FOUNDERS AND FUNDERS:
Institutional Expansion and the Emergence of the American Cultural Capital
1840-1940

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ABSTRACT

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The pattern of American institution building through private funding began in metropolises of all sizes soon after the nation’s founding. But by 1840, Manhattan’s geographical location and great natural harbor had made it America’s preeminent commercial and communications center and the undisputed capital of finance. Thus, as the largest and richest city in the United States, unsurprisingly, some of the most ambitious cultural institutions would rise there, and would lead the way in the creation of a distinctly American model of high culture.

This dissertation describes New York City’s cultural transformation between 1840 and 1940, and focuses on three of its enduring monuments, the New York Public Library, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Opera. It seeks to demonstrate how trustees and financial supporters drove the foundational ideas, day-to-day operations, and self-conceptions of the organizations, even as their institutional agendas enhanced and galvanized the inherently boosterish spirit of the Empire City. Many board members were animated by the dual impulses of charity and obligation, and by their own lofty edifying ambitions for their philanthropies, their metropolis, and their country. Others also combined their cultural interests with more vain desires for social status.

Although cohesive, often overlapping social groups founded and led most elite institutions, important moments of change in leadership in the twentieth century often were
precipitated by the breakdown of a social order once restricted to Protestant white males. By the 1920s and 1930s, the old culture of exclusion—of Jews, of women, of ethnic minorities in general—was no longer an accepted assumption, nor was it necessarily good business. In general, institutions that embraced the notion of diversity and adapted to forces of historical change tended to thrive. Those that held fast to the paradigms of the past did not.

Typically, when we consider the history and development of such major institutions, the focus often has been on the personalities and plans of the paid directors and curatorial programs. This study, however, redirects some of the attention towards those who created the institutions and hired and fired the leaders. While a common view is that membership on a board was coveted for social status, many persons who led these efforts had little abiding interest in Manhattan’s social scene. Rather, they demanded more of their boards and expected their fellow-trustees to participate in more ways than financially. As the twentieth century beckoned, rising diversity in the population mirrored the emerging multiplicity in thought and culture; boards of trustees were hardly exempt from this progression.

This dissertation also examines the subtle interplay of the multi-valenced definition of “public” along with the contrasting notion of “private.” In the early 1800s, a public institution was not typically government funded, and more often functioned independent of the state, supported by private individuals. “Public,” instead, meant for the people. Long before the income tax and charitable deductions for donations, there was a full range of voluntary organizations supported by private contributions in the United States. This dissertation argues that in a privatist spirit, New York elites seized a leadership role, both individually and collectively, to become cultural arbiters for the city and the nation.
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FOR

AR and NGR, who gave me a love of the past;

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and

ATP and EP, who give me hope for the future (most of the time).
“The founders of the older museums were strong-minded, opinionated, dictatorial men with a curiously one-sided sense of public obligation. All the larger American cities had them—mostly new millionaires determined to show that they could be Duveen more per square inch of canvas and cubic inch of marble or bronze than any competitor. They bargained better than they knew, and we can now sift out and rearrange the loot. We owe them much, however, and those who now inherit what they collected and hoarded should never forget it.”

INTRODUCTION

In the eighteenth century, when the French Revolutionary government transformed the Louvre Palace into the first truly modern art museum, it was professing an already commonly held belief: public art museums were evidence of political virtue and a government that did right by its people. Indeed, in Europe, culture has always been a public entitlement and a government responsibility, like health care or education. In the United States, by contrast, this historically was never the case, and most museums and cultural institutions have been born of the private sector and funded primarily by wealthy individuals and private foundations. In the mid-nineteenth century, American civic leaders recognized that culture could enrich and ennoble the nation’s cities as it had in Europe’s great capitals. Challenging Europe’s cultural leadership in a purely American way, through the efforts of private citizens rather than though the direction and funding of government, would represent a great accomplishment for those who had engineered it, and provide a source of pride for the nation as a whole.

Unlike Europeans, Americans looked to their resources, not to birth in a privileged class, as the means by which to measure merit. But even in a country in which rank was conferred by the size of one’s fortune, and the idea of aristocracy was disdained in theory if not always in fact, money alone could not buy social status or insure lasting political influence or power. How could such members of the haute bourgeoisie parlay their financial accomplishments into a means of gaining influence? Leadership in the cultural arena conferred a status of a more substantial and enduring variety.

