the horsehair hem at this point too. Three students and I spent about six days cutting, gathering, pinning, and hand-sewing the 154 yards of bias trim for the swags and 49 yards for the rosettes. The swags were manipulated and placed "by eye" as there are no calculations explicitly saying when or how much to gather. We worked in an assembly line fashion where I would gather and pin the swags, and then they would hand-sew each row after me. It took approximately a day to hand-sew twenty sections.

The width of the strips varies slightly from panel to panel, and no two are the same. This is also the case with the rosettes as the number of revolutions changes and can vary between ½ inch and 1 inch in diameter. Further, some spiral clockwise and some spiral counterclockwise. They are also not placed consistently, with a few of the rosettes placed slightly off-center and toward the front of the dress, presumably so that they would feature more prominently. The bias ruffles of the rosettes are also manipulated "by eye." I estimated the amount of gathering Lowe used by measuring the continuous folded edge of the bias ruffle and compared that with the number of revolutions it makes.

The final steps in the re-creation were attaching the skirt to the bodice, applying the waistline bias strips, and sewing the handpicked zipper. Admittedly, these steps were the most difficult to complete because the dress was almost completed and a challenge to maneuver due to its weight and size. Further, everything at this point is hand-sewn, so it was important to create strong, consistent stitches to hold the entire dress together. The skirt fits snugly against the bodice, and I had to take care that the correct number of pleats were exposed and that the transition lined up perfectly in the back. There is some crinkling of the pleats under the bust caused by the weight of the skirt, and I sought to imitate this as well by adjusting the tension on my stitching.

The waistline strips cover where the skirt is attached to the bodice. They meet perfectly in center front, alternately overlap, and transition gracefully to the back into a V at center back. It necessitates the stitcher to move from the left to the right, and the back to the front, for each successive strip, which was a painstaking and slow process given the size and scale of the dress. Although the sewing of the handpicked zipper was relatively easy, again, the challenge was working around the enormous dress and ensuring that the strips and pleating all lined up on either side of the zipper. I was honestly confounded at this step and never quite understood how Lowe accomplished it.

I considered if Ann Lowe worked as efficiently as she could have, having to make this garment so quickly. I found that the hand-sewing was not an unnecessary extravagance. The pleating, swags, and rosettes must be sewn and tacked by hand, as there is no way to operationalize the process with a sewing machine. The dress is too big, and the layers too thick to fit into a machine bed. My attempts to hasten the process and gather the silk faille petticoat trim by using a special foot attachment on my machine failed. Except for the handpicked zipper, machine sewing is utilized mainly for straight seams and for points of fortification like in the boning and seam applications. This is testament to Lowe's skill as a couturier and her understanding of fabrics and their inherent potential. The hand-sewn techniques also offer beautiful inconsistencies not seen in machined garments.

Final reproduction of Jacqueline Kennedy's wedding dress by Katya Roelse, 2022.

It is perfectly imperfect, providing endless moments where you can see her skill. Unlike ready-to-wear garments that are sewn systematically for speed and ease of production, a haute couture garment is built, so to speak, and not necessarily put together for ease of production.

There were plenty of challenges at every step. The first challenge was not having Jacqueline's actual measurements on which to base the reproduction. Accurate measurements could have provided some idea as to what undergarments were worn with the gown and what kind of ease had been added for comfort. There are plenty of speculative theories, but these assumptions do not account for what her measurements were that day or at that time in her life. The built-in corset offers some structure, but Ann Lowe clients typically wore their own undergarments as support and shape. "When they wear one of my dresses," says Ann Lowe, "they just step in, zip up and they're gone,"[35] suggesting that they came wearing any supplementary garments. In any case, there would be accommodations made in the overall fit of the gown so it would not be too tight or too loose when finally worn. Another challenge was having to account for how much the fabric deterioration had changed the size of the garment over time. The most noticeable tears at the waist could have added an inch or two to the final measurements. Many sections were cut on the bias and could have stretched over time, changing the overall length and proportion. Taking construction cues from the original gown proved to be a challenge as well when deciding what to include in the reproduction. It was difficult to determine what parts of the original gown were salvaged or hastily reconstructed. It is also possible that Ann Lowe, in her wisdom, knew what battles were important and some crooked stitches that were never meant to be seen would not matter. Additionally, the gown has numerous layers, is white, and is of considerable size, and any designer attempting to re-create it has a veritable design conundrum to solve. I relied on the facts of the dress as it is today to guide me, but with every step, I looked for general proportion and checked this against original photographs that the public knows so well. Finally, although every trim and secondary fabric shipped in a timely fashion, the forty yards of the main taffeta fabric were delayed months due to the ongoing supply chain issues in spring 2022. By resorting to a supplier that had the taffeta in white rather than the original off-white, I was able to complete the reproduction and drop it off at Winterthur on July 1, six months from start to finish.

