

The Met Gala and the hubris of wealth

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On the first Monday in May each year a spectacle of excess is staged in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City—the Met Gala. The red carpet rolls out for the billionaires and their hangers-on, the politicians and parasites, and the celebrities competing in what is known as the Oscars of fashion.

It is the pornography of wealth. Tickets cost \$35,000 and are a limited item. The elite fiercely compete to secure one. Each year, the fashion magazine *Vogue*, organizer of the event, selects a theme for the costumes. In 2020, for example, it was “studied triviality,” a choice which for most of the guests proved instinctive.

This year was more ostentatious than any prior. *Vogue* announced the theme was “gilded glamor,” fashion inspired by the Gilded Age of late 19th century American capitalism. The magazine explained, “For the upper echelon, fashion during that period was one of excess” and enthused that they “spent outlandish attention to detail—and amounts of money—on their outfits.”

The guests rose to the occasion. The *New York Times* headlined the event, “Much Gilt, Little Guilt,” and declared, “the Met Gala 2022 celebrated themes of opulence, excess and fame.”

One million Americans are dead of COVID-19 and nearly 20 million people worldwide. The price of basic goods, of fuel and food, has risen beyond the purchasing power of working people. It is a grim world of tightened belts, scant meals and nervous budgets. The relentless bloodshed in Ukraine, sustained and expanded by the imperialist schemes of Washington, threatens a global catastrophe.

Those in the ruling class, however, have done quite well for themselves. Over the two years of the pandemic the wealth of America’s billionaires grew by more than 70 percent to more than \$5 trillion. The rich feel inclined to celebrate.

Celebrities—gimcrack and chintzy of substance, but properly gilt for the occasion—dominate the red carpet. The billionaires—latter-day Astors and Vanderbilts—are in dress a touch more discreet, but it is their affair. The actors, singers and reality TV stars are in the end their bling.

Dutifully, eagerly lining the velvet rope at the fringes of

the carpet, the press crowd to capture each gown and inquire of its designer, the custom Prada here, the bespoke Gucci there. In the space of minutes hundreds of thousands of dollars of scanty fabric are turned upon the stairs. Millions more follow.

Many of the costumes are, to speak frankly, deliberately repulsive, but they are treated seriously, imbued with substance by the sums of money that they represent. It is ever thus with the emperor’s clothes.

Elon Musk, a man now worth a quarter of a trillion dollars, makes silly faces for the cameras. He “earned” a \$23 billion bonus last month and purchased Twitter for \$44 billion. Considered as a portion of his net worth, it cost Musk far less to buy the social media platform than it would cost an American working family to buy a used sedan. He tells the press that he intends to “make Twitter as inclusive as possible” and enters the Met.

Cardi B—she of the lyrics, “I’m a boss, you a worker, bitch”—follows, draped we are told in a kilometer of fine Versace gold chain.

Politicians are heavier of foot as they enter. The red carpet is their chance to make a statement at once expensive and cheap. The new mayor of New York, Eric Adams, swaggers in, his custom coattails read “End Gun Violence.” Michael Bloomberg, the billionaire and former mayor, is already inside.

Hillary Clinton follows, her Joseph Altuzarra gown burgundy to hide the blood of the masses of Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Libya that doubtless soaks its hem. She had the names of 60 inspirational women embroidered into the neckline and fringe. Betty Ford rides upon her shoulder, Sacagawea trails behind, and Rosa Parks is included somewhere, one trusts not at the back.

Absent this year is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. She used her \$35,000 slot last year to parade a white off-the-shoulder gown with “Tax the Rich” scrawled on its rear, before dining with Elon Musk.

Kim Kardashian and Pete Davidson—one feels slightly cheapened knowing their names—round out the red carpet. Kim is so much happier, the press inform us breathlessly, since she left Kanye, and now she wears the very gown that

Marilyn Monroe wore for Kennedy.

