

Ann Lowe: America's Overlooked Fashion Icon Finally Found

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Abstract: *Ann Lowe was an African American fashion designer who landed jobs with some of the biggest names of the time. This essay calls for greater recognition of Lowe's work while exploring the challenges she faced on her path to becoming one of the finest designers of the era.*

We have all heard of Coco Chanel, Jeanne Lanvin, Elsa Schiaparelli, designers whomade their mark and acquired fame in the 1900s by scoring jobs with elite members of society. But rarely do we hear Ann Lowe's name, despite her creation of elegant dresses for some of the biggest names in history. Unlike the three white designers listed above, Lowe was African American, and she was not presented the same opportunities or recognition for her work. Lowe worked diligently on each individual dress, perfecting and making her designs one of a kind. Lowe's painstaking hard work and dedication landed her jobs with some of the most well esteemed Americans of the time period. Even though Lowe designed and created Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis' wedding dress as well as attire for numerous bridal parties and other significant events over the course of her career, she is not well remembered in fashion today.

Lowe overcame many racial obstacles to achieve professional success. She was determined to receive a respectable education in spite of being forced into a segregated classroom. She also stood her ground when working with the upper echelon of society in her professional career. Since the majority of her clients were part of the social register, they often took advantage of her and ultimately left her thousands of dollars in debt, which is a central reason for why she is not well recognized today. Fame and monetary gain were not her primary motives for working in the fashion industry, but instead it was her passion for design that sustained her throughout her working years during a time period filled with prejudice. Ann Lowe's career

includes stunning highs—designing dresses for celebrities and well-known companies—and discouraging lows—culminating with her drowning in debt. Her story bears witness to the racial barriers of twentieth-century America, but also to her own creativity and entrepreneurship that allowed her to design for America’s elite.

History of the Fashion Industry

To understand Lowe’s achievement, it is important to first understand the origins of the fashion industry, and how it specifically impacted Lowe’s career. According to urban and regional researcher Rik Wenting, the creation of fancy and expensive garments otherwise known as “haute couture” began in the late 1850s when people involved in the industry began “incorporating creativity and technical excellence into the clothing design process” (2). Charles Frederick Worth had a large impact on the evolution of fashion, coining the term “couturier” as well as creating a system for designer and consumer interactions. Worth heightened the prestige of the designer, with the majority of his customers respecting him enough to travel to his house for business instead of the past cultural trend for designers of assisting clients in their own homes.

The fashion industry pervasively spread in Europe, with well-respected designers teaching and employing young apprentices, building on their own skills while educating others to potentially start their own brands in the future. Wenting highlights how early work experience under a well-known designer often led to heightened success in a designers’ own career. These general ideas relate to Lowe specifically because of the education she gained from working for her mother. She also eventually taught specific design methodologies and attentiveness to detail to others in the industry so they too could be successful with a career in fashion (Wenting 3).

Ann Lowe’s Early Years

Aside from the more initial context of the fashion industry, it is also necessary to grasp an understanding for how Lowe initially became involved in the industry and ultimately obtained

jobs with some of the most well-respected members of society. As Rosemary E. Reed Miller explains, Lowe was born in 1898 into a family of individuals involved in the textile industry. Her grandmother lived as a former slave and seamstress and her mother Jane's career centered around sewing for the prosperous women in their small Alabama town. From a young age, Lowe began her craft by getting her hands on loose fabric and helping her mother with dresses. After her mother abruptly passed, Lowe devoted her time to finishing four dresses from her mother's last order as both a way to cope with her loss and polish her skills (Miller 55).

People instantaneously noticed Lowe for her talents, including a woman from Florida named Josephine Edwards Lee who eventually befriended Lowe. In an interview I conducted with Elizabeth Barron, great-granddaughter of Lee, Barron shared her connection to Lowe's career. While shopping in an Alabama department store, Lee asked who designed the store's dresses because the intricate work was unlike anything she had seen back in Tampa. Lowe humbly credited herself for the masterpieces. Impressed with her detailed work, Lee asked Lowe to come home with her to Thonotosassa because she had twin daughters who were getting married in a double wedding ceremony and wanted Lowe to create luxurious dresses for that affair. Putting her career first and taking a leap of faith, Lowe left her husband and her job at the department store in Alabama to work for Lee in Florida. Throughout Lowe's stay in Tampa, she lived in the Lee's servant quarter; however due to their close relationship, she was treated like family. In addition to the Lee family wedding helping Lowe's early career, a close friendship developed. The Lees were always willing to assist Lowe in ways to further her profession. Despite just starting her career, Lowe's encounter with Josephine Edwards Lee offered Lowe hope and helped launch her work in the fashion industry, where she became one of the first African American fashion designers.