Honoring a Master Couturier

The process of re-creating the Jacqueline Kennedy wedding gown only served to further establish Ann Lowe as a consummate dressmaker who is worthy of haute couture status. Successfully executing the numerous details and techniques in such a gown takes many years of experience and a dedicated *metier*. Ann Lowe not only possessed these, but she had the perseverance to weather any storm.

The reproduction is significant because it is an opportunity to document a master couturier's skills and techniques in what is arguably her most important design and a culmination of her life's work. There are so many signature details, and it is important to examine and catalogue them so that her talents and hard work are recognized as much as any other haute couturier's.

The reproduction is also significant because through creating it, we get to know how the dress was made and the specifics of the fabric and trims, and we also become more familiar with what Lowe and her staff experienced as they hurriedly worked to create it after the plumbing accident. We become more appreciative of every stitch, and in a way get to walk in her shoes. By documenting it, we are giving Ann Lowe her voice and the respect she deserves.

The most meaningful characteristic of Ann Lowe's supreme dressmaking abilities was that she had an acute sense of what mattered and what the average person would not detect. With only a few days to re-create the dress, it is evident that she knew what to keep and what to discard. This is another hallmark of a consummate couturier: knowing what to sacrifice while also delivering a beautiful dress on time.

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Lowe
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The Legacy of Ann Lowe

ELIZABETH WAY

In 2021, Dawn Davis, the respected publisher and editor-in-chief of *Bon Appétit* magazine commissioned the American fashion designer B Michael to create a gown for her attendance at The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute Gala. Begun in 1948, "the event has gone from an annual fundraiser attended by the fashion industry and New York society to a cultural phenomenon attracting global attention."[1] The red-carpet promenade of the attendees is as much an object of public fascination and comment as any Hollywood awards show, and the fashion is the main attraction. Some guests—celebrities of all fields—use the opportunity to make bold sartorial statements of enormous proportions and over-the-top embellishments inspired by the gala theme, and others use their platform to communicate cultural messages or political beliefs through their clothing—Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, for example, wore a dress by Brother Vellies that read "Tax the Rich" when she attended the same year as Davis.[2] B Michael recalled that Davis

> wanted her dress to have a narrative that would channel the contributions of "unsung" Black American Designers. Our collaboration led to the embroidery of the names of a few of such designers: *Ann Lowe, Elizabeth Keckley, Arthur McGee, Scott Barrie, Willi Smith, Jay Jaxon and Patrick Kelly*—Dawn Davis said as she ascended the red carpeted steps of the Metropolitan Museum, "I am bringing with me those designers"—with their names colorfully embroidered on the majestic gold paillettes of the hemline, they all attended the Met Gala.[3]

Ann Lowe, whose work is held in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, sits in good company with the other designers named on Davis's gown. Each has made significant contributions to American fashion, helping to shape its culture and aesthetics both domestically and internationally. With the exception of Keckly (also spelled Keckley) and Lowe, these designers mainly created ready-to-wear fashion in a late twentieth-century tradition—though Jaxon and Kelly notably contributed to Parisian couture. Keckly (1818–1907), a nineteenth-century modiste, worked in an artisanal tradition that defined high-end (and nearly all other levels of) fashion before its eventual replacement by industrial manufacturing and ready-to-wear garments. Lowe followed in her footsteps, creating made-to-measure couture gowns, much like the B Michael confection that Davis majestically carried into The Met Gala.