The pattern of American institution building through private funding began in metropolises of all sizes soon after the nation’s founding. But by 1840, Manhattan’s geographical location and great natural harbor had made it America’s preeminent commercial
and communications center and the undisputed capital of finance. Thus, as the largest and richest city in the United States, unsurprisingly, some of the most ambitious cultural institutions would rise there, and would lead the way in the creation of a distinctly American model of high culture.

This dissertation describes New York City’s cultural transformation between 1840 and 1940, and focuses on three of its enduring monuments, the New York Public Library, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Opera. It seeks to demonstrate how trustees and financial supporters drove the foundational ideas, day-to-day operations, and self-conceptions of the organizations, even as their institutional agendas enhanced and galvanized the inherently boosterish spirit of the Empire City. Many board members were animated by the dual impulses of charity and obligation, and by their own lofty edifying ambitions for their philanthropies, their metropolis, and their country. Others also combined their cultural interests with more vain desires for social status.

In the early nineteenth century, as historians have observed, the young republic encouraged a utilitarian attitude towards the arts that paid little heed to aesthetics, bespeaking the practicality of a democratic society. The mingling of the “vernacular” popular culture of the masses with the “high” culture of the European tradition was common; in New York, for example, P. T. Barnum’s “museum” was essentially a cabinet of curiosities that included Indian arrows and two-headed pigs, along with casts of Greek sculpture and paintings by Gilbert Stuart and Thomas Sully. The human landscape was equally diverse, and the classes mingled comfortably, albeit sometimes tenuously, in public places, including cultural venues. In fact, the notion of the museum in Europe arose partly from the impetus to rationalize the disorder of not only varied collections, but also a broad citizenry. As the nineteenth century progressed in the United States, how could social leaders differentiate themselves from the “middling sorts”? 
Politics, earlier a means of ascent, was by the 1870s dominated in New York City by political “bosses,” who drew their support from “unwashed” immigrants. The pursuit of this manner of collectivized power became socially problematical. Thus, by participating in the founding moments of cultural institutions, some affluent New Yorkers were able to set themselves apart while publicly asserting and assuring their city’s future in the cultural domain.

At the outset of this research was a larger question. In a capitalist economy, it was perhaps inevitable that the wealthiest metropolis in the United States should become its cultural capital. But apart from donations, how did trustee leadership explain institutional prosperity? The nineteenth-century founders of the library, the museum, and the opera built cultural models for the city and ultimately the nation because of their ability to adapt to shifting economic and social circumstances. While the American bourgeoisie in the Reconstruction era fell short of the ambition to create a national art institution on the order of the Louvre or London’s National Gallery of Art because of elite factionalism and provincial social divisions, New Yorkers persisted in their efforts in a different way. The comparatively fluid nature of the city’s social class divisions, from top to bottom—with the currency of mobility being money—provided the basis for eventual institutional growth and success, and the steady supply of wealthy newcomers guaranteed it. Social openness, together with rapid growth, replenished philanthropic leadership with fresh funds and ideas.

The prevailing lore about Gotham represents the city as one predicated on Dutch tolerance for any citizen dedicated to making a guilder. Even so, the tendency towards “openness” and possibility is more broadly American—as exemplified by the metaphor of the frontier, or the Horatio Alger myth. The growing urban centers of the nineteenth century, crucibles for innovation and aspiration, afforded opportunities for both foreign-born and native
immigrants. Certain cities, however, were not welcoming of difference at the top rungs of the social ladder. In this sense, Gilded Age Manhattan, a place of “sunshine and shadow,” but also a place where social acceptance was less dependent on family lineage than on family wealth, exemplified perhaps the most “democratic” manifestation of class movement, making it a compelling place to realize the “American dream”—at least for white men.

Although cohesive, often overlapping social groups founded and led most elite institutions, important moments of change in leadership in the twentieth century often were precipitated by the breakdown of a social order once restricted to Protestant white males. By the 1920s and 1930s, the old culture of exclusion—of Jews, of women, of ethnic minorities in general—was no longer an accepted assumption, nor was it necessarily good business. Jewish New Yorkers like George Blumenthal, a Lazard Frères partner who became the Metropolitan Museum’s board president in 1934, or Otto Kahn, a Kuhn Loeb partner who helped shape the Metropolitan Opera, played vital roles in the organizations they served, as did Eleanor Belmont, the first woman elected to the opera’s board in 1933. Yet all three would have been prohibited from leadership roles in the nineteenth century. In general, institutions that embraced the notion of diversity and adapted to forces of historical change tended to thrive. Those that held fast to the paradigms of the past, such as the New-York Historical Society, did not. An institution’s relative success or failure can be measured many ways: by the legacy of programs; by public attendance numbers; by an expansion in purpose or collections; by new funds or donations; by the opinions of the press or public intellectuals; or by the positive adaptation of these models in other cities. Or simply by the endurance of an organization’s reputation. The New York Public Library, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Opera more than survived; they became standard bearers for the nation. But in the end they were also intrinsically New York City
institutions, influenced as much by the city’s uniquely diverse social culture as by its dominant financial one.