Ann Lowe as a Professional Designer

Due to her intense devotion to her profession, Lowe landed numerous jobs despite the common trend of racial discrimina-

tion and disrespect of African Americans who worked for the upper white class during this time period. She drove herself to be the best, seeking wide-ranging opportunities to fine-tune her tailoring skills. According to Barron, Lee supported Lowe's dream to receive a formal education at a design school by financing her schooling in New York. Upon arriving, it quickly became evident that Lowe's skin color would affect her experience. Her teacher, bothered by the admission of an African American, hesitantly allowed Lowe to continue her education, although she was segregated from her white cohort. She proved so talented that her white peers were often called in to look and learn from her work. Then, after only half a year, Lowe was eligible for graduation. Her teacher commented, "There is no more we can teach you" (Congdon 76).

Lowe worked assiduously in New York in the years following her formal education, allowing her to further her career by applying the methods she learned to craft her dresses. Barron notes that her most commonly used technique, trapunto, was used to add texture to gowns. Lowe also attached countless quilted flowers to each dress, a signature way to tell her style apart from other designers. When she added beading and sequins to her gowns, she would place each bead one by one in a very time consuming process. The effort Lowe put into a single dress, as well as her vow to make each piece an original, made her quite marketable to upper-class Americans who desired elaborate and unique gowns (Barron). Historian and author Canter Brown loosely examines the trends of the Victorian era and identifies the time period's relations to the Tampa Bay Hotel. As depicted in his pamphlet "A Late Victorian Romp; Or, The World as Seen From The Tampa Bay Hotel's Veranda, 1891-1901," Brown explains that using an abundance of fabric to craft apparel worn throughout the Victorian Era was a trend that followed years of pre-established culture (4). Lowe followed this trend when fashioning her dresses without concern for the amount of material she needed or more importantly, the money it cost. Lowe never aspired to become rich or famous but instead wanted solely to produce the most elaborate dresses for society's elite; as Lowe put it, "Not counting the

dollars going into a dress but just the beauty that came out of it” (Congdon 76). Lowe’s passion for design and her willingness to construct ornate dresses was reflected in each labored piece. Her near-perfect dresses suited the prosperous customers who wore them. Ultimately though, her lack of concern for money or moderation of materials led Lowe into a lifelong battle with debt.

Lowe’s precision and attention to detail were some of the most valuable attributes in her career, securing her jobs with numerous celebrities. Lowe spent days perfecting a dress and thoughtfully adding extra details until she was satisfied with a gown’s overall appearance. *Ebony Magazine* quotes Lowe, articulating her devotion to sewing and earnest desire that if possible, she wanted to do all the handiwork on her own (Major 138). This obsession encouraged Lowe to work tirelessly and refine each individual piece to ensure it was acceptable to wear by the high-class individuals for whom she sewed. Although Lowe had a successful start to her career, she was excessively concerned with her dresses’ designs and who was worthy of wearing her beautiful gowns. After obtaining a number of jobs with members of the American elite, Lowe grew captious about whom she fitted. As written in journalist Gerri Major’s piece, “[Lowe] describes herself as ‘an awful snob’”: “I am not interested in sewing for cafe society or social climbers. I do not cater to Mary and Sue. I sew for the families of the social register” (137). After creating a steady career for herself, Lowe became finicky about who deserved her time. Although she created attire for African American events, she preferred to sew for the most eminent celebrities.

One problematic aspect of Lowe’s specialization in dresses for the American elite was their tendency to take advantage of her pricing. In his newspaper article for the *Saturday Evening Post*, American book editor Thomas Congdon examines Lowe’s battles with debt and stresses that Lowe was highly concerned with the outward appearance of her dresses rather than the amount they cost. Wealthy individuals frequently took advantage of her extraordinary talents which largely contributed to her money problems. Congdon includes references to Lowe’s

customers that demonstrate them taking advantage of Lowe's elaborate construction: "'Miss Lowe's dresses are so expensive,' says one customer, a woman with a fortune of many millions, 'but she has always made special rates for me.' 'She must have lost money on my wedding'" (75). Lowe's affluent customers knew the amount of time and effort that went into each one-of-a-kind dress and still attempted to bargain for each piece.

Although Lowe's celebrity clients helped gain a number of connections and prosperous jobs, their negotiation skills led Lowe to a lifetime battle with debt. She always struggled to make a profit in spite of the fact that she knew how to manage money. A personal letter written by Lowe herself illustrated her business knowledge but more pressingly suggests that the hardships she faced can be traced back to her finicky clients: "I know how to make money for others to spend because I had had management. But knowing all the Top Society people in New York has not been like knowing the Lee's and others in Tampa. I have always felt you were sincere" (Letter to Rosemary Johnston 1). At the start of her career, Lowe had a fondness for the people in Tampa because of their authenticity. However, other customers Lowe worked for did not share the same genuine demeanor and took advantage of her, placing Lowe in dire need of money.