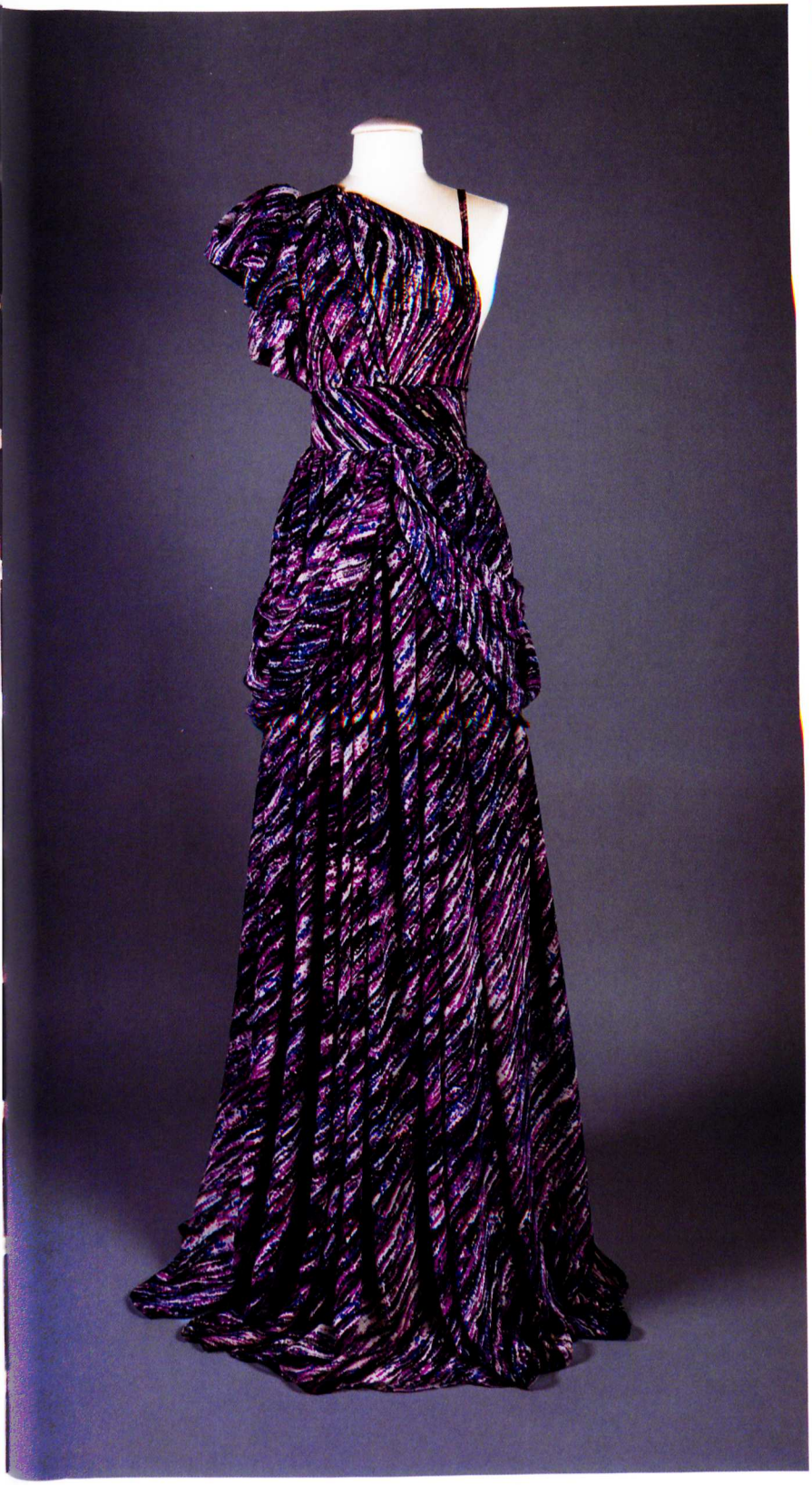
Ann Lowe was not the first Black American designer to achieve her level of prominence—Keckly, as First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln's dressmaker, received national press coverage during the 1860s.[4] Yet Lowe's impact—too often unrecognized—was greater than most. She drew on the legacy of Black dressmakers before her, those such as Keckly, but more directly her own grandmother and mother, Georgia Thompkins and Janie Cole, and she left an example for others to follow. As a Black woman born into a poor, rural community in the Jim Crow American South, Lowe did not have an easy life or career, but she was an ingenious designer who garnered respect and admiration from elites in an environment that, at best, undervalued and underestimated Black people and women. Her visibility, at times significant—a 1926 profile in a Tampa newspaper, a 1964 appearance on a national television show—has had an immeasurable effect on fashion designers who came after her, and for people of color who aspired to work in fashion, it was a game-changer. McGee, Barrie, Smith, Jaxon, and Kelly may or may not have known of Lowe, but her career—her attendance at a New York City fashion school, her relationships with suppliers and buyers, her prominent list of clients, and the press she received—all helped normalize the idea that a Black person could be a talented and important fashion designer. Every person she came in contact with personally, professionally, or through her coverage in the media became a little more accepting of that idea.