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In 1944, as the trustees of the Metropolitan Museum pondered the institution’s seventy-fifth anniversary, board president William Church Osborn was uneasy about commissioning another book describing the museum’s founding. “I am glad to have this matter taken seriously in hand,” he wrote to a fellow-trustee, “as certainly the results of the first history were lamentable.”16 His colleague concurred. “The trouble with all institutional histories is that they are not read,” he replied.17

The trouble, actually, lies in the fact that official institutional biographies are often more mythic than historical, and read more as triumphal narratives of visionary heroes than stories of individual men and women identifying and addressing a gap in the circumstances of a historical moment. Moreover, there are few “smoking guns” in the institutional archives. Prejudices, personal associations, and Machiavellian motivations are all but erased. What remains are the corporate documents and official minutes that sketch out the subjects of meetings but not the arguments, as well as the letters and notes sometimes so trivial as to warrant the thought of how they ever escaped the trash can. These records do not provide much evidence of the drama of the rumored back-story. In reality, all institutions rise up around an age and place populated with living and breathing people, and are contextualized by events that affect expectations, aspirations, and conclusions. The characters participate in a more nuanced negotiation of power and leadership than the official record or institutional biographies betray.

So what is the purpose of retelling the stale founding tales of institutional ascendency and cultural progress? This effort foregrounds the trustees instead of the directors, while situating the
institutions within larger cycles of change. Typically, when we consider the history and development of such major institutions, the focus often has been on the personalities and plans of the paid directors and curatorial programs. This study, however, redirects some of the attention towards those who created the institutions and hired and fired the leaders. While a common view is that membership on a board was coveted for social status, many persons who led their efforts had little abiding interest in Manhattan’s social scene. Rather, they demanded more of their boards and expected their fellow-trustees to participate in more ways than financially. As the twentieth century beckoned, rising diversity in the population mirrored the emerging multiplicity in thought and culture; boards of trustees were hardly exempt from this progression. Yet while the legitimacy of the argument for the value of leadership diversity in the cultural realm has become patently obvious in current decades, even with the significant presence in the 1920s and 1930s of the Kahns, the Blumenthals, and the Belmonts, the benefit of having outsiders on boards was less apparent in their own time.

This dissertation examines a more subtle interplay, by turns simple and perplexing. At its core is the multi-valenced definition of “public.” In the nineteenth century, Americans in general and New Yorkers in particular had a unique notion of what constituted a public organization, and indeed, who “the public” was. In the early 1800s, a public institution was not typically government funded, and more often functioned independent of the state, supported by private individuals. “Public,” instead, meant for the people, which had an unerringly democratic ring to it. But who were the people? In the case of the early subscription libraries, they were those who could afford to pay the membership fee. “Public” in that construction did not necessarily imply “free.” Other public service arrangements drew their entire support from
private individuals dedicated to the public good and avoided government intervention completely.  

In contrast was the notion of “private.” To Alexis de Tocqueville, in the 1820s and 1830s the spirit of voluntarism in America was astonishing. Long before the income tax and charitable deductions for donations, there was a full range of voluntary organizations in the young country supported by private contributions. Yet Sam Bass Warner has argued that privatism—the financial dependence on individual enterprise and not community action—was the cause of both urban success and failure. If the first purpose of the American citizen was the private search for wealth, the city consequently became “a community of private money makers.” This was detrimental to Philadelphia, which as a “private city” produced no powerful group that understood or appraised it as “a public environment of a democratic society.” This dissertation argues that in contrast, New York elites seized a leadership role, both individually and collectively, and became cultural arbiters. There is no overstating that a different sort of privatism, combined with New York’s wealth and prosperity, allowed philanthropists the discretion to have a disproportionate impact on the city’s cultural infrastructure.