Lowe's Work Overlooked

Lowe's top jobs and elite clientele prompt the question why she never received widespread recognition. Even at the end of her time studying in New York, Lowe's white classmates were coming to her for help because of her natural talent. Barron argues that Lowe's career would have never taken off beyond the local level in Alabama had Lowe not gone to Tampa to work for Barron's great grandmother in the early years of her working life (Barron). Indeed, jumpstarting her career with the Lee family led to working with top tier members of society, such as designing former first lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis' wedding dress, which is arguably her most well-known gown. However, articles published about the dress allegedly describe Mrs. Kennedy referring to Lowe as a nameless black designer. Undeterred by Kennedy's distinguished stature, Lowe stood up for

herself and combatted the disrespect she was shown, saying, "My reason for writing this note is to tell you the hurt I feel as a result of an article. ... You know I have never sought publicity but I would prefer to be referred to as a 'noted negro designer'" (qtd. in Powell, "Ann Lowe" 2). Lowe never sought fame but stood up for the respect she deserved.

Regardless for whom she was working, Lowe was not afraid to confront her clients when she believed they were being unjust. Although the story of Kennedy's impudent comment about Ann Lowe proved to be a misunderstanding, Lowe's letter illustrates her overt motives as well as the courage it took for her to combat the degrading treatment from her customers. The book *Threads of Time: The Fabric of History* describes another particular instance when Lowe stood her ground. Rosemary Miller, a nineteenth and twentieth century historian whose research centers around African American dressmakers, shares the stories of African American designers from 1850 to 2002 and tells of Lowe delivering dresses for the Hyannisport wedding. Upon arrival, the butler instructed Lowe to go to the back door which was designated for African Americans. Appalled, Lowe retorted, "If I have to enter this by the back door, the bride and bridesmaid would not be dressed for the wedding" (59). Lowe faced common bigotry when working, demonstrating that her white privileged clients rarely gave Lowe the respect she deserved. Lowe specialized in creating attire for society's highly acclaimed celebrities and courageously challenged racial disrespect by confronting the American elite when warranted.

Lowe's skillset and customer pool suggested she could have obtained fame, but in the end, she struggled primarily because of her skin color. Gender and race historian Malia McAndrew identifies different professions of African Americans in her piece, "A Twentieth-Century Triangle Trade: Selling Black Beauty at Home and Abroad." Her article accentuates the common careers of African Americans during the years 1945 to 1965. McAndrew begins her argument by presenting more generally how African Americans obtained their careers and suggests that Lowe may have become better known if she expanded her networks overseas. McAndrew supports her theory

by offering Arthur Dages' similar point of view. Dages, one of Lowe's known associates, proposes that Lowe's skin color and work rooted in America are two central reasons for why she never acquired recognizable success (789). Had Lowe been born white or based her business in Europe, it is much more probable the name Ann Lowe would be more widely remembered today alongside other renowned designers. McAndrew's view allows readers to consider Lowe's work as worthy of higher value than she was ever given.

Textile and fashion historian Margaret Powell provides a similar view to McAndrews, arguing that Lowe's race held her back from becoming the highly acclaimed celebrity she should be. Powell thoroughly analyzes Lowe's career in her dissertation and claims that for the number of well-known people she dressed, Lowe was never given the proper recognition she truly deserved: "Rich women pass her name among themselves," the *Post* stated, "some have even cheated her. But few outsiders have heard of Ann Lowe, the only Negro to become a leading American dress designer" ("The Life and Work" ix). Working for names as famous as the Roosevelts and the Duponts, Lowe's name should have resonated throughout the course of history, especially since she was one of the leading African American designers to work for such highly respected people; however, her working relationship with America's elite did not firmly cement her legacy.

Posthumous Recognition

Though most perspectives describe Lowe as an unknown entity, the city of Tampa has embraced her legacy. *Tampa Bay Tribune* staff writer Betty Phipps explores a contradicting view to the pervasive idea of Lowe being a hidden treasure. Phipps complicates this perception in her article "Ann Cone Lowe: A Tampa Legacy Is Honored in New York," by providing evidence to support the notion that Lowe was recognized for her accomplishments and would be remembered internationally. Although recognizing that most individuals may not be aware of Lowe's wide-ranging accomplishments, after analyzing the success of her career, Phipps argues Lowe has made a powerful

impact on the fashion industry and has been recognized for her lifelong achievements. She claims Lowe's legacy will continue to live on through her great-granddaughter, Linda Hassell, who, at the article's publication in 1976, planned on attending fashion school and becoming a designer like her grandmother. One of the shortcomings of Phipps' argument is that she over-analyzed Lowe's success in the United States but almost completely disregarded her success abroad. Although she mentions Lowe designing a dress for a fiancée of the governor of Bermuda, Phipps discounts this information by mentioning it only briefly and instead, focuses the majority of her piece on Lowe's national success. Lowe's talent outweighed many other designers of the time period, but ultimately, her race put an enormous damper on her career.

