



## ALL IS GILT ON THE SURFACE

BY ALEX R. TRAVERS

**OPENING NOVEMBER 13**, a truly civilized exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York, “Gilded New York,” will illuminate an age when absolute decorum ruled. The exhibition arranges over 100 works, including costumes, jewelry, portraits, and decorative objects, all created between the mid-1870s and early 20th century—a time when New York became the nation’s corporate headquarters, and helped launch the city to its global prominence.

“Gilded New York” begins in 1870: a revelatory period American textbooks call the Second Industrial Revolution, when fortunes amassed by industrial titans such as Jay Gould and John D. Rockefeller translated into lifestyles that could only be described as wantonly excessive. At the time, the existence of cooks, coachmen, and valets was

COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK



*This page: An ornate Japanese room in the home of William H. Vanderbilt printed in a book titled Mr. Vanderbilt's House and Collection, which was published circa 1883. Opposite page: A satin damask wedding gown by Maison Worth from 1878. The gown was worn by Annie Schermerhorn and was given as a gift to the museum by Miss Fannie M. Cottenet; a folding fan in painted silk, feathers, and mother-of-pearl made by Duvelleroy around 1900 (inset).*





deemed *de rigueur* rather than decadent: Women wrapped themselves in Charles Fredrick Worth's celebrated couture gowns, and the luster of Tiffany & Co.'s impeccable jewels seemed incapable of dimming. On the surface, "Gilded New York's" continued reiteration of prosperity and wealth points to signs of well-being. But, beneath those polite smiles and ladylike mannerisms, defiance against the customs of society often brewed. The exhibition leads us around themes of obeying tradition, and encourages us to dissect the disparate elements of an era pregnant with intrigue.

Just as it did in the Renaissance, art played an important role in creating the appropriate image of affluence and power. While we can look at 15th-century paintings today with a cerebral coolness, during the Renaissance, commissioning works had the capability to restore a political dynasty or to disguise a family's bankruptcy; a case of the paintbrush being mightier than the sword. But even more so than it did in the Renaissance, art's allure in the Industrial Revolution came in the form of competitive collecting and hiring European portraitists to portray familial scenes. And, with New York's now widespread wealth, trophies like art, fashion, and jewelry from new and exotic sources were abound.

The artworks and scenes that were displayed in 19th-century New York mansions are translated well in "Gilded New York." One artist featured in the exhibition is a Frenchman named Alexandre Cabanel. While Cabanel won praise for his academic pictures, his subjects were mainly aristocratic women—ladies with a capital "L"—who appear lit from within. His work echoed Dutch and Italian genre paintings in that Cabanel captured the shimmer of satin dresses with Gerard ter Borch-like exactness, and his subjects' pale skin color against their dark settings had the bold contrasts of Caravaggio's chiaroscuros. Prominent American collectors like William Astor and William T. Walters frequently purchased Cabanel's works. In the artist's own eyes, he was quite adept at capturing the image wealthy women desired, in part by showcasing their delicacy and grace. Cabanel was also venerated by the Paris Salon, the official art exhibition of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, which, in turn, led several more Americans to commission Cabanel to paint portraits of their wives.

One of his pictures on display in "Gilded New York" is an 1887 portrait of Olivia Peyton Murray Cutting. The painting is a vivid likeness of William Bayard Cutting's wife in a pink satin full-skirt gown and a pearl necklace. She holds a folding fan, perhaps made by Duvelleroy. Also

COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK



This page: A fancy dress costume by Maison Worth worn by Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt II to the Vanderbilt Ball, which represented "Electric Light." The dress was made in 1883; a Tiffany & Co. perfume bottle (inset). Opposite page: Thomas Wilmer Dewing's "DeLancey Iselin Kane."



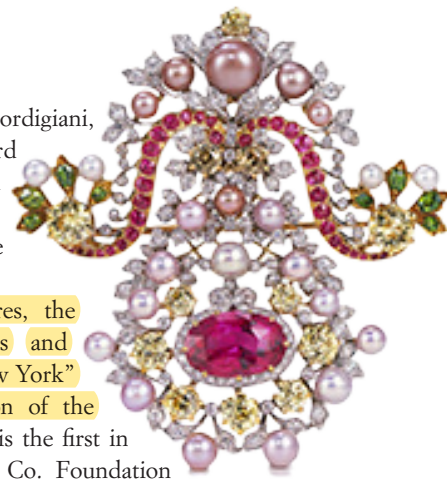


on view is a magnificent Gordigiani, presenting Cornelia Ward Hall with her children and a photogravure of actress Madame Rejane at the Hyde Ball in Versailles.

Along with the pictures, the vast selection of gowns and accessories in “Gilded New York” showcases the imagination of the curators. (The exhibition is the first in the museum’s Tiffany & Co. Foundation Jewelry Gallery.) It’s worth mentioning a selection of items: Theodore B. Starr’s swan-billed flask, Maison Worth’s voided velvet gown, and Tiffany & Co.’s gold, quartz, and rock-crystal perfume bottle. But apart from their obvious beauty, fashion and accessories also had symbolic value. They embraced the leisurely lifestyles of the ultra-rich. In fact, fashion became a topic of thought and research and was heavily covered in the media. Fashion plates—illustrations depicting the highlights of current styles of clothing—were circulating around New York, England, and France, allowing dressmakers and consumers to have access to the latest foreign fashions, accessories, and hairstyles. As far as fashion goes, “Gilded New York” features a satin damask wedding gown by Maison Worth, from 1878, worn by Annie Schermerhorn. There is also a dress costume that Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt II wore to the famous Vanderbilt Ball.

Upon viewing “Gilded New York,” you can’t help resist envisioning the lifestyles of the men and women of the Gilded Age. For starters, they had some wardrobe—one that the modern millionaire could only dream of. Then there were the jewels: rare opals, sapphires, and diamonds, all brilliantly crafted by Tiffany & Co. Surely, there was scandal in their lives; history tells us as much. Through a more modern lens, director Martin Scorsese captured the risqué romanticism of a Gilded Age ball in his film version of Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*. Scorsese’s camera, as it did when he followed Ray Liotta through the Copacabana’s kitchen in *GoodFellas*, weaves through Julius Beaufort’s ornate drawing rooms, leading us into the grand setting of the Beaufort’s opera ball. Then, also à la *GoodFellas*, we learn the complexities of each character. There are other novels (*Washington Square*) and films (*The Heiress* and *Senso*) that bleed through in his 1993 film. Yet, Scorsese claims that *The Age of Innocence* was the most violent film he ever made without a single act of violence ever occurring. He’s right; society was—and still is—tough, especially in an era that created scenarios designed to underscore the exposure of any raw emotions. Taking in all those spectacular portraits in “Gilded New York,” it’s worth pausing for a second glance and wondering if all is just as it seems on the surface.

“Is New York such a labyrinth?” Wharton asked in *The Age of Innocence*. “I thought it so straight up and down—like Fifth Avenue. And with all the cross streets numbered!” You’ll have to make your way up to 1220 Fifth Avenue this month to decide for yourself. ♦



COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK



This page: Alexandre Cabanel’s 1887 portrait “Olivia Peyton Murray Cutting (Mrs. William Bayard Cutting),” a striking oil on canvas using chiaroscuro techniques. Opposite page: A voided velvet evening gown by Maison Worth worn by Mrs. Stanford White in 1894; a Tiffany & Co. brooch in 22-kt. gold, sapphires, zircons, and enamel, circa 1900.