Margaret Powell's research has shown that Lowe contributed directly to the careers of other dressmakers and designers. She trained her own staff in Tampa, for example, empowering other women with lucrative dressmaking skills,

B Michael gown worn by Dawn Davis, publisher and editor-in-chief of *Bon Appétit* magazine, in 2021. It features the names of "unsung Black American designers" embroidered near the hem, including Ann Lowe.

and these women valued their association with Lowe. When Gussie Sheffield placed her 1928 advertisement in the *Tampa Morning Tribune*, she was sure to note that she was "for years associated with Annie Cone West."[5] What is also certainly true but harder to document are the people who read about Lowe in magazines and newspapers or saw her on TV and thought, "I could do that." Television has expanded significantly since Lowe appeared on *The Mike Douglas Show* and has further developed as a medium to expose designers to a public whose interest in and understanding of the profession of fashion design have also expanded. Bishme Cromartie (b. 1991) was introduced to an international audience through the popular fashion design competition show *Project Runway* in 2019. Although his work had been featured in international magazines and he had shown at New York and Los Angeles Fashion Weeks, the program gave him unprecedented exposure to those who would have never known where to find him or his work before. Separated from Lowe by generations, Cromartie grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, and though his urban upbringing contrasts with Lowe's rural childhood, they share the joy and sense of escape each found in design. Cromartie recalls of his home, "It wasn't the best neighborhood, but I think being in a rough environment forces you to develop a great imagination that allows you to escape the world that you're in."[6] Unlike Lowe, Cromartie is self-taught—hard to believe when looking at his draped watercolor-motif silk crepe gown in the collection of the Maryland Center for History and Culture. In terms of elongated proportions and chic asymmetry, the design recalls Lowe's rare 1930s gowns. Also, unlike Lowe, he is harnessing new media, namely social media, to connect directly with customers and to control the narrative of his own story in ways she could not.

B Michael (b. 1957) may be the American designer working today whose fashion practice most closely aligns with Ann Lowe's—he is also a couturier in a land of ready-to-wear designers. Lowe would have surely identified with his description of his position as a couturier: "timeless elegant style, excellence in fabric and workmanship. . . . I dress women with impeccable taste, and who have world class



OPPOSITE: Dawn Davis in a B Michael gown at the 2021 Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute Gala.

ABOVE LEFT: Bishme Cromartie gown. Courtesy of Maryland Center for History and Culture, 2019.11.1.