Mark Twain, the great American novelist, coined the phrase Gilded Age, now unironically adopted by the ruling elite, to describe a period of corruption and social rot which the wealthy covered over with their wasteful and ridiculous excess. In 1869, he wrote an “An Open Letter to Commodore Vanderbilt.” Addressed to one of the era’s tycoons, its scathing words seem tailored to the flaneurs of Monday’s red carpet.

“How I do pity you, Commodore Vanderbilt! Most men have at least a few friends, whose devotion is a comfort and a solace to them, but you seem to be the idol of only a crawling swarm of small souls, who love to glorify your flagrant unworthinesses in print; or praise your vast possessions worshippingly; or sing of your unimportant private habits and sayings and doings, as if your millions gave them dignity ...”

Up the red carpet they turn left and are lost to our sight. The gala guests stroll the corridors of culture toward cocktails and dinner. The 2,000-year-old marble sculpture of Eirene, the personification of peace, has long stood at the center of the Greco-Roman gallery. It was ill-suited to the times, however, and was removed. A life-sized marble statue of a pregnant Rihanna stands in its stead. Degas, Courbet, Rubens, Picasso, da Vinci—the cultural wealth of humankind—are but the wall hangings for their evening meal.

More than anything else, the Met Gala speaks to the obliviousness of the ruling class. Before the hungry and unsettled eyes of the world, they parade their stolen wealth. In the dynasties of old it was incest that bred the Habsburg jaw and occasional monarchic cretinism. Not so at the Met, for this is a more American royalty; while their wealth may be inherited, they are self-made idiots.

Theirs is, in every sense of the phrase, a looking glass world—narcissistic and unreal. Additional injections of wealth into these decrepit social layers serve only to harden the sense of unreality, as Botox turns smiles to fast frozen sneers.

Outside, city police round up the homeless. Eric Adams, with his handmade tuxedo, has ordered them cleared off the streets. Their few possessions are thrown away and encampments destroyed. An average of 650 such encounters take place every night.

Children in much of the world remember as a momentous occasion the day they first wore shoes. Mothers are adept in the art of thinning rice and stretching paltry meals. Only 0.6 percent of all people in low income countries have received a COVID-19 booster shot. America’s inner cities are liquor store, pawnshop and food pantry wastelands. That disgusting term, “side-hustle,” has become an inescapable feature of

working class life.

Indifferent to all of this, with the hubris of immense wealth, the ruling elite display their diamonds and their gold. Guillotines have been sharpened for less. The click of knitting needles and rumble of approaching tumbrils can be heard just offstage.

Leon Trotsky, in his masterful *History of the Russian Revolution*, described the atmosphere in ruling circles in Tsarist Russia in World War I on the very eve of the 1917 October Revolution. It is stunningly apt today.

Speculation of all kinds and gambling on the market went to the point of paroxysm. Enormous fortunes arose out of the bloody foam. The lack of bread and fuel in the capital did not prevent the court jeweller Faberget from boasting that he had never before done such a flourishing business. Lady-in-waiting Vyubova says that in no other season were such gowns to be seen as in the winter of 1915-16, and never were so many diamonds purchased. The night clubs were brim full of heroes of the rear, legal deserters, and simply respectable people too old for the front but sufficiently young for the joy of life. The grand dukes were not among the last to enjoy this feast in times of plague. Nobody had any fear of spending too much. A continual shower of gold fell from above. “Society” held out its hands and pockets, aristocratic ladies spread their skirts high, everybody splashed about in the bloody mud—bankers, heads of the commissariat, industrialists, ballerinas of the tzar and the grand dukes, orthodox prelates, ladies-in-waiting, liberal deputies, generals of the front and rear, radical lawyers, illustrious mandarins of both sexes, innumerable nephews, and more particularly nieces. All came running to grab and gobble, in fear lest the blessed rain should stop. And all rejected with indignation the shameful idea of a premature peace.



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