



## Ann Lowe and the Intriguing Couture Tradition of Ak-Sar-Ben

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Article Summary: Following their tradition of hiring top New York designers for their coronation ball gowns, in 1961 Ak-Sar-Ben leaders turned to Ann Lowe, the first African American designer to establish a couture salon on Madison Avenue. Though it's difficult to imagine a designer of Lowe's caliber remaining virtually unknown, that is exactly what happened. Fortunately, her association with Ak-Sar-Ben provides "a treasure chest of information about the work of this mysterious fashion personality."

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Photographs / Images: Ann Lowe with model Judith Palmer; Connie O'Neil wearing Ak-Sar-Ben queen's gown 1961 (2 views); princess gown 1961 (2 views); princesses and countesses; gown with detailed embellishments



# ANN LOWE

## and the Intriguing Couture Tradition of Ak-Sar-Ben

BY MARGARET POWELL



During the 1960s, one of the most respected couture designers on the New York fashion scene was also one of its least known. Ann Lowe was the first African American designer to establish a couture salon on Madison Avenue. Her fairytale-like gowns appeared in *Vogue* and *Town and Country* magazines and at the Academy Awards in 1947, when Olivia de Havilland accepted the award for Best Actress in one of Lowe's hand-painted floral designs.<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Bouvier and her bridal party also wore Ann Lowe's gowns when she married John F. Kennedy in 1953. It would be difficult to imagine a designer of this caliber remaining

virtually unknown, but in the case of Ann Lowe, that is exactly what happened.

*The Saturday Evening Post* named Ann Lowe "Society's Best-Kept Secret" in 1964 as a result of her extraordinary talent and limited public profile. Very little has been written about her since that time and outside of this early connection to Jacqueline Kennedy, most of her creations have been overlooked. There are some fortunate exceptions. Examples of Ann Lowe's work are tucked away in the permanent collections of some of the country's finest museums, although the fragile nature of textiles has limited their display.<sup>2</sup>

**Above: Ann Lowe, age sixty-seven, with London model Judith Palmer, wearing a Lowe theater gown and coat of Italian Mecado silk, with black lace re-embroidered in black soutache. *Ebony*, December 1966**

The queen gown was designed to be a sensation with “literally hundreds of yards of white French net most of it finer than the sheerest chiffon.” Courtesy of Connie O’Neil



Ann Lowe’s history is unusual for a fashion designer. She was born in the rural town of Clayton, Alabama, in the late 1890s. She learned to sew alongside her mother and grandmother, Janey Lowe and Georgia Cole. Her grandmother was a seamstress during slavery and in that role, Georgia created fine gowns for the mistress of the Tompkins plantation. After Georgia’s husband, a freedman and carpenter named General Cole, purchased Georgia’s freedom around 1860, Georgia used her dressmaking skills to build a business. Her clients included white women from elite families throughout Montgomery and all of the women in the Cole family learned to sew and contribute their work to the shop.<sup>3</sup>

In 1916, Ann Lowe moved to Tampa, Florida, and established a dressmaker’s business of her own. The citrus and cigar industries, as well as an expansion of the railroad, created wealth for a number of Tampa’s residents. Lowe used her family’s Alabama shop as a model for her own and set herself up to exclusively serve Tampa’s elite upper class. The twelve years she spent in Tampa helped the young designer refine her skills and prepare for the move that had always been her dream: New York City. “I just knew that if I could come to New York and make dresses for society people,” she explained, “my dreams would be fulfilled.”<sup>4</sup> She arrived in Manhattan in the winter of 1928 and

set up a small shop that failed within a year, most likely in response to the crash of the stock market and the beginning of the Great Depression.<sup>5</sup> Lowe spent the years between the Depression and World War II moving from shop to shop as a finisher and designer for established dress salons like Hattie Carnegie. She would eventually reopen her own salon, specializing in wedding and debut gowns for clients who were regular customers of fashion houses in Paris. By the early 1950s, her clients included Jacqueline Bouvier, Marjorie Merriweather Post, and a number of women from the top of New York society. “I love my clothes and I’m particular about who wears them,” Lowe explained. “I am not interested in sewing for café society or social climbers. I do not cater to Mary or Sue. I sew for the families of the social register.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1961, Lowe was working as a featured designer in the couture Adam Room boutique at Saks Fifth Avenue. This position made her a perfect candidate for one of the most sought-after dress commissions in Omaha: The Ak-Sar-Ben Coronation Ball.

