

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM & LIBRARY

Cover Story: Katharine Graham, CEO

On view in the Joyce B. Cowin Women's History Gallery

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Selected PR Images

The New-York Historical Society celebrates the extraordinary life and career of Katharine Graham (1917-2001), who made history leading the Washington Post at a turning point in modern American life. Cover Story: Katharine Graham, CEO charts how Graham's life trajectory changed in the wake of her husband's death, as she went on to become one of the most influential figures in 20th-century American journalism, business, and politics. The monumental publishing decisions Graham made at the helm of the Washington Post—helping to end a war and a corrupt U.S. presidency—are brought to life through a host of photographs, letters, costumes, and objects. The exhibition explores how—as writer and filmmaker Nora Ephron once remarked—Graham's "journey from daughter to wife to widow to woman parallels to a surprising degree the history of women in this century." Featured items include stylish outfits and ephemera from writer Truman Capote's legendary 1966 Black and White masquerade ball, held in Graham's honor at the Plaza Hotel and dubbed the "Party of the Century."

**Woman of the Year in Economy and Business:
Katharine Graham, 1973**
Bettmann/Getty Images

In 1963, Katharine Meyer Graham, a self-effacing daughter, wife, and mother, assumed control of the Washington Post. It marked the beginning of a pivotal period in her transformative life, as she grew into an influential figure in journalism, business, and politics. By the time Nixon resigned in August 1974, she said: "I had warmed up to a degree of toughness of which I probably wouldn't have been capable the year before... I was much more willing to go on the offensive rather than be defensively polite."



Marion S. Trikosko, photographer
Katharine Graham, publisher of the *Washington Post*, holding an issue of *Newsweek*, April 7, 1976
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division



With the publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, Graham took a principled stand for press freedom and became a household name. Two years later, Graham backed the Post's investigation of the Watergate break-in and subsequent cover-up, implicating Richard Nixon's re-election campaign, the White House, and eventually Nixon himself, leading to the first-ever Presidential resignation.

Katharine Graham speaks to newsroom employees during pressmen's strike, 1975
Linda Wheeler / The *Washington Post* via Getty Images



As the Post shifted from a private family-owned company to a publicly-traded media conglomerate, its craft unions—including typographers, printers, and pressmen—objected to management's focus on profit margins and shareholders. The ensuing strike caused deep bitterness on both sides. In December, the pressmen's union rejected Graham's final settlement offer and she made permanent replacements—including Black, women, and Vietnamese workers, a significant difference from the predominantly white, all-male Pressman's Local.

Ruth Henderlider to Katharine Graham, March 1, 1966
Library of Congress Manuscripts Division



Of all her professional duties, Graham found public speaking the most challenging. Nevertheless, it was “part of the job description” so she delivered speeches, she recalled, with her knees quivering. In March 1966, the Women's City Club of Cleveland invited her to speak on “The Status of Women.” Graham responded: “I am inevitably saddled with this subject,” adding that it was one in which she was “not interested nor educated,” and gave remarks on the status of newspapers instead. The club secretary wrote a supportive note afterwards, urging Graham: “Don't be camera or mike shy anymore!”

Dorothy Butler Gilliam, 1962

Harry Naltchayan /The Washington Post/via Getty Images

Dorothy Butler Gilliam (b. 1936) was the only Black woman in her class at Columbia University's School of Journalism before becoming the first Black woman hired by the Washington Post in 1961. Gilliam worked on the city desk until 1966, when she quit to care for her children. Returning to the Post in 1972, Gilliam spent seven years as the Style section's first Black woman editor before becoming the paper's first Black woman columnist.



Eleanor Lambert, 1963

Associated Press

Publicist Eleanor Lambert (1903-2003) was one of the most important behind-the-scenes figures in 20th-century fashion history. Throughout her long career, Lambert spotlighted American designers and established New York as an international fashion capital. She created the International Best-Dressed Hall of Fame, the Council of Fashion Designers of America, Press Week (now New York Fashion Week) and the Costume Institute Benefit—better known today as the Met Gala.



Invitation to the Black and White Ball, 1966

Museum of the City of New York, 66.113.1

In January 1966, Truman Capote published In Cold Blood, a “nonfiction novel” about a brutal quadruple murder in a small Kansas town. Capote had spent nearly six years on the project, interviewing and befriending investigators, lawyers, locals—and the two killers, even attending their execution. Capote planned his high-profile Black and White Ball to keep his name in the public eye. To avoid the appearance of crass self-promotion, he telephoned Katharine Graham and announced: “Honey, I just decided you’re depressed and need cheering up, so I’m going to give you a party.”



Bernard Gotfryd (1924-2016), photographer
Katharine Graham and Truman Capote at the Black and White Ball, November 28, 1966
Patricia D. Klingenstein Library, New-York Historical Society

“Why was I the guest of honor? Who knows?” Graham wrote. Capote was already close to many wealthy, fashionable society women. “I suppose he chose me because I didn’t conflict with all the glamorous women he knew,” Graham acknowledged. As a relative outsider, she was an uncontroversial yet still newsworthy choice. “Though I obviously appreciated it and loved the role, I was terribly nervous,” she later recalled.



Halston (1932-1990), designer
Mask worn by Katharine Graham, 1966
Wool, plastic beads
Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Katharine Graham, 1994.334b

Graham went to Bergdorf Goodman in 1966 to buy her ensemble for the Black and White Ball. “For one magic night I was transformed,” she wrote. Her mask was one of many created for the event by Halston, who was then Bergdorf’s resident milliner, famous for creating Jacqueline Kennedy’s iconic pillbox hats.



Black and White Ball, Plaza Hotel, 1966
© Elliott Erwitt/Magnum Photos

The masquerade prompted months of frenzied speculation—who among Capote’s fashionable crowd of socialites, artists, intellectuals, and celebrities would receive the coveted invitations? By November 28, 1966, as guests, onlookers, and journalists crowded into the Plaza Hotel, “there was a slight note of insanity about the party,” Graham recalled. Legendary to this day, Capote’s ball introduced Graham to new networks of influential people, and her social profile skyrocketed.



Truman Capote and Katharine Graham at the Black and White Ball; Charlotte Curtis in the background, 1966
Harry Benson / Hulton Archive via Getty Images



The lasting significance of the Black and White Ball lay in Capote's innovative mixture of different elite circles: American "swans" and European aristocrats; writers, publishers, and editors; academics, politicians, and diplomats; intellectuals, artists, and stars of Broadway and Hollywood—leavened with an investigator from Kansas, Capote's doorman, and Graham's personal assistant. Surrounded by glamor, wealth, influence, and power, Graham later recalled the ball as a very big and important event for her. Though she had never met most of the attendees before, many stayed in her life.

Bergdorf Goodman (founded 1899), maker
Evening gown worn by Brooke Astor, 1966
Lace, net, satin, silk, velvet
Museum of the City of New York, 67.118



Brooke Astor was among the guests at the Black and White Ball. New York's elite women have a long history of using charitable giving as a way to influence public policy. Few had access to as much wealth as the Astors, descendants of the country's first multimillionaire. Under Brooke Astor's active leadership, the Astor Foundation became a major philanthropic presence in New York City for many decades, supporting youth services, community restoration, and the New York Public Library.

Shannon Rodgers (1911-1996), designer
Evening cape created for Joan Crawford, 1966
Velvet, rhinestones
Silverman/Rodgers Collection, Kent State University
Museum, 1983.001.0641



For much of her career, Joan Crawford was one of Hollywood's top earners. She also received three Best Actress nominations, winning for Mildred Pierce in 1945. As she aged, Crawford found work harder to come by. Nevertheless, Crawford clearly expected to go to the Black and White Ball. Although Shannon Rodgers designed this cape for the occasion, no evidence suggests that Capote—who notoriously teased, "Maybe you'll be invited and maybe you won't"—ever extended an invitation to her.

Eleanor Holmes Norton (center) and Newsweek women at press conference, 1970

Bettmann/Getty Images

Newsweek's first cover story on the women's liberation movement appeared on March 23, 1970. It was not a coincidence that 46 women employees of Newsweek, represented by Eleanor Holmes Norton (then an ACLU attorney), filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission on the same day. The women's allegations of discrimination in hiring, promotions, and salaries were supported by the fact that Newsweek hired a freelancer to write "Women in Revolt," as there were no women writers on staff considered senior enough to handle the story. When Katharine Graham heard the news, she asked: "Which side am I supposed to be on?"



Reporters Michael B. Hodge, Ivan C. Brandon, LaBarbara A. Bowman, Leon Dash, Penny Micklebury, Ronald A. Taylor, Richard Prince, and attorney Clifford Alexander, March 23, 1972

Ellsworth Davis/The Washington Post via Getty Images

The first journalists in U.S. history to challenge an employer on the grounds of racial discrimination were a group of Black Washington Post Metro section writers, who filed a complaint with the EEOC on March 23, 1972. The "Metro Seven" (originally eight) inspired the women of the Post to file a similar complaint, supported by the Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild. Graham would later acknowledge that neither the Post nor Newsweek dealt with African American and women employees "with much sensitivity, understanding, or skill."



Katharine Graham on the AP Board, 1975

Associated Press

While the Pentagon Papers, Watergate investigation, and pressmen's strike helped forge Graham into a renowned media executive, the women's liberation movement also changed her profoundly. Years of being the only woman in the room had left her feeling "pretty well squelched." As late as 1969, Graham said in an interview that she thought "a man would be better at this job I'm in than a woman."



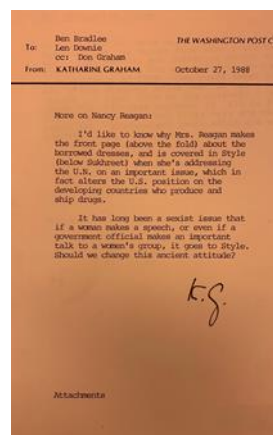
Gloria Steinem and Katharine Graham, 1974
Bettmann/Getty Images

Graham credited Gloria Steinem with helping her understand that women had a right to a frame of reference “other than that we were put on earth to catch a man, hold him, and please him.” She also acknowledged her responsibility to do something about the women’s movement’s goals. From investing \$20,000 in Ms. magazine to pushing all-male institutions such as Washington’s Gridiron Club and the board of the Associated Press to admit women members, Graham became a staunch, if discreet, feminist.



Katharine Graham to Ben Bradlee and Len Downie,
October 27, 1988
The University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Center

Defining “women’s news” remained problematic through the 1980s. When First Lady Nancy Regan gave a speech in 1988 before the United Nations on curbing drug abuse, it was covered in Style. Graham strongly objected to putting news-making women in Style by default, writing pointedly: “Should we change this ancient attitude?”



Marion S. Trikosko, photographer
Katharine Graham, publisher of the Washington Post,
seated at desk, April 7, 1976
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

Although she often said she would have liked to win a Pulitzer Prize for management, after retiring in 1991, Graham ended up winning the prize with her candid memoir, Personal History.