ABOVE RIGHT: Amsale Aberra beaded silk net wedding dress, 2015. Collection of The Museum at FIT, 2016.107.1.

options."[7] In addition to society ladies, his clients reflect the visibility of actors and musicians in contemporary society, including Cicely Tyson, Phylicia Rashad, Valerie Simpson, and Beyoncé, but he also dresses cultural influencers such as writer and producer Susan Fales-Hill and poet laureate Elizabeth Alexander. Fashion was not an inevitable career path for Michael as it seemed to be for Lowe—his parents were professionals in Connecticut, his mother a real estate agent and his father an accountant—and he attended the University of Connecticut and worked on Wall Street before turning to millinery and eventually couture and ready-to-wear fashion. Like Lowe, Michael attended fashion school—the Fashion Institute of Technology—and like her, he worked for other design firms, designing millinery for Oscar de la Renta and Louis Féraud before establishing his own millinery brand in 1989 and his couture collection B Michael America ten years later. While Lowe created fantasy gowns for debutante and costume balls, Michael designed for divas on screen, including hats for *Dynasty* and costumes for Whitney Houston.[8] Michael and Lowe may have found similarities in their fashion practices, but Michael had an asset that would have made all the difference for Lowe: a trusted and highly competent partner in business and life. Mark-Anthony Edwards co-founded B Michael America in 1999 and has steered the business for more than two decades, attracting investors and capital and expanding into ready-to-wear collections. Together, Michael and Edwards helm a fashion business that Lowe could have only dreamed of.

Both B Michael and Ann Lowe have created luxury fashion in a tradition well recognized in Western culture: beautiful fabrics such as ornate silks—velvet, cloqué, and brocade—and laces, and meticulous construction to create well-fit bodices and flowing skirts. These are elite fashions for rarified occasions. Some of the most exceptional gowns Lowe created were for brides, and she was well known early in her career for creating opulent wedding gowns. Her most famous gown is Jacqueline Kennedy's 1953 wedding dress, which is rich in ruffles, pleating, and flowers (see "Reproducing Jacqueline Kennedy's Wedding Dress," page 175). Other bridal gowns, such as Florance Rumbough's 1951 historically inspired satin and lace dress and Elizabeth Mance's 1968 floral lace and pintucked column with cathedral-length train, show Lowe's love of lavish detail. Yet, as fashion embraced simpler lines, Lowe adapted, as seen in Ann Bellah Copeland's 1964 elegantly simple gown (see photo, page 115, bottom left). Bridal designer Amsale Aberra (1954–2018) would have found affinity in Lowe's design for Copeland. Aberra found her way to bridal design from womenswear while planning her 1985 wedding. She craved minimalism—the opposite of the offerings for a 1980s bride—and designed her own dress. Like Lowe, Aberra was innovative within a narrow set of design parameters. She changed bridal design, "getting away from all the old traditions of lace, beads and everything that really wasn't modern anymore. She created the modern wedding dress."[9] Lowe may have preferred more ornate design, but would have surely appreciated the bridal couture salon Aberra opened on Madison Avenue in 1997, where Lowe herself once kept an atelier. Aberra, like Michael, has expanded on Lowe's couture legacy by building a sound business. All three relied on family, though Lowe's son Arthur tragically died young, denying her a partner she could trust. Aberra partnered with her husband Clarence O'Neill Brown, CEO of the successful Amsale Group. Aberra also died tragically, in 2018, yet she is one of the only Black designers who built a fashion house that has outlived her, a feat Lowe would have also surely admired.

B Michael and Amsale are fashion brands with obvious connections to Lowe's legacy, but a designer like Dapper Dan may be a surprising point of comparison to Ann Lowe's work. Both lived in Harlem in New York City, however, while Daniel Day (b. 1944), better known as Dapper Dan, and his fashion practice are deeply enmeshed in the Black neighborhood, Lowe worked on the Upper East Side, serving mainly white socialites. A client, the Black Harlem socialite Idella Kohke, however, proved that Lowe maintained a presence in her community and designed for her neighbors—the ones who could afford her services.[10] Dapper Dan diverges significantly from Lowe in that he is not a technical practitioner of garment production—he does not sew or pattern, though

Bevy Smith, TV personality and Sirius/XM Radio host, wearing Dapper Dan cape and Kimberly Goldson gown at the 2019 Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute Gala.

