

Hi everyone, welcome to Infinite Women. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today we're talking about a few incredible African-American women in fashion.

We take women's sewing for granted, both in terms of the skill required and labor of the work. Seamstresses, particularly women of colour, have routinely been underpaid throughout modern history, because many of them were poor and had few other options. There are countless women like civil rights activist Rosa Parks, Holocaust survivor and educator Rose Van Thyn, American Old West outlaw Laura Bullion or Colombian revolutionary heroine Policarpa Salavarrieta who are well-known for activities other than their day jobs as seamstresses.

Fashion is one of the few areas where sewing really gets to shine, but even then modern designers are the ones getting the credit rather than the people building their imagined creations. But not too long ago, the roles were often combined by dressmakers like Elizabeth Keckley, a formerly enslaved woman who gained her professional reputation in Washington, D.C. by outfitting the city's elite, including First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. Thanks to her work as a seamstress, she was able to buy her and her son's freedom in St. Louis, Missouri in 1855, and moved to DC in 1860, where she established a dressmaking business that grew to include a staff of 20 seamstresses. After the Civil War, Mrs. Keckley wrote and published an autobiography titled *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868). The book was both a slave narrative about the physical and sexual abuse she experienced in her early life, and a portrait of the First Family, especially Mary Todd Lincoln. For a fictional novel about Mrs. Keckley, I recommend *Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker* by Jennifer Chiaverini.

Speaking of outfitting the first lady, Ann Lowe was the first African-American to become a major fashion designer from the 1920s through the 1960s. She was best known for designing Jacqueline Bouvier's wedding dress when she married John F. Kennedy in 1953 - or rather, she should have been. Although her work is recognised now, Jackie never publicly credited Ann for the most talked-about dress of the year. Even though Ann had been working with the Bouvier family for years, when asked who designed the dress, Jackie reportedly replied 'I wanted to go to France, but a colored dressmaker did it.' The dress, which cost \$500 (approximately \$5,000 today), was described in detail in *The New York Times's* coverage of the wedding, but Ann's name was never mentioned. Even worse, Ann lost money on the project - ten days before the wedding, a pipe burst in her studio, ruining the dress as well as nine other dresses for other members of the wedding party. Ann and her team worked day and night to re-create the masterpieces in a week and a half. She ended up losing \$2,200 — about \$21,000 in today's currency. Then, when she hand-delivered the gowns in Newport, R.I., she was told to enter through a service entrance in the back. Ann replied that either the dresses went with her through the front door or they went back with her to New York. Ann also designed the dress Olivia de Havilland wore to the 1947 Oscars, when she won Best Actress. The name on the label, however, was Sonia Rosenberg.

In 2019, Ruth E Carter became the first African-American to win an Academy Award for Best Costume Design, for her incredible work on the superhero film *Black Panther*. It was her third nomination - of the more than 60 films she worked on as lead costume designer, she was also nominated for Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* in 1992 and Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* in 1997. She then won again in 2023 for *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*. And it probably goes without saying, but her own Oscars dresses were masterpieces.

Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.