



#### DRESS CODES

CLOCKWISE FROM NEAR LEFT: Jacquelin and John F. Kennedy at their 1953 wedding; Ann Lallman Jessop at a ball in 1961; Olivia de Havilland (with Ray Milland) at the Academy Award in 1947; Ann Lowe (seated) with model Judith Guile in 1966.

moved to Florida in 1916, where she worked for prominent Tampa families until 1928, when she set up shop in New York and attracted the business of Posts, du Ponts, and Bouviers. (Years before her wedding, both Jacqueline and her sister, Lee, had worn Ann Lowe gowns as debutantes.) She also breached the Hollywood set, making the strapless tulle dress that Olivia de Havilland wore to accept her 1947 Oscar for *To Each His Own*.

So why, until recent years, was Lowe's name so little known? "Being a Black woman certainly didn't help," says Elizabeth Way, the exhibition's guest curator and an associate curator at FIT. (As late as 1961, four decades into Lowe's career, the *Ladies' Home Journal* still dismissed her as "a colored woman dressmaker, not the *haute couture*.") Nor did the culture of discretion around elite dressmakers and their clients. "Also, in the United States, we don't have a long memory for our designers," Way says. "How many people know who Hattie Carnegie is, or Claire McCardell?" Even at the height of Lowe's powers, European giants like Christian Dior far overshadowed her.

Now, however, her name and painstaking work are well established in the fashion firmament. Closely following "In America: An Anthology of Fashion" at The Metropolitan Museum of Art last year, which featured several Lowe designs, "American Couturier" draws on years of research by Margaret Powell, a former cataloger at Winterthur, and Way, who has assembled some 40 dresses created between 1924 and Lowe's retirement in 1972. Also on display are looks by contemporary Black designers, like Tracy Reese and B Michael, for whom Lowe helped chart a course. Maintaining that connective thread felt important to Alexandra Deutsch, the John L. and Marjorie P. McGraw director of collections at Winterthur.

"There are elements of Ann Lowe's story, and her challenges, that have not changed for designers of color," Deutsch says. "We're really celebrating a past so we can have conversations about the present." —MARLEY MARIUS



## Lowe and Behold

At the Winterthur Museum in Delaware, the long-undersung American designer Ann Lowe gets her biggest survey yet.

**T**he September 1953 wedding of Jacqueline Lee Bouvier to Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy was a huge to-do. In the *New York Times's* front-page report the following day, amid notes on the guest list (politicians from across the northeast; names like Vanderbilt and Gimbel) was a long description of Miss Bouvier's splendid silk taffeta wedding dress, "made with a fitted bodice embellished with interwoven bands of tucking, finished with a portrait neckline, and a bouffant skirt."

Left unidentified was the designer of that dress—and another 15 ensembles for the bridal party: Ann Lowe, who was nonetheless well-known within that rarefied milieu. "I'm an awful snob," Lowe (circa 1898–1981) told *Ebony* magazine in 1966. "I do not cater to Mary and Sue. I sew for the families of the Social Register."

"Ann Lowe: American Couturier," a new exhibition at the Winterthur Museum in Delaware, tells her remarkable story: After humble beginnings as the daughter and granddaughter of Black dressmakers in rural Alabama, Lowe