

# The PARTY of the CENTURY

This month marks the 100th anniversary of the infamous Bradley Martin Ball. A family member dusts off the clan's long-hidden scrapbooks. BY RICHARD JAY HUTTO ♦ PHOTOGRAPHS BY BENJAMIN J. FALK

In a driving snowstorm on the evening of February 10, 1897, carriages backed up for three blocks to deposit costumed passengers under the porte cochère of the old Waldorf Hotel (where the Empire State Building now stands). Upon arrival, the 900 guests were shown to 15 individual dressing rooms, where hairdressers ensured a spectacular entry into the ballroom, elaborately decorated to re-create the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. Six thousand mauve orchids and hundreds of feet of hanging asparagus vines adorned the hall where Victor Herbert's orchestra played. Sixty cases of 1884 Moët et Chandon were being uncorked and served by 50 waiters in tights and powdered wigs. "The" Mrs. Astor, who had never before graced an event not held in a private home, wore her famous \$200,000 diamond tiara. The young bride Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt and her sister Mrs. Ogden Goelet, architect Stanford White and his partner, Charles F. McKim, J. P. Morgan, Jr., and his sister Anne, dressed as Pocahontas, vied for position as they were presented to their hostess, Mrs. Bradley Martin. She was dressed as Mary, Queen of Scots, seated on a dais, backed with Beauvais tapestries brought from her house. As his wife danced inside, Police Commissioner Teddy Roosevelt supervised 200 policemen and 40 plainclothesmen on the street. Mrs. Martin had ordered 400 private carriages so her guests could arrive and depart at will. When the bills were tallied, the Ball cost \$369,000 (some \$7 million today). A century later, the Bradley Martin Ball stands as the most expensive private party ever held. And the most notorious.

Its origins began nobly enough. Mrs. Bradley Martin, hearing that there was a depression in the winter of 1896-97, decided to throw a magnificent ball "as an impetus to trade."

She sent out 1,200 invitations only a short time before the affair, so that the attendees would be inclined to order their costumes from local shops, rather than from their usual suppliers in Paris or London. Mrs. Martin asked the attendees to choose costumes from European history, although a few came disguised as George Washington, an Egyptian princess and the aforementioned Pocahontas. The evening went off without a hitch, except when Otto Cushing made his entrance. Elsie de Wolfe recalled the moment in her memoir, *After All*: "He appeared as a falconer in flesh-colored tights into which he might easily have been melted. His only accessory was a falcon on his arm. When Mrs. Martin recovered her breath, he was asked to leave."

After the Ball, however, a storm of controversy flew in on a clerical wind. Ministers preached against its conspicuous consumption, and City Hall promptly more than doubled the property tax assessments of the Martins and many of their guests. Mrs. Martin was horrified at the reaction to what she had hoped would provide work to hundreds. The Martins removed permanently to their homes in England and Scotland, where they leased from Lady Seafield a 65,000-acre estate, Balmacaan, in Inverness-shire. Later, their son (and my wife Katherine's great-grandfather), Bradley Martin, Jr., married Helen, daughter of industrialist Henry Phipps, who at the time leased nearby Beaufort Castle.

Today the Bradley Martin Ball is remembered only for its excesses. Perhaps it should be recalled as marking the end of the Gilded Age. (James Hazen Hyde held a 1905 fête, but it paled beside the Martins' ball.)

As *The New York Sun* stated, "Once in a generation...the rivalry of social ambitions crystallize in an entertainment so stupendous in scope and sumptuous in detail that it makes an epoch in the history of society."



THE BRADLEY MARTINS AND GUESTS

As Mary Stuart, Mrs. Bradley Martin (third from left, beside her husband, center, as Louis XV) was draped in French crown jewels formerly worn by empresses Marie-Louise and Josephine, with Marie Antoinette's diamond and ruby stomacher and the exquisite "Sevigné Brooch."

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF MRS. H. BRADLEY MARTIN

DR. JOHN VAN RENSSELAER HOFF AS A JAPANESE NOBLEMAN

"We congratulate New York on its triumph," *The London Chronicle* wrote after the Ball. "It has cut out Belshazzar's Feast and Wardour Street and Mme. Tussaud's and the Bank of England." Dr. Hoff's elaborate getup certainly contributed to that feat. During the Sioux wars in the West, his detachment of the medical corps served with the Seventh Cavalry at the Battle of Wounded Knee in 1890. After the Ball, he was posted to Puerto Rico as chief surgeon, where he vaccinated the populace against smallpox and fed 100,000 people a day. His wife, Lavinia, appeared at the Ball as a Japanese noblewoman.



ELSIE DE WOLFE AS GISMONDA (AFTER CHARTRAN'S 1896 PORTRAIT OF SARAH BERNHARDT, RIGHT)

The fact that Elsie de Wolfe, an aspiring lady of the theater, was included on the Martins' guest list is proof that the hosts rejected the "400"'s usual prejudice against artists and bohemians. But in her memoirs, *After All*, de Wolfe drily noted that the famed Met prima donna Emma Eames was the only other theatrical personality invited, one of the few singers back then to be received by Society. "Mrs. Martin," she wrote, "considered the stage just too utterly impossible." Elsie's companion at Irving Place, Bessie Marbury, also attended. In 1926, having gained renown as the first professional interior decorator, Elsie surprised all and wed Sir Charles Mendl, press attaché at the British embassy in Paris.



