

Ann Lowe exhibit honors the American fashion designer high society often kept hidden

The Winterthur's new exhibit 'Ann Lowe: An American Couturier,' is a groundbreaking fashion exhibit honoring the designer who made Jacqueline Kennedy's wedding dress.



A wedding dress for Ann Bellah Copeland, 1964, (at right) and the reproduction of the wedding dress worn by Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy. Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

by [Elizabeth Wellington](#)

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Roses were Ann Lowe's signature flower. But their delicate petals don't quite represent the largesse of the early 20th century Black couturier responsible for the picturesque gown Jacqueline Bouvier wore the day she married Sen. John F. Kennedy.

Hence, Winterthur Museum's director of collections, Alexandra Deutsch, needed a more dynamic logo than a single rose for its retrospective on the designer, "[Ann Lowe: American Couturier](#)," running through Jan. 7, 2024.

Lowe's six-decade career spanned two world wars, the Great Migration, and the civil rights movement. The descendant of enslaved seamstresses, Lowe fashioned frothy debutante frocks and nuptial gowns for America's richest families including the Carnegies, the Rockefellers, and the du Ponts. She hand-painted giant, sparkling flowers on the aqua ballgown Oscar winner Olivia de Havilland wore to the 1946 Academy Awards, but she didn't get credit for the dress; New York-based design house Sonia Gowns did.



Image of Ann Lowe in entrance to exhibit, "Ann Lowe: American Couturier." soon to open at the Winterthur Museum. Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

It wasn't until Deutsch watched a [1964 episode of *The Mike Douglas Show*](#) during which Douglas and his cohorts referred to Lowe as "high society's best kept fashion secret" that Deutsch realized why the rose logo was all wrong.

"How many Black women have contributed to all kinds of accomplishments in our history, whether they were dressmakers, chefs, teachers, or mathematicians, treated as secrets, and never got the recognition they deserve," asked Deutsch, who is white. "This whole notion of being hidden. ... It just felt like we could do better and we should do better, so in that moment I decided the logo should be of Ann Lowe's face. Her essence shouldn't be hidden by a flower. I wanted to make her presence known."

Lowe is a looming presence: A sepia-toned image of the bespectacled haute couture dressmaker in her iconic wide-brimmed chapeau, sleeveless black sheath, and chic scarf coolly acknowledges all those who enter the 3,000-square-foot gallery. Life-size photos of Lowe fitting high society women and their debutante daughters adorn the walls of the dimly lit space designed to look and feel like a mid-20th century atelier.

“Ann Lowe” features 40 couture confections — including a stunning replica of Kennedy’s wedding dress — and is the largest exhibition of her work.



Jane Trimmingham’s 1941 wedding gown is flanked on the left by Tampa heiress Josephine Lee’s cotton organdy and lace afternoon dress circa 1930 and on the right by a golden silk day dress worn by Nora Francke Cammann. Read more [Alejandro A. Alvarez](#) / Staff Photographer

A family of dressmakers

A descendant of enslaved dressmakers, Lowe grew up in Clayton, Ala. She was born in either 1889 or 1898 — the earlier date was entered into the record, perhaps, according to research by the late fashion historian Margaret Powell, to cover up Lowe’s first preteen marriage. (Powell, the foremost researcher on Lowe’s life, died in 2019, before she was able to curate this show. It is dedicated to her memory.)

The Lowe family was known for their perfect-fitting gowns. Lowe's mother died in 1914, leaving four ballgowns for Alabama's then-first lady Elizabeth Kirkman-O'Neal unfinished. Lowe stepped in. Two years later, she landed a job as a live-in seamstress for Tampa heiress Josephine Lee, whose estate lent several gowns to the exhibit, including an organdy and lace afternoon dress.



Gasparilla court gown for Katherine Broaddus (from left), 1926, Ak-Sar-Ben countess gown worn by Ann Lallman Jessup, 1961, and veiled prophet gown for Susan Celeste Peterson, 1963, all from the exhibit "Ann Lowe: American Couturier." [Read more](#) Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

Lowe moved to New York in 1928 with the lofty goal of designing dresses for women on the Social Register, the directory of the most influential families in the Northeast. But during the Great Depression even the very rich couldn't afford her luxurious work. Those who could nickel-and-dimed Lowe to the point that she lost money on sales. "She had to constantly reinvent herself," said Elizabeth Way, associate curator for the Museum at FIT who curated "Ann Lowe." "But her drive helped her continue."

She had very few Black customers for fear of alienating white women who did not want their dressmaker to serve Black women. "Ann Lowe" does, however, feature prominent Southern African American heiress and pianist Elizabeth Mance's wedding gown and two of her bridesmaids' frocks.



Katya Roelse (left) a University of Delaware fashion and apparel studies professor, created the replica wedding dress worn by Jacqueline Kennedy. Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

The Kennedy replica

The exhibit preserves the grandiose garments Lowe painstakingly made. It is a testament to fashion conservation and the expertise it takes to mount historic garments. Winterthur borrowed many of the gowns from estates and a dozen museums. The Winterthur staff spent months tightening corsets, fixing small tears, replacing hard-to-match buttons, reinforcing seams, and adding sturdier zippers to make the pieces show-ready. The dresses are one-of-a-kind, so the mannequins had to be customized, too.

The Kennedy wedding gown is the exhibit's most storied piece. University of Delaware fashion instructor Katya Roelse led the production efforts, first acquiring permission from the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, where the too-fragile-to-be-displayed original resides. She spent hours analyzing fabric and sketches, and recreating Lowe's pattern. Roelse and three students spent upward of 200 hours fashioning the gown from 50 yards of silk taffeta, faille, gauze, and organza. After the exhibit closes, the gown will be donated to the JFK Library, further centering Lowe's place in America's high-fashion history.

Roelse describes the Kennedy wedding dress as a fashion masterpiece, a culmination of Lowe's signature dressmaking techniques like enormous rosette swags and the tiny, capped 30-15 sleeves, that, Roelse said, it took Lowe 30 hours and 15 minutes to create. The details in the dress, one of the most photographed in history, are even more amazing considering Lowe's Harlem studio was flooded one late summer night in 1953, the night before she was to ship the wedding gown and 12 bridesmaid dresses to Newport, R.I. The ceremony was just 10 days away.

"Instead of being a beautiful white, it was rust-colored where the rust streamed down on it," Lowe told Douglas in the 1964 interview. "Nine of the bridesmaids dresses were ruined. At first, I screamed and cried and I didn't know what to do. Then the only thing to do was to get to work."



Alexandra Deutsch, John L. and Marjorie P. McGraw director of collections at Winterthur. Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

Lowe delivered the dresses the morning of Sept. 12, just five hours before the wedding. She fitted the bride and her attendants, but she wasn't allowed to attend the wedding. In a 1961 Ladies' Home Journal article, Kennedy said her wedding gown was made by a "colored woman dressmaker" and "was not haute couture." Roelse begs to differ.

"The fact of the matter is Lowe was a haute couture designer," Roelse said. "And when designers are on deadline, come hell or high water, they are going to get it done."

A lasting legacy

Lowe should have the same fashion cachet as her mid-20th century ready-to-wear and specialty gown contemporaries Claire McCardell, Bonnie Cashin, Hattie Carnegie, and Norman Norell. Because she was Black, not only was Lowe not given credit for her designs, her contributions were ignored. She never complained, for fear of losing clients. She died nearly penniless in 1981. She was living at her sister's Queens home, nearly blind from complications of glaucoma.



Names of Black fashion designers in hem of dress worn by Dawn Davis at the 2021 Metropolitan Museum of Art Gala. Dress created by Black fashion designer B Michael. Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

Even today, structural racism continues to limit Black designers' access to the capital needed to keep their businesses afloat. Like Lowe, despite their extreme talent, many aren't household names after decades in the business. Way selected a dozen gowns from contemporary Black designers including B Michael, Tracy Reese, and Philly Fashion Week and *Project Runway All-Stars'* season 23 winner Bishme Cromartie to close "Ann Lowe."

My favorite: a gold gown Michael designed for the former editor of *Bon Appétit*, Dawn Davis, to wear to the 2019 Met Ball. He stitched names of Black designers into the hem — including Lowe and Elizabeth Keckley, Mary Todd Lincoln's dressmaker, a reminder that "We can't undo the history of racism, but we can celebrate and document Lowe's history and the work of other Black designers in a way that's lasting," Deutsch said.

“Ann Lowe: American Couturier” will run through Jan. 7, 2024. The Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library is located on Route 52, six miles northwest of Wilmington, Del., and five miles south of U.S. Route 1. Admission is \$25 for adults, \$23 for seniors and students, \$8 for children ages 3 to 12, and free for children under 3. For more information call 800-448-3883 or visit winterthur.org/annlowe