

# What is it about the Met fashion gala that leads one to think fondly of the guillotine?

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*“The leprosy of unreality disfigured every human creature in attendance...” [A Tale of Two Cities]*

So wrote Charles Dickens of the French aristocracy on the eve of the great Revolution. The words apply with undiminished force to the attendees at the 2026 Met Gala, an annual display of self-congratulation at which the American oligarchy and its hired entertainers gather to admire themselves. The 2026 edition was bought, paid for, and presided over by Jeff Bezos, the Amazon founder and world’s third-richest man, owner and political enforcer of the *Washington Post*, together with his wife Lauren Sánchez Bezos.

A check for \$10 million, a rounding error in a fortune estimated at between \$223 and \$279 billion, purchased the couple their seats as honorary co-chairs. The wealth that Bezos now distributes in such gestures was extracted, dollar by dollar, from the broken backs of warehouse workers urinating in bottles to make rate. Outside the museum, protesters projected the slogan “Boycott the Bezos Met Gala” onto the Bezoses’ \$80 million Madison Square Park penthouse. The guests inside, costumed as their own self-image, evidently did not consider that the conditions which produced their wealth and the conditions which produced the protest were one and the same.

Vulgarity is too mild a word for what unfolded on the steps of the museum, since vulgarity implies a coarse vitality. The 2026 gala was a pageant of decay so far gone in self-parody that one struggled to know whether to laugh, vomit, or check out Ebay for a working replica of Dr. Guillotine’s invention.

The noted wit Dorothy Parker once deadpanned: “If you want to know what God thinks of money, look at the people he gives it to.” Here are a few examples that proved Parker’s point:

A reality-television heiress arrived in a custom

Schiaparelli rubberized bodysuit with sculpted nipples, beneath a ballooning satin skirt embroidered with 10,000 baroque pearls and 7,000 hand-painted fish scales. The garment, by the house’s own admission, required eleven thousand hours of embroidery, the equivalent of more than five years of a working woman’s full-time labor for a single evening’s wear. Her older sister appeared in a metallic-orange breastplate conceived by a British pop artist and finished in an actual auto body shop, featuring cone bras lifted from Jean Paul Gaultier.

A pop singer, born in Michigan and old enough to know better, mounted the steps in a Saint Laurent ensemble accompanied by women in sheer blindfolds, wearing a hat fitted with what observers compared to a ship’s mast, carrying a brass trumpet, and trailing a violet organza cape so vast that seven attendants were required to manage it. The fashion press, fully in sync with the aristocratic pretensions, called these women her “ladies-in-waiting.” The hostess herself, the billionaire’s wife who last year purchased an eleven-minute trip to the edge of space aboard her husband’s vanity rocket, appeared in a Schiaparelli gown said to be inspired by John Singer Sargent’s *Madame X*.

Bad taste competed with brainlessness. An actress with a cage strapped to her backside. A singer immobilized inside a sculpture she could barely walk in. A Chanel gown that, Condé Nast’s own organs proudly reported, had absorbed 761 hours of atelier labor. The official theme was “Costume Art.” The actual theme was money, and the working principle of the evening was that there exists no quantity of human labor too great to be expended on the four-hour amusement of the rich.

A single seat at the 2026 gala cost \$100,000, raised from \$75,000 the year before. A table of ten ran

\$350,000. The four hundred or so attendees thus consumed, between tickets alone, some \$42 million, which the museum reports as a record fundraising achievement. The costumes themselves, lent by the fashion houses as marketing investments and routinely valued in the hundreds of thousands of dollars each, are not counted in that figure. Rihanna's 2015 Guo Pei gown reportedly cost nearly \$4 million to produce. A single Schiaparelli gown represents more labor-time than a New York City public school teacher will perform in three full school years; it is then worn for four hours, photographed, and returned to the atelier from which it came. This is what the ruling class understands by the support of the arts.

The whole performance is treated by the press with the gravity of a state occasion. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Vogue*, the broadcast networks and their streaming subsidiaries devote acres of coverage to the event, broadcast live red-carpet feeds, and convene panels of solemn commentators to parse the year's theme as though something of cultural significance were transpiring. Fashion editors discuss a rubberized bodysuit in vocabulary that was once reserved for a Manet or Renoir.

The conditions outside the velvet rope are inseparable from those within it. While the bodysuit was being adjusted by handlers, the New York City shelter system was housing more than 100,000 people. While Bezos was writing his \$10 million check, Amazon warehouse workers were collapsing at injury rates that exceed those of the rest of the warehousing industry combined. While the Schiaparelli atelier was cutting the hostess's gown, the Trump administration was announcing that the United States can no longer afford day care, healthcare, or Social Security, though it can afford \$1.5 trillion for the military. The connection between these two worlds is all too real: the wealth on display at the Met Gala is the wealth that raked in over four decades of class war waged from above.

The Metropolitan Museum itself, founded in 1870, custodian of the Egyptian Temple of Dendur, of paintings by Rembrandt and Vermeer and El Greco, of five thousand years of human creative labor, has been reduced to a stage prop. Government funding accounts for perhaps eight to ten percent of its operating budget. The remainder is supplied by precisely the donors who showed up on Monday and displayed their decadence.

And then there is Bezos himself. The *Washington Post* under his ownership now functions as cheerleader for Donald Trump's fascistic regime and genocidal war. This modern day Ozymandias bellows to the world: "I am Bezos, billionaire of billionaires, look upon my works, ye mortals ... and puke."

The phony dissent surrounding the event was as nauseating as the event itself. New York's newly elected mayor is Zohran Mamdani, whose vision of a socialist utopia is focused on filling the city's potholes with asphalt. He distanced himself physically from the gala but did not condemn it. Mamdani excused his absence on grounds of "affordability," as though the gala were a pricey restaurant rather than a ritual celebration of the social order he was elected to confront. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, several years earlier, had pioneered the art of hypocritical gestures by attending the gala in a "Tax the Rich" gown. It was an attempt to critique Versailles from a seat at Marie Antoinette's table. Various celebrities this year issued furrowed-brow statements about Bezos and then turned up anyway, smiled for the cameras, ate the food, and posted the pictures.

The Met Gala is a ritual whose purpose is to make the rule of the billionaires appear glamorous and somehow deserved. What the spectacle communicates, in the only language this class still speaks fluently, is contempt for the overwhelming mass of the city's population.

As for the guillotine, we have referenced it only for satirical purposes. The question that opens this article, however, is a real one. The filthy rich can keep their empty heads, but not their money. Expropriation of the mega-millionaires and billionaires is a social necessity. The United States is controlled by an oligarchic ruling class that is as shameless as it is brutal. It has rendered itself intolerable by its own conduct. Society cannot afford the rich. The working class will have to separate them from their bank accounts.



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