When the Ak-Sar-Ben women’s ball committee members began their search for the designer of their 1961 gowns, they were continuing a sixty-year tradition of bringing the work of a respected couture designer to Omaha. This tradition can be traced to the earliest coronation of 1895, when

Ak-Sar-Ben was created as an example of family friendly entertainment to take place alongside that year's Nebraska State Fair. The multiple-day celebration included a parade, a ball, and a coronation of the festival's king and queen that became an elaborate sensation in its own right. Despite its extravagant appearance, Ak-Sar-Ben was not a beauty pageant or a debutante ball, but a celebration of Nebraska's prosperous agricultural industry.<sup>7</sup>

The Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben was a civic organization founded by a group of local businessmen who shared a commitment to "build a more prosperous heartland" through their work.<sup>8</sup> The young members of the Ak-Sar-Ben court were selected for their roles in appreciation of the civic and business contributions of their fathers.<sup>9</sup> In 1961, the queen's father, Benjamin Cowdery, was the publisher of the *Omaha World-Herald*. Her court was selected from the college-aged daughters of the Ak-Sar-Ben members who had the greatest hand in shaping Nebraska's agricultural landscape that year.

According to the *World-Herald*, the premier coronation of 1895 was created to be "the most beautiful feature of the fete" with a "display of gowns and jewels greater than has ever been seen here before."<sup>10</sup> The coronation participants, members of the new Knights of Ak-Sar-Ben organization and their families, were dressed in couture costumes from Paris. These costumes, which were originally a part of that year's Mardi Gras festivities in Louisiana, were said to be "beautiful beyond description" and cost \$7,000.<sup>11</sup>

"Beautiful beyond description" could have been a description of every Ak-Sar-Ben coronation. Each year, the leading department stores of Omaha selected one of the famous fashion houses in Rome, Paris, London, Beverly Hills, or New York City to dress the young ladies of the court. In 1932, four top French designers shared the honor, each creating one of the four designs for the twenty-six ladies in waiting. Mainbocher and Augusta Bernard each designed a countess gown while the Houses of Vionett and Lanvin each designed a gown for the princesses. Although the *World-Herald* declined to name the designer of the queen's gown that year, their fashion writer described each dress down to the smallest ruffle or rhinestone and proudly announced that all of the gowns were "Paris inspired, but Omaha made."<sup>12</sup>

In 1938, *Life* magazine sent prized photographer Margaret Bourke-White to cover Ak-Sar-Ben. *Life* called it the "prime event of the corn belt's social season" and captured the elaborate proceedings of the court including the queen's grand entrance



in her sparkling \$500 Hattie Carnegie gown. Ak-Sar-Ben was also covered by *Look* magazine in 1952.<sup>13</sup> Those examples of national press exposure are an interesting note, but it is the impact of the *World-Herald's* coverage that is of historical significance. Their fashion writers built a robust archive for costume historians. Rare examples of the work of Norman Hartnell, who worked as Queen Elizabeth II's official couturier, and other designers at the height of their popularity like Oscar de La Renta, Hattie Carnegie, or Geoffrey Beene, are available in a surprising location: the pages of Omaha's largest newspaper. Indeed, their coverage represented the most detailed and extensive publicity that Lowe would ever receive for her work.

"If the gowns worn by the 1961 Ak-Sar-Ben countesses and princesses put the audience in the mind of an Eastern debutante cotillion," the *World-Herald* proclaimed, "it's understandable. Ann Lowe

**Connie O'Neil remembers that her queen gown had to be modified after the coronation so it could be worn at the ball the next evening. Even with a portion of the underskirts removed, her escort "had to jump if I turned in the dance so he wouldn't step on it."** Courtesy of Connie O'Neil



**The princess and countess gowns were less extravagant than the queen gown, but still remarkable with full hoop skirts and modest trains.**

Courtesy of Phyllis Dahlke

of New York City, court couturier is no newcomer to custom designing for debutantes and their social register mothers. Lowe originals were worn by Jacqueline Kennedy at her debut and wedding.”<sup>14</sup>

The Ann Lowe Ak-Sar-Ben gowns provide a unique opportunity to learn about this notable designer’s work from a number of women who wore them. These were college girls in their early

twenties, when they were whisked into the world of the Ak-Sar-Ben court and they appreciated every moment. A countess recalled that “to have the opportunity to wear such a beautiful, elegant and marvelous gown was truly icing on the cake of life at twenty. I delighted in my gown. The style was so elegant. I’ve always referred to it as my Cinderella gown.”<sup>15</sup>

A number of these “Cinderella” gowns have survived, and a number of court members from that year have been eager to talk about them. Some kept their gowns permanently, others donated them to a variety of organizations and a few are in the collection of the Durham Museum in Omaha. The thirty-three gowns created for the court are the largest known order of custom ball gowns designed by Ann Lowe. To a costume historian, Ak-Sar-Ben is a treasure chest of information about the work of this mysterious fashion personality.

Ak-Sar-Ben was a little mysterious for the designers who were commissioned to dress its court. Bold and dramatic dresses were needed to make the countesses and princesses stand out to the 10,000-member audience amongst the grand surroundings of a huge hall named the Coliseum. Sometimes a court couturier needed a bit of guidance to deliver gowns with the right sense of scale and tone. “How can a famous high fashion couturier design gowns for the Ak-Sar-Ben Coronation,” the *World-Herald* asked, “when he’s never heard of Ak-Sar-Ben? Or for that matter, has never been to Nebraska?” Oscar de la Renta’s early designs for the coronation of 1970 required this kind of assistance. “When we saw the sketches of the dresses,” the head of the Women’s Ball committee recalled, “I asked that the skirts be made a little fuller. He was still thinking in terms of one dress for a collection rather than a lot of them all together and we wanted it to be more costumey.”<sup>16</sup> Ann Lowe had been creating these types of “costumey” ball gowns since the early 1900s and her designs gave the committee exactly what they needed. A countess recalled that her mother, who had attended many coronations, believed that the Ann Lowe year “was the best year as to dress and our looking like a fairytale.” She remembered “the gowns that year just floated as we paraded down a very long floor up to a stage for the King to be crowned.”<sup>17</sup>

The televised coronation featured a forty-four-piece symphony orchestra, a fifty-member symphonic choir and a performance by members of the brand new Illinois Ballet of Chicago before the young ladies appeared. The pink rubrum lilies in their bouquets were out of season in October,

but hundreds of these flowers were forced into bloom by a Chicago florist and shipped for the coronation.<sup>18</sup> Nothing was too good for the ladies of the Court of Quivira.

While some designers simplified their coronation designs, changing fabric color or embellished motifs on a series of otherwise identical shells to save time and money, Ann Lowe and her staff met the regal challenge of the occasion by creating six distinct dress designs for the princesses and countesses in “monochromatic shades of pink—petal, hyacinth, begonia and camellia” and a truly astounding white gown for the queen. The dresses were custom fit to the measurements of each girl.