MRS. HAMILTON FISH WEBSTER AS MARIA THERESA

Caroline Webster, the daughter of lawyer and amateur astronomer C. A. Post, made a splash as Marie Antoinette's mother. Her costume was inspired by a court portrait of the stately Austrian empress, but "Lina" wisely left out the horse. Her husband, Hamilton, came as Charles I, while her mother mimicked Madame de Maintenon.



MRS. SIDNEY WEBSTER AS CATHERINE OF ARAGON (AFTER AN ANONYMOUS ENGLISH PORTRAIT, RIGHT)

Sarah Morris Webster was the daughter of Hamilton Fish, the former New York Governor and U. S. Senator who served as Secretary of State under both administrations of President Ulysses S. Grant. Sarah's husband, Sidney Webster, was private secretary to President Franklin Pierce. Her son, Hamilton Fish Webster, also attended the Ball (see "Lina" above right). A painted ivory miniature of Mrs. Webster, posed in her costume, commissioned by fellow attendee Peter Marić, now resides at the New-York Historical Society. Her impersonation of Henry VIII's first wife subtly took its cues from a well-known painting by an anonymous artist which hangs in London's National Portrait Gallery.



JOHN JACOB ASTOR AS HENRY IV OF NAVARRE

The only son of "the" Mrs. Astor, Jack usually avoided large social functions, but Mrs. Martin convinced him to lead the *quadrille d'honneur*. With his first wife, Ava, he had two children. After remarrying, Jack died tragically on the Titanic, refusing a seat in a lifeboat ahead of the women and children. Another son was born soon after his death.



MRS. HERMAN OELRICHS AS A DANCING GIRL OF THE ANCIEN RÉGIME

Née Theresa "Tessie" Alice Fair, Mrs. Oelrichs was the daughter of U. S. Senator James G. Fair of San Francisco, a silver bonanza king. Her younger sister, Virginia "Birdie" Fair, also attended the Ball and went on to marry William K. Vanderbilt II, whose mother was Mrs. O. H. P. Belmont. Tessie's gown of light blue satin was richly garlanded with pink roses, the old lace recycled from her wedding gown. William Ivey Long, the Tony winning costume designer, likens this "charming confection to 18th-century gowns Rose Bertin, the French founder of couture, created for Marie Antoinette."

THIS PAGE: BERNHARDT: UNICOBIS-BETTMANN; CATHERINE OF ARAGON: NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON



RICHARD WARD GREENE WELLING AS INDIAN CHIEF MIANTONOMAH

A law clerk at Bradley Martin, Sr.'s brother-in-law's firm, Richard Welling lived with his parents and never married. In one of the most colorful costumes at the Ball, he paid tribute to Native American Miantonomah (under the helpful eye of Professor Putnam of Harvard). Miantonomah had sold land near Newport to Welling's ancestor, John Greene, in 1642. Welling's Indian necklace contained bear claws, deer teeth, shells and beads. Because his headdress would not fit into a closed carriage, Welling arrived at the Waldorf standing in an open coach, then greeted the crowd with a terse, "How!"



KATHERINE GARRISON AS MRS. GRAHAM  
(AFTER GAINSBOROUGH, RIGHT)

Katherine Esther Garrison's grandfather, banker Cornelius Garrison, was mayor of San Francisco. When his son William (Katherine's father) took over the reins of the company, he expanded it into shipping and railroads, eventually becoming president of the Missouri Pacific. After moving his family to New York City, William became president of the Metropolitan Elevated Railroad and consolidated the lines into a network that in time would evolve into the city's subway system. After the Ball, Katherine married Count Francis de Casteja. Her sisters also fared well; Mary wed Baron Gaston Chandon de Brialles, while Martha, the oldest, married a son of the 12th Earl of Dalhousie.



MRS. O.H.P. BELMONT  
AS TOSCA

Alva Smith Belmont, the former Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt, forced her daughter Consuelo to marry the 9th Duke of Marlborough. But Alabama-born Alva later became a suffragette and helped Consuelo win an annulment so she could wed her love, Jacques Balsan. Alva's attire was adorned with pink ribbons and a corsage of diamonds.



MISS KATE BRICE AS THE INFANTA MARGARITA  
(AFTER VELÁZQUEZ, RIGHT)

Kate Brice, daughter of U. S. Senator Calvin Brice, did not heed Mrs. Martin's request that all costumes be made in America, but wired Worth in Paris to make a copy of the dress worn by Infanta Margarita, daughter of Philip IV of Spain, in the famous Velázquez painting (Brice's costume is still in the collection of the Museum of the City of New York). Worth complied in 24 hours and shipped the elaborate dress standing up. When it arrived, the immense crate would not fit into the Brice residence; it had to be delivered to the Waldorf, where Brice took a room in which to dress. Kate was escorted by her parents, her brother and her sister, who showed her own daring by dressing up as an exotic Egyptian.



MRS. CORNELIUS VANDERBILT  
AS A VERSAILLES COURTIER

Grace Vanderbilt was one of the "Marrying Wilsons of Georgia." Her brother Orme married "the" Mrs. Astor's daughter Carrie, and her sisters were Mrs. Ogden Golet and the Hon. Mrs. Michael Herbert. Grace, in turn, was nearly engaged to Bill Vanderbilt, but after his untimely death, she courted scandal by marrying his younger brother, "Neily."

THIS PAGE: GAINSBOROUGH AND VANDERBILT: UPI/CORBIS/RETNA; BRICE: MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK; VELÁZQUEZ: ERICH LESSING/AP/RETNA