he is a highly skilled and self-taught textile printer. He got his start in fashion by selling luxury styles—furs and leathers—to his Harlem neighbors in the 1970s and 1980s. Like Lowe, who created "fairy princess" gowns to give confidence to nervous debs,[11] Day assessed what his clients needed and dressed them to boost their confidence and help them pro-ject their truest selves. These were not elite white women, but the hustlers, gangsters, and later rappers of Harlem and other Black urban centers. While Lowe is known for her dimensional flowers, Day is inextricably associated with the logo-covered streetwear designs he pioneered during the late 1980s. Lowe's work speaks in conversation with mid-century Parisian haute couture with its meticulous construction and overtly feminine silhouettes, fabrications, and embellishments. Day started a new conversation, taking European luxury logos—Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and MCM—and incorporating them into athletic, military-inspired, and classic menswear staples in new silhouettes that were changing the way both men and women dressed during the late twentieth century. Daniel Day's use of these logos was not strictly legal, and he was forced underground by raids from these brands' lawyers, yet for more than thirty years, his influence has been seen on fashion at every level, from couture runways to street corner clothing vendors. In 2017, Dapper Dan re-emerged. The fashion industry was forced to recognize his innovative influence on American and international fashion when Gucci was criticized on social media for copying his original designs. Dapper Dan partnered with Gucci on a series of collections that emphasized his undeniably cool and current streetwear.[12] These designs also showed Day's flexibility as a designer. The 2019 Met Gala was filled with celebrities wearing Day's designs in collaboration with Gucci, and the piece he created for his guest, fellow Harlemite and television personality Bevy Smith, shown on page 192, was not only stunning but a surprising departure from his usual style.[13] The full-length floral metallic cape with a medieval collar was paired with a delicate pink gown designed by Kimberly Goldson—a Brooklyn-based designer who, like Cromartie, gained international exposure through *Project Runway*. The ensemble is right at home with Ann Lowe gowns, but the feminine cape is not as divergent from Dapper Dan's styles as a first glance might suggest. Day's oeuvre is luxury, and as much as Lowe, he has always outfitted his clients to present the best version of themselves to fit the occasion.

Ann Lowe did not often discuss race in the press or the prejudice she faced as both a Black person and a woman, though it inevitably came up in her 1960s interviews, when the civil rights movement demanded national attention. At the beginning of her career, "dressmaker" was the common term for fashion makers, and these artisans were mostly women. However, few Black woman created high-end fashion at the level that her grandmother, mother, and she worked. By the end of her career, Lowe witnessed a transition that favored male designers for womenswear, as ready-to-wear became an industry and fashion design became recognized in America as a creative and artistic pursuit. When a callous journalist at the *Ladies' Home Journal* referred to Lowe as a "colored woman dressmaker" in 1961, she was deeply offended. She wrote to Jacqueline Kennedy, the subject of the article, that she preferred to be referred to as a "noted Negro designer."[14] The moniker may jar with twenty-first-century identifications with Blackness, but what is important to note is that Lowe had thought deeply about how she positioned herself in the fashion industry and the image she wanted to project. This is seen as clearly in the portraits that show her immaculate and chic dresses and hats. Tracy Reese (b. 1964) may be the most prominent and respected Black female designer working in American fashion at this time, and like Lowe, she has given thought to her position in the industry: "I consider myself a designer of women's sportswear and dresses. . . . I never say, oh I'm a Black designer or I'm a woman designer. I design for women, but I don't think I have to be identified as anything other than a clothing designer."[15] Reese's statement is telling of the progress that the design industry has undergone over six decades, though racial discrimination and sexism are far from absent.

White cutwork dress from the Hope for Flowers collection by Tracy Reese.