Each gown included dozens of yards of French nylon tulle, enhanced with intricate hand-applied embellishments such as the “vertical rows of tulle roses outlined in iridescent sequins, silver bugle beads and rhinestones” on four of the princess gowns and the “diamond shaped panels of bugle beads and iridescent sequins interspersed with silver sequin flowers beginning from the bust line and extending into deep points in the skirts” on eight of the countess gowns.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the Ak-Sar-Ben gowns were in Lowe’s Manhattan workroom when a newspaper reporter visited in the summer of 1961. “Miss Lowe frosts many of her gowns with showers of beautiful beading,” the reporter observed, “and every tiny bead is hand sewn by skilled seamstresses who boast that Ann Lowe is one of the few dressmakers who has her beading done on the premises.”<sup>20</sup>

The gowns were worn with dyed-to-match silk high heels and sixteen-button kid gloves that stopped above the elbow. A countess recalled that “We had to be shown how to put it on since the skirt was so large.”<sup>21</sup> The *World-Herald* described the process in greater detail, revealing the two hours spent by pressers to iron out the wrinkles on each dress. When they were finally ready, “shoes are placed on the floor, then the hoop skirt is laid flat. Next comes the gown so that attendants may step into the entire ensemble at once.”

The queen gown was designed to be a sensation with “literally hundreds of yards of white French net most of it finer than the sheerest chiffon.” It featured “twelve layers of net hand-embroidered in sixty different motifs with silver and crystal bugle beads, rhinestones, pearls and cut crystal pendants.” The gown was said to be “so true to (her) measurements that not a single alteration was needed” and the exquisite beading created the effect of having been “splashed across the skirt and bodice like hundreds of dewdrops.”

The queen remembered that the gown was comfortable but needed to be modified after the coronation so it could be worn at the ball the next evening, “as I couldn’t get into a car with it on. It took up the whole back of the limo” and even with a portion of the underskirts removed, the queen’s escort “had to jump if I turned in the dance so he wouldn’t step on it.”<sup>22</sup>

The princess and countess gowns were less extravagant, but still remarkable with full hoop skirts and modest trains that were a bit difficult to manage. “One of my clearest memories,” one former countess described, “was coming out onto the stage of the Ak-Sar-Ben Coliseum and having to walk down probably twelve to fifteen steps to the main floor. Needless to say, between the large dress and heels I was scared to death that I would tumble down to the floor below in front of a large crowd and a television audience that encompassed at least the eastern half of Nebraska. I did not fall, thank goodness!”<sup>23</sup>

“I was also nervous about going down the stairs as we were introduced at the ceremony,” another countess recalled. “We were told to gently kick the dress forward with each step for safety.”<sup>24</sup>

The ball committees began their preparations a year in advance. The first decision was the selection of the year’s colors. Flamingo rose and silver were selected as the colors of 1961. “This is the key,” a member of the board of governors told the *World-Herald*, “and we build from there.” Sketches were submitted by a number of designers and evaluated by the committees. The chairmen from each committee reviewed sample gowns in person in New York City before selecting the couturier.<sup>25</sup> Ann Lowe’s gowns for Saks would be a perfect fit that year and the J. L. Brandeis and Sons department store would organize the details.<sup>26</sup>

The leading department stores in Omaha took turns in the role of official couturier of the Ak-Sar-Ben Court of Quivira. This honor allowed them to publicize their involvement in local advertisements, and occasionally feature the designer’s work in their own couture boutiques.<sup>27</sup> In exchange for the \$600 “coronation wardrobe fee” each court member received “a custom made ball gown, costume jewelry, gloves, slippers, corsage and the services of a beautician.”<sup>28</sup> The identity of the court couturier was usually kept under wraps until the night of the coronation. Instructions for the countesses of 1961 made sure to note, “Please remember that ALL DETAILS—color, design, name of designer, etc. are SECRET.”<sup>29</sup>

Representatives from the Brandeis French Room worked with the Ak-Sar-Ben ball committee,



**Same gown as on p. 138.**  
Courtesy of Phyllis Dahlke

sales representatives from Saks and the thirty-three young ladies of the court to organize all fittings and wardrobe details.

The gowns were a perfect fit for Ak-Sar-Ben, but their success did not guarantee that the order would be a profitable one for Ann Lowe. Lowe's business arrangement with Saks Fifth Avenue was a challenging one, skewed heavily in the department store's favor.

