

Opulence in the Gilded Age, 1890

The period following the Civil War to the mid-1890s was a time of rapid industrial expansion in the United States. In addition to accelerating America's economic development, the era spawned a new generation of wealthy families that benefited from their early investment in this transformation. These *nouveau riche* families broadcast their new status through conspicuous consumption. This was particularly true in New York City where families such as the Astors, the Vanderbilts and the Rockefellers built extravagant homes in Manhattan and luxurious vacation residences on Long Island and New Port, Rhode Island.

Mark Twain coined the term "Gilded Age" to describe the era. His characterization is based on the concept of "Gilding the Lilly." The lily, is naturally beautiful, it needs no further embellishment. Attempting to "Gild the Lilly", or add a gold covering to it, to enhance its beauty is superfluous and unnecessary. Thus, Twain's description refers to the unabashed desire of the wealthy of this era to broadcast their status through extravagant opulence

At the same time that Jacob Riis was shining a journalistic spotlight on the plight of the poor in New York City (see *Death of a Child, 1890*), another journalist, Ward McAllister, was focusing his attention on those families who lived in unbridled opulence. In the following account McAllister describes an opulent banquet given by a new member of the wealthy in New York City.

The \$10,000 spent on this extravagant dinner in 1890 is the equivalent of approximately \$235,000 in today's dollars.

"A man of wealth who had accumulated a fortune here resolved to give New Yorkers a sensation."

". . . a man of wealth who had accumulated a fortune here resolved to give New Yorkers a sensation, to give them a banquet which should exceed in luxury and expense anything before seen in this country. As he expressed it, 'I knew it would be a folly, a piece of unheard-of extravagance, but as the United States government had just refunded me ten thousand dollars, exacted from me for duties upon importations (which, being excessive, I had petitioned to be returned me, and had quite unexpectedly received this sum back), I resolved to appropriate it to giving a banquet that would always be remembered.'

Accordingly he went to Charles Delmonico, who in turn went to his *cuisine classique* to see how they could possibly spend this sum on this feast. Success crowned their efforts. The sum in such skillful hands soon melted away, and a banquet was given of such beauty and magnificence that even New Yorkers, accustomed as they were to every species of novel expenditure, were astonished at its lavishness, its luxury. The banquet was given at Delmonico's in Fourteenth Street. There were seventy-two guests in the large ballroom looking on Fifth Avenue.

The table covered the whole length and breadth of the room, only leaving a passageway for the waiters to pass around it. It was a long extended oval table, and every inch of it was covered with flowers, excepting a space in the

center, left for a lake, and a border around the table for the plates. This lake was indeed a work of art; it was an oval pond, thirty feet in length, by nearly the width of the table, enclosed by a delicate golden wire network reaching from table to ceiling, making the whole one grand cage; four superb swans, brought from Prospect Park, swam in it, surrounded by high banks of flowers of every species and variety, which prevented them from splashing the water on the table.

There were hills and dales; the modest little violet carpeting the valleys, and other bolder sorts climbing up and covering the tops of those miniature mountains. Then, all around the enclosure and in fact above the entire table, hung little golden cages with fine songsters who filled the room with their melody, occasionally interrupted by the splashing of the waters of the lake by the swans and the cooing of these noble birds and at one time by a fierce combat between these stately, graceful, gliding white creatures.

The surface of the whole table, by clever art, was one unbroken series of undulations, rising and falling like the billows of the sea, but all clothed and carpeted with every form of blossom. It seemed like the abode of fairies, and when surrounding this fairyland with lovely young American womanhood, you had indeed an unequaled scene of enchantment.

But this was not to be alone a feast for the eye; all that art could do, all that the cleverest men could devise to spread before the guests, such a feast as the gods should enjoy, was done, and so well done that all present felt, in the way of feasting, that man could do no more! The wines were perfect. . . Then soft music stole over one's senses; lovely women's eyes sparkled with delight at the beauty of their surroundings, and I felt that the fair being who sat next to me would have graced Alexander's feast."

References:

This eyewitness account appears in McAllister, Ward, *Society as I Have Found it* (1890).

How To Cite This Article:

"Opulence in the Gilded Age, 1890", EyeWitness to History, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (2008).