Considering Lowe was an African American living through a very racially segregated time in American history, she was naturally forced to overcome numerous injustices. Despite attaining jobs with some of the most elite members of society, Lowe was unable to attend the bulk of events for which she was designing. When dealing with various prejudices and hardships throughout her career, *Ebony Magazine* portrays Lowe as always maintaining a positive attitude (138). However, it is evident that bigotry took a toll on her. Miller explains that Lowe's time away at design school was full of inescapable racial segregation, thus being a hard and isolated few months (56). Nevertheless, Lowe repressed her desolate feelings because she knew this was a rare opportunity that would ultimately promote a lifelong career.

Lowe tried not to let discrimination impede her success, but sometimes it was difficult. She continued to prosper in her studies and eventually helped other students. Lowe recognized this when she said, "You know, I've made these dresses all these years for all these ceremonies and I have never been able to attend" (Barron). Historian Rosanna Ensley's article "Peerless Pageant: The First Ten Years of Tampa's Gasparilla Festival," describes the opening decade of Gasparilla in the 1900s and demonstrates how previous Florida history helped shape this annual tradition. Ensley points out the inequalities in the treatment of African Americans during the early years of the festival:

“With 750 members at the time, Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla was considered the most prestigious and secretive of Tampa’s clubs. When faced with the demand to admit twenty-five black members, the Krewe withdrew their sponsorship of the parade rather than comply” (20-21). Racial inequalities continued to present a pressing issue in Tampa throughout the early to mid 1900s. One of Barron’s great-grandmother’s sons, Walthugh Lee, helped found Gasparilla and was deemed Gasparilla King in 1921. Lee’s daughter, Nell Keene, was Gasparilla Queen in 1926. Lowe’s connection to the Lee family presented an opportunity to create dresses for many highly regarded individuals for the festival’s Gala. After Lowe’s remark about her exclusion, Nell invited her to attend the Gasparilla Ball and Lowe obliged. However, the whole evening Barron recalls, Nell was given a very hard time for bringing an African American to a predominantly white event. In the eyes of the attendees, Lowe’s inferior race trumped her prestige in designing the exquisite dresses for the ceremony.

A Lesson in Race, Class, and Fashion

People equate success with fame and fortune, yet it can be argued that Ann Lowe was successful in the fashion industry even though she was not well recognized for years and never acquired great wealth. Lowe’s determination helped her overcome racial barriers to achieve a significant level of success, yet because of those racial barriers, her success was ultimately discounted by society. Though Lowe’s legacy is not remembered as a couture fashion brand or a department store in New York City, London, or Milan, she was still able to break into the fashion industry and reflect the notion that hard work and determination have the potential to supersede social status or race when attempting to obtain a job. Until recently, Lowe’s work, such as the Kennedy bridal gown, was recognized, but not her name. Today however, many of her dresses are showcased in the Smithsonian’s collection at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (Black Fashion Museum). In 2017, the children’s book *Fancy Party Gowns: The Story of Fashion Designer Ann Cole Lowe* was published, to share her success

with younger readers. These two examples indicate a shift in her reputation, finally offering her the recognition that was long overdue. Lowe proved to the world that race need not define a person, but instead, it can encourage a person to push beyond the restrictions of society. Lowe's focused mindset and passion for her career allowed her to stand up for herself and seek opportunities to pursue the craft she loved. Today, the fashion industry has grown exponentially with more African Americans achieving fame than ever before. During a 1965 appearance on the Mike Douglas Show, Lowe explained that the driving force behind her work was not a quest for fame or fortune but a desire "to prove that a Negro can become a major dress designer" (Powell). Lowe's career clearly and abundantly proves that she succeeded.

The Dresses of Ann Lowe



Figure 1: According to museum curator Susan Carter, the 1924 dress was worn by Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla Queen XVI Sara Lykes Keller for a Gasparilla event. Her coronation picture shows her in a different dress.

ROYAL ROAD



Figure 2: According to museum curator, Susan Carter the 1926 dress is the coronation gown worn by Queen Katherine Broaddus (Mrs. Archibald Livingston Jr.) for Gasparilla XVIII.



Figure 3: According to museum curator Susan Carter, the 1957 Jewel Circle Gown was owned and worn by Rebecca Davis Smith for a special out of town event for Gasparilla.

Note: This essay was composed in Dr. Ashley Palmer's AWR 201 class.

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