Until 1958, Ann Lowe's son managed the financial details of her business. This freed Lowe, as the designer, to concentrate on the creative side of her

work. After her son's death that year, she attempted to keep track of the finances with only the help of a bookkeeper. She would eventually lose her salon because of problems with cash flow and taxes. She was not well trained in financial matters and although she still had a large client base, hundreds of devoted clients were of no use to Lowe if she did not have a place to work.

Partnering with a fashionable department store solved this problem. At Saks, she would be able to greet her customers in a suitable atelier. She would also have adequate workspace and access to the dozens of highly skilled seamstresses necessary to keep her business running smoothly.

In exchange for the workroom and client reception space, Lowe was responsible for the purchase of all of her materials. She was also responsible for her own salary as well as the salaries for her large staff. Saks purchased completed gowns from Lowe at the price she stated, selling the gowns to Lowe's customers at a substantial markup. Her refusal to cut corners or take any cost-effective step that might reduce the quality of the finished product (but increase the profit) turned most of her Saks orders into large losses. In interviews, she acknowledged that she had a habit of "not counting the dollars going into a dress but just the beauty that came out of it."<sup>30</sup> She rarely priced her work accurately, and she grossly underestimated the cost of seamstress labor. "Well," she would admit to a reporter, "you can't run a business that way." This especially became a problem at Saks where she "didn't realize until too late," she explained, "on dresses I was getting \$300 for, I had put about \$450 into it."<sup>31</sup> Ann Lowe left Saks in early 1962, and after this three-year partnership she owed the company more than \$9,000.<sup>32</sup> The large amount of her debt, as reported on her bankruptcy proceedings, can be assumed as money owed for staff salaries and materials.

The details of the Ak-Sar-Ben gowns are also significant from a business perspective. In my study of Ann Lowe's career, I have researched more than sixty individual dress designs created between 1916 and 1968, but the Ak-Sar-Ben order is the only work that can be confirmed as a Saks Fifth Avenue commission. This is significant because information from Ak-Sar-Ben provides a unique opportunity to reconstruct the operation of her business with greater accuracy and see the ways in which her decisions as a designer may have affected her success as a businesswoman.

Lowe insisted on the use of labor-intensive techniques to create the hand-beaded embellishments that were her hallmark. Employees who had worked



for her as early as the 1920s described Lowe's detailed and time consuming practice of attaching each small glass bead to the fabric individually.

The detailed embellishments on each Ak-Sar-Ben gown would have taken dozens of hours of seamstress labor to complete. One of Lowe's previous employees recalled that the beading on similar dresses could take two seamstresses "two full weeks without pause" to complete. If Lowe did not like the quality of her employee's beadwork, "a whole day's work would be ripped out," and she would ask them to begin again.<sup>33</sup> The end result was of superior quality. Even if a thread broke, only one bead would fall, but these decisions were troubling from a business perspective.

One countess recalled that the dresses for the countesses and princesses were priced around \$300. This was paid directly to Brandeis Department Store as a part of the \$600 dollar coronation wardrobe fee.<sup>34</sup> Saks purchased the completed gowns from Lowe at a price that would make that final \$300 price profitable for the store. Following

Lowe's own account of her mismanagement, it would be reasonable to estimate that her wholesale price for the attendant gowns was around \$150 apiece. The dozens of hours of beadwork required for each gown, even at the established minimum wage of \$1.15 an hour, could cost at least \$50 apiece in seamstress labor.<sup>35</sup> Before the gown was ready for embellishing, of course, it needed to be sewn. Dozens of yards of nylon tulle fabric were measured, draped, cut and fashioned into custom fit ball gowns for thirty-two attendants. This represented another eight to ten hours of seamstress labor at the very least for each gown. The Ak-Sar-Ben order should have been a gem in Lowe's professional crown. Her pricing structure and business methods quickly turned this into a financial quagmire with an estimated loss of at least \$5,000.<sup>36</sup>

The coronation gowns may not have been the financial success that Ann Lowe had expected, but the order was a point of pride for her. Her entry in the 1968 edition of *Who's Who of American Women* lists a "Couturier of the Year Plaque" as one of her

**Ak-Sar-Ben princesses and countesses. The Ak-Sar-Ben order should have been a gem in Lowe's professional crown, but her pricing structure and business methods quickly turned this into a financial quagmire with an estimated loss of \$5,000.**

Courtesy of Phyllis Dahlke



**Lowe insisted on the use of labor-intensive techniques to create the hand beaded embellishments that were her hallmark. The detailed embellishments on each Ak-Sar-Ben gown would have taken dozens of hours of seamstress labor to complete.**


Courtesy of Ann Jessop

professional accomplishments of 1961.<sup>37</sup> Without more information, the origin of this award has been up for interpretation by fashion historians, who have assumed incorrectly that it was presented as an industry award in New York City.

New York City was the country's fashion center, and while a number of industry awards to celebrate designers did exist in the city during this period (the Coty American Fashion Critics Award perhaps being the most prestigious example), the small output of Lowe's shop would not have warranted a major industry award. Her business was firmly positioned in New York, so it is reasonable

to assume that any award presented to her would have a New York connection. One problem with this is that the city's fashion industry never established a Couturier of the Year award. Without any further detail from Ann Lowe, the origin of this honor was bound to remain a mystery.

The answer can be found in a letter sent to Ann Lowe at her Saks Fifth Avenue office by Robert Storz, the Ak-Sar-Ben chairman that November. "We are pleased to send you a plaque designating you as the official couturiere for the 1961 Ak-Sar-Ben Coronation and Ball." He wrote, "Everyone was delighted with your creations. The Queen's gown was exquisite and the young ladies who were Princesses and Countesses were also very happy with their gowns. We all feel the gowns were very effective and added a great deal of elegance to Omaha's most important civic and social affair."<sup>38</sup>

More than fifty years later, the gowns of the 1961 Ak-Sar-Ben court add a great deal of important information about the history of a notable American fashion designer who spent much of her career in the shadows of fashion history. The *Omaha World-Herald's* Ak-Sar-Ben coverage stands as an unexplored archive that could assist a number of costume historians in their future research of great twentieth-century fashion designers. 

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In 1947, Lowe was designing for Sonia Gowns in New York City. Sonia Gowns received public credit for the de Havilland gown. Thomas Congdon Jr., "Ann Lowe: Society's Best Kept Secret," *The Saturday Evening Post*, Dec. 12, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> Along with several Ak-Sar-Ben gowns at the Durham Museum in Omaha, Ann Lowe gowns from the height of her career (the 1950s-1960s) can be found in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution and the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Other Manhattan museums also have a few examples of Lowe's work in their collections: The Museum of the City of New York, and the SUNY Fashion Institute of Technology. The earliest collected example of her work (1926) can be found in the Henry B. Plant Museum in Tampa, Florida. Jacqueline Kennedy's wedding gown is in the collection of the John F. Kennedy Museum. In the fall of 2013, the sixtieth anniversary of the Kennedy wedding was celebrated at the museum with the display of a full-sized paper replica of the bridal gown. This replica was created in 2003 by Isabella de Borchgrave, an artist from Belgium. Lowe's original gown is too fragile for public display.

<sup>3</sup> This part of Lowe's biography has been recounted many times in a number of her interviews during the 1960s. The most thorough descriptions of her early life can be found in Congdon Jr., "Ann Lowe: Society's Best-Kept Secret." Additional information from Lowe's distant cousin Charles Cole, letter to author, May 2013.

<sup>4</sup> *Oakland Tribune*, Aug. 7, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> Information about Lowe's early years in Tampa and New York can be found in Geri Major, "Dean of American Designers," *Ebony*, December 1966, 137. Additional information can be found in Congdon Jr., "Ann Lowe: Society's Best-Kept Secret."

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> A detailed history of the Knights of the Ak-Sar-Ben Foundation and the Ak-Sar-Ben festival can be found at [www.aksarben.org](http://www.aksarben.org).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> L. Van Kleeck, email to author, Apr. 16, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Sept. 16, 1895.

<sup>11</sup> The Sept. 5, 1895, *Omaha World-Herald* features detailed coverage of that year's Ak-Sar-Ben events.

<sup>12</sup> The article says that the designs were executed in Omaha that year. *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 8, 1932.

<sup>13</sup> Ak-Sar-Ben was profiled in the Oct. 24, 1938, issue of *Life* magazine. The *LOOK* magazine archive at the Library of Congress has a collection of thirty-six photographs from the 1952 Ak-Sar-Ben coronation.

<sup>14</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 21, 1961.

<sup>15</sup> P. Dahlke, letter to author, Apr. 12, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 18, 1970.

<sup>17</sup> L. VanKleeck, email to author, Apr. 16, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Details of the 1961 coronation come from the coverage of the *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 21, 1961.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, Sept. 21, 1961.

<sup>21</sup> M. Wolpert, email to author, Aug. 14, 2013.

<sup>22</sup> C. O'Neil, email to author, Nov. 12, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> A. Jessop, email to author, Apr. 1, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> M. Wolpert, email to author, Aug. 14, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> The *Omaha World-Herald*, Oct. 21, 1961, published an article discussing the process of dress selection and the work of the Ak-Sar-Ben men's and women's ball committees.

<sup>26</sup> E. John Brandeis wrote a letter of congratulations to the members of the court. E. John Brandeis to A. Lallman, May 8, 1961. Private collection of A. Jessop.

<sup>27</sup> In other years, the court couturier was invited to attend the festivities. The designer would attend a luncheon with the ladies of the court and their mothers, meet department store customers at a showing of their designs, attend the coronation and publicly receive a plaque to honor their participation. Ann Lowe did not attend Ak-Sar-Ben in 1961, and it is not known if she was invited to participate. One countess soberly recalled, "My only regret of the time is becoming aware down the road that Ms. Lowe was not invited to the occasion because she was black." The reason for Lowe's exclusion from the event cannot be confirmed. P. Dahlke, letter to author, Apr. 12, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Unpublished memos from the Brandeis department store to the Ak-Sar-Ben countesses of 1961. Emphasis original. Private collection of A. Jessop. This rule of secrecy was relaxed in later years. By 1981, the couturier was announced days before Ak-Sar-Ben in the *World-Herald*.

<sup>30</sup> *New York Daily News*, Jan. 21, 1965.

<sup>31</sup> Details of the Saks partnership and the business matters of Lowe's early salons are discussed in Congdon Jr., "Ann Lowe: Society's Best-Kept Secret."

<sup>32</sup> Bankruptcy docket 63 B 105, U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York.

<sup>33</sup> Lowe began her professional career as a dressmaker in Tampa in 1916 before moving her business to New York in 1928. *Tampa Tribune*, Feb. 7, 1965.

<sup>34</sup> P. Dahlke, letter to author, Apr. 12, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Salary rates of Saks seamstresses are not available, but the federal minimum wage in 1961 was \$1.15. Sewing was semi-skilled labor, and it is likely that seamstresses were paid at least a small amount above minimum wage.

<sup>36</sup> Without Lowe's invoices and salary figures, an exact amount of the cost of this order cannot be determined. From my research, I find it safe to estimate her losses at around \$150 (getting \$150 from Saks for a gown that she spent \$300 to create) per attendant gown. With thirty-two attendant gowns, this would create a \$4,800 loss. It is likely that the queen gown was also created at a loss, although the coronation wardrobe fee for the queen is not known. Even these estimates are conservative.

<sup>37</sup> *Who's Who of American Women (and Women of Canada)* 5th ed. (Nashville, TN: A. N. Marquis Company, 1968), 737.

<sup>38</sup> Robert H. Storz letter to Ann Lowe, Nov. 6, 1961. Durham Museum, Omaha.

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