Unlike Warner, Peter Dobkin Hall has countered that the voluntarist impulse actually was democratic. By the 1870s, this notion of egalitarianism attained its most complete expression through private action encouraged but not mandated by government support. The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Museum of Natural History, to name but two of the large, early institutions, were founded and funded by persons with superior abilities rather than inherited privilege. But while oversized ambitions were perfectly reasonable and in fact predictable for nineteenth-century trustees and city boosters to have, the oversized encyclopedic collections they imagined proved more than they could sustain without municipal assistance.
Thus began a negotiated interplay of authority and accommodation, in which a cultural institution’s leaders evaded public control even as they pursued public resources. In the case of the Metropolitan Museum, for example, with shared private and public responsibilities, who, then, was the institution’s rightful owner—the trustees or the city? Furthermore, what precisely was the institution’s function, and under whose authority was it established? Was it ultimately a place to display a donor’s sophistication and largesse, or a place to advertise American cultural refinement? The civilizing affects of art and culture were high on the trustee agenda in an apprehensive era of rapid human and physical expansion and the accompanying fears of disorder. High culture had a social and even political role to play in this context, with the ability to elevate thoughts and aesthetically gentrify both the middle and lower classes.

While there was no definitive answer to these questions, the one idea that satisfied all parties was the somewhat loose assertion that the museum was founded for the education of the public. Privately, however, the trustees and staff acknowledged their trepidation that the “great unwashed” also might violate the sanctity of the museum and perhaps even the works on display.

The trustees of the Metropolitan Opera House, founded in 1880, avoided this issue by funding the venture privately. Fundamentally, the auditorium was established as a private clubhouse for the rich. Although there were enough seats for the paying public—who functioned as the audience for both the cultural display onstage and the social display in the boxes—the public in fact was irrelevant to the opera house’s founders. Adding to the bifurcated nature of the endeavor was another Metropolitan Opera leadership entity governed by a separate board of trustees that administered the performing company. Its mission to bring world-class opera to the public was often in conflict with the demands of the real estate faction.
Another more local bifurcation was the issue of non-profit versus profit-making endeavors, which mirrored the more visible tensions between high and low culture and the thin delineation between them. Early not-for-profit cultural institutions were the domain of philanthropists who were committed to dual local and national agendas of uplift for their fellow-citizens. New York’s surfeit of moneyed plutocrats and would-be philanthropists in the Gilded Age assured firm financial footing for their projects. With money came the assumption that trustees could put their own tastes and values on display without taking into consideration what the public wanted, but rather only what the public should want. Having claimed high culture as their own, in part to reinforce their class status, elites sought to institutionalize it for everyone else.  

Prior to the professionalization of museums and libraries, curatorial alternatives were few, and collections and program building usually fell to board members.

While the early character of cultural institutions was marked by this intuitive approach, the museum trustees were certain that there was no mistaking their venture for one of P. T. Barnum’s productions. Barnum gave the people what he thought they wanted, and did not much care about either taste or uplift. His focus was on entertainment and profit. Yet his museum was also a private effort intended for the public, but with one major distinction: it was a commercial venture.

Barnum unapologetically embraced the tensions of high and low culture when he sponsored the Swedish diva Jenny Lind’s American concert tour to sold-out audiences in 1850-52. As Lawrence W. Levine has described, opera and theater (Shakespeare in particular) in the nineteenth century began as neither a “high” nor “low” art form but rather was entertainment appreciated across classes experiencing it together in close spaces. In time, culture itself became bifurcated: the high, subscribing to an Old World standard of pretension and taste for
museums and entertainments, and the low, following Barnum’s popular, profit-generating standards. In the 1870s, with both high and low culture accessible to the middle class, American taste was somewhere in between.32

The New York Public Library, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Metropolitan Opera, to varying degrees, therefore constantly faced the dialectic of private and public influence. Underpinning this tension was a contest of authority between the trustees and the public their institutions served. At the Library, this was manifest in the debate over the primacy of reference over circulation systems. The public reference library was the domain of gentlemen-collectors, and was the template that Astor and Lenox favored for the nineteenth-century libraries that bore their names. Rare books and scholarly treasures were in closed stacks; visitors could page and read them only in the library during the restricted hours of opening. This model did not cater to the larger public. Circulation libraries, conversely, loaned out both classic and popular works for home use and served that portion of the public—the so-called “other half”—that could not afford to buy books. The trustees of the New York Public Library, aided by Andrew Haswell Green’s audacious schemes of consolidation and Andrew Carnegie’s bold $5.2 million donation, managed to break the paradigm of “either/or” and deliver a library that served both the reference and circulation needs of the colossal city. However, the fact that the dual tasks of funding the buildings and operations were shared in an intricate division of responsibilities between the private and public-municipal factions of the enterprise added yet another layer to the complex system. Dependent on the city government for resources, institutions also maintained political independence through the equal financial footing, not to mention entire programmatic responsibility, generated by their boards.33
In the case of the museum, in an often-told decisive moment in the institution’s history, in the late 1880s one faction of the trustees held out against public opinion and the majority of citizens in forbidding the museum to open on Sundays. The story affords another reading not to retell the tale of the elites versus the masses, but to offer another example of the way trustees responded to changing times and contexts, and the divided orientations among private individuals directing a public enterprise. Ironically, many men on the board opposed to the Sunday opening were leaders in organizations devoted to addressing the health, education, and welfare of the urban underclass, precisely the group that stood to benefit from the museum’s larger education agenda. And yet the unyielding faction remained blind to the demands of the city. The so-called “masses” saw the museum as theirs, too, and the incident scrutinized and tested the limits of private authority. Ultimately, the museum opened on Sunday, and public perception, and attendance records, changed for the better, while more progressive trustees like Robert de Forest and William Sloane Coffin rose to leadership.  

For the opera, the divisions between the entity that controlled the opera house and the one that managed the performing troupe quietly festered for years. But the real estate board had always had an indifferent and almost dismissive attitude towards the public. The situation escalated in the 1930s, when, via the radio, the opera returned to its nineteenth-century iteration as entertainment for a broad cross-section of the public. This called into question not only the character of the art form but the nature and management of the Metropolitan Opera itself. The venture, in fact, had been as much about the physical theater as it was about operatic performance. As the locus for the self-defining social interactions that took place among the nineteenth-century founders in the boxes, the opera house building was more important for the real estate faction than the quality of the performances also bearing the Metropolitan name. The
auditorium was required to be large and attractive not so much to accommodate the opera-going public, but in order to rival the houses of Europe as a backdrop for a self-styled American aristocracy. As it was, opera endured in popularity across the classes into the twentieth century, and interest exploded when the Metropolitan began broadcasting performances over the radio. The audience quickly expanded into the millions, and the elegant old venue on Broadway and Thirty-ninth Street was supplanted by the new virtual “theater” of living rooms across the United States. Even so, the public might have remained insignificant to the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate trustees were it not for the near-bankruptcy of the endeavor during the Depression. Radio listeners pooled their small change to answer the call to save the opera season in 1933, and the old guard was forced to accept and embrace the very people who once had been inconsequential to its program of conspicuous display. The public again came to the Metropolitan’s aid in 1935 when it joined Mrs. Belmont’s “democratically” oriented Opera Guild, the proceeds of which helped sustain the company’s program. Finally, in 1940, through public appeals, the Metropolitan Opera Association bought the opera house from the beleaguered and broke aristocrats of the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company. “Cathedrals are built with pennies of the faithful,” Eleanor Belmont wrote.35

While these incidents are but three of many examples of the underlying private-public dichotomy in the three institutions, they underscore a larger argument. In the face of changing times, adhering to an antiquated protocol or expectation of the past would fail an institution programmatically as much as obeying a social culture of exclusion on the board would fail an institution financially. Indeed, these stories were characteristic of the diverse intersection of ideas, people, and events in the early twentieth century that distinguished the multiplicity of social and cultural transformations that were taking place.36 The restructuring of public life,
which began in the 1870s and 1880s during the founding eras of these institutions, became a national impulse in the Progressive era that ushered in the twentieth century. When trustees recognized the larger cultural change and contingency, they made their institutions stronger.

The dissertation is divided into three parts. The first, “In Pursuit of an American Culture,” situates the early trustees in their institutions’ founding periods from the 1840s through the early 1880s. In the context of a rapidly expanding metropolis, elite New Yorkers were moved to fund and conceptualize cultural projects that might compete with those of the capitals of Europe. In the absence of an American template, they adapted European institutional models and benefited from the authority accorded them in terms of social stature in life as well as in death.

Part Two, “Into the Twentieth Century,” focuses on the period from the 1880s through the 1910s and structural building for the institutions—both physical and programmatic—within a local context of consolidation and a national environment of progressivism and growing social variety. The trustees in this period, most of them continuing from the founding time, were building on the conceptual framework they had established. The elegant, monumental architecture for their institutions, in turn, communicated the extravagance of their ambitions. At the Public Library, the combined entities of Astor, Lenox and Tilden, along with a windfall from Andrew Carnegie, established the venture as one in keeping physically, intellectually, and spiritually with the growing population of Greater New York. In 1880, the Metropolitan Museum moved into the initial building of a permanent complex in Central Park, broadcasting visually and physically its grand institutional aspirations to rise to the status of the Louvre and the British Museum. During J. P. Morgan’s tenure as president, the inclination for progressive-era efficiency and professionalism drove a corporate-styