

A forgotten fashion designer for Jackie Kennedy gets her due



By [Rachel Tashjian](#)

September 9, 2023 at 6:00 a.m. EDT

Wedding dresses have a way of fixing themselves in the American mind. Carolyn Bessette’s dress for her wedding to John F. Kennedy Jr. cemented minimalism as the ultimate ’90s fashion statement, and even the cupcake frock worn by Princess Diana — perhaps the most American of British royals — made the world’s biggest democracy fall in love with a monarchical fairy tale.

But even within the fashion world, the story behind the dress Jacqueline Bouvier wore to wed John F. Kennedy in 1953 is strangely unknown. The designer of the dress — simple and feminine, with charming pinwheels of white silk — went uncredited at the time. In 1961, a reporter for the Ladies’ Home Journal profiling the first lady described her wedding gown in glowing detail, but referred to its maker as “a colored woman dress maker, not the haute couture.”

The dress — as well as Jacqueline Kennedy’s bridesmaids’ — was made by a Black designer, Ann Lowe. Born in rural Alabama in the late 19th century, she was taught the skills of dressmaking by her mother and grandmother. From the 1920s through the early 1960s, Lowe was the go-to designer for weddings and debutante balls for American blue bloods, including Marjorie Merriweather Post and actress Olivia de Havilland, as well as Kennedy and her mother and extended family.

Lowe’s work is striking for its exterior purity — clean lines and ingenious embellishments — and its internally complex construction. And for her biography, as a Black designer who was integral to the construction of America’s particular conception of glamour and power, before financial struggles and the loss of her eyesight saw her retire from fashion in the early 1970s. She died in 1981.

“She really had this very unique style,” said Elizabeth Way, an associate curator of costume design at New York’s Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology. “It was elegant. It was very feminine. It was really *her* style.”

Now, Lowe is the subject of a new exhibition at The Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library, that will put her name back into the firmament of American fashion and design history. Winterthur, a museum that focuses on American antiques located just outside Wilmington, Del., was uniquely poised to bring Lowe’s work back to life.

“Winterthur really has the conservation lab to handle all of the restoration work that had to be done on these dresses,” said Way, who was brought in as guest curator of the exhibition. Way and the museum’s curatorial team assembled the biggest-ever collection of Lowe’s work, from private collectors and descendants of the garments’ original owners as well as more than a dozen museums, and will return them to their owners and institutions with state-of-the-art repairs that make them available again for display.

Fashion exhibitions are unique in their ability to shift public perceptions, perhaps because they so naturally ask a visitor to imagine themselves in the objects on display. Winterthur's director and CEO Chris Strand, said that this was the museum's fifth such show, including one on the costumes of "Downton Abbey" in 2014 and another on the clothes of "The Crown," and that they often rank among the institution's most-attended. But Strand said this show is probably their most ambitious fashion effort, putting the museum and its curatorial team on the map for its scholarship and preservation methods, including the development of a dress form that makes displaying delicate garments much safer.

It is also, as Strand put it, an example of the museum "using objects to tell stories" — specifically, a declarative story about the meaning of American fashion, which to this day remains a slippery concept mired in the cheap desires of fast fashion and a sense that our creativity always seems to live in Europe's shadow.

But this was not always the case, and it is stunning that a designer like Lowe was overlooked given how central she was to constructing American fashion ideas. Today, fashion houses are under pressure to pay more attention to Black designers, stylists and celebrities, and to speak more directly to Black consumers.

Both consumers and fashion houses readily admit that not enough progress has been made. Decades before this conversation began, the very aesthetics of American prestige were the work of a Black designer's vision. In other words, the history of overlooking fashion talent that is outside the stereotype of the White male loner auteur is even heavier than we might believe.

Lowe was well aware of her talent. She "knew what the public wanted fashion designers to look like," Way said. "And she spoke to that with her aesthetics."

She made her own clothes — sadly, none are included in the exhibition — and paired them with elegant hats. Many photographs of Lowe show her, in her suit and hat, carefully pinning a dress on a client, echoing similar portraits of Coco Chanel and Christian Dior. She also covered the couture shows in Paris during the artform's golden age, the 1940s, for the Black newspaper the New York Age. She was well-versed in the style that would reemerge during that period as Dior's wasp-waisted "New Look," putting her clothes in fluid conversation with the output of Paris.

Way insists that Lowe should be considered on the level of a couturier. It's rare that Americans warrant such a distinction, which indicates a specialized form of dressmaking done primarily by hand, with rare materials. In fact, it was another Black designer, the Mississippi-born Patrick Kelly, who was the first American and first Black designer to be admitted into the Chambre Syndicale that protects the status of couture like the Comité Interprofessionnel du vin de Champagne protects champagne. Charles James, who made extraordinarily strange garments for a similar clientele to Lowe's during the mid-20th century, might also come to mind, and of course Oscar de la Renta, who designed for myriad first ladies and worked for a time as the creative director of Paris couture house Balmain.

What is ultimately fascinating about Lowe's designs — in addition to the story of the woman behind them — is their very Americanness. They are glamorous, to be sure, but they share a triumphant sense of pragmatism, even in their embellishments. Vines of flowers twine over shoulders and across bodices with a naturalistic grace; pale peach ostrich feathers are manipulated into delicate wisps cinched with small grosgrain bows.

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Even the way she applied sequins, in careful and crisp patterns, speaks to the intelligence of her taste. One of the most interesting dresses in the show is a more casual one — a red floral dress, the back of which is open with a line of individually cut out red flowers from the print carefully strung together. Her instinct to use the decorative as constructive is fantastically original.

Also on display is a copy of Kennedy's wedding dress, which was painstakingly re-created by a University of Delaware professor, Katya Roelse, and three students. (The dress will be donated to the John F. Kennedy Library after the exhibition closes on Jan. 7.) A video shows how the dress was constructed, a process that helped reveal Lowe's unusual level of skill.

For Way, Lowe's ability to build her dresses was her most remarkable talent. "She builds her dress in layers from the inside out," she said. "We're able to identify unlabeled Ann Lowe's because of the very specific way she built her bodices, [which are] very highly structured in the way she places her waist, tapes, the boning, the elastics. Her clients would say that you don't need any undergarments — you step in, it fits perfectly."

Way hopes the show will help put Lowe in her proper place in the American design landscape. "When we think about the history of American design, I want her to be a big name that people mention. I also want people to understand that even though the story of American fashion is ready-to-wear, we do have this beautiful couture tradition that was rivaling what was happening in Paris," she said. "She inspired untold amounts of people in the fashion choices they made."