Reese, a native of Detroit and alumna of Parsons School of Design, was first exposed to fashion by her mother, but unlike Lowe, who joined the family business to help support their livelihoods, both Reese and her mother were home sewers who enjoyed the pleasure of fashion outside of the latter's professional career. Reese was surrounded by both creatives and entrepreneurs in her own family, setting an example she could latter draw on to form a fashion business. Like Lowe, and countless other fashion designers, Reese has experienced business ebbs and flows. Unlike Lowe, Reese has been savvy in her business practices, although she did learn through trial and error. After gaining experience by designing under other labels, Reese launched her own brand in 1987, supported by her family.[16] Although her sportswear label received accolades and orders from prominent department stores, the business did not have the capital to survive. The 1987 stock market crash was not as devastating as the 1929 crash that killed Lowe's first New York business, but it did claim Reese's first brand after two years.[17] Reese was able to learn from the incident. She grew her reputation as a designer of flattering, functional womenswear creating under other labels, and she relaunched in 1995.[18] After nearly twenty years, Reese is now a mainstay of American fashion, and like Lowe, her most famous client is a First Lady with a well-noted sense of style: Michelle Obama.

In terms of design, Tracy Reese creates for a very different woman than Ann Lowe did. Reese's ready-to-wear is designed not for once-in-a-lifetime events such as weddings or debutante balls but for modern women who fulfill multiple roles. Still, their design philosophies seem remarkably similar. Reese has studied the work of female designers, including couturiers like Lowe and Callot Soeurs as well as ready-to-wear designers like Claire McCardell, and she notes:

> I always felt that they ended up with a more useful product that took into account the wearer. This person had someplace to go and something to do and needed to look beautiful and be comfortable and be flattered by the

> clothing. . . . For me that's job one. Whoever is wearing my clothes should be flattered by them and look good in them and they should have a use for the pieces.[19]

Reese's work translates some of the dressmaker's details that she associates with Lowe's work into modern fashion. Appliqué and cutwork dresses in fit-and-flare silhouettes, for example, embody the same delicate femininity of Lowe's designs in versatile and modern pieces. Floral elements—a signature design element for Lowe—are also important to Reese, though in a very different way. Reese's "Hope for Flowers" collection focuses on sustainable materials and bringing production back to the United States, specifically, her hometown of Detroit.[20] Reese explains,

> I've always been drawn to flowers and to nature as a source of inspiration. When we see something growing and we see flowers in bloom, there's a spirit of optimism in that . . . all of those things are continually inspiring . . . but for Hope for Flowers I was really thinking beyond the obvious. . . . For me it's that flower or seed in each person that deserves to be nurtured and expressed. I wanted Hope for Flowers to stand for being a hub and an ecosystem here in Detroit where we are nurturing the creative talent in young people and grown-ups alike. It's more than just the thing itself, it's the greater meaning. It would definitely outlast the life of any flower.[21]

Lowe's legacy in contemporary fashion can be seen in countless ways. The designers explored here represent only a handful of those who have consciously or unconsciously built on Lowe's example, in ways both similar and completely divergent from Lowe. Through their design philosophies and business practices, American fashion culture is continuing to evolve and maintain its relevance in an international industry. As a new generation of designers emerges, they will implement even newer practices and adjust to contemporary realties. Anifa Mvuemba (b. 1990), for example, has created opportunities for herself outside of the traditional fashion gatekeepers. She is self-taught and established her brand in Maryland in 2011, away from the New York City hub. Mvuemba's label, Hanifa, drew international attention during the COVID-19 pandemic for her three-dimensional animated Instagram fashion show. In May 2020, when the world was locked down, Mvuemba accomplished what so many established brands were struggling to do—create a compelling and entertaining digital fashion presentation. The collection, Pink Label Congo, celebrated her family's roots in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. "She wanted to convey the beauty and hope of the Congolese spirit while shedding light on the African country's problems, including the use of child labor in local mines."[22] Harnessing digital technology and social media, Hanifa is a modern brand for fashion's future. Body inclusivity is baked into her design philosophy, as is social activism.

Ann Lowe acted as a bridge between a nineteenth-century dressmaking tradition and modern fashion in a twentieth-century context over her six-decade career, from the 1910s through the 1960s. The Amsale brand, Bishme Cromartie, Dapper Dan, B Michael, Anifa Mvuemba, and Tracy Reese are all carrying American fashion into the twenty-first century—each building on the past and innovating for the future, sometimes in ways that Lowe would have recognized and sometimes in ways she might never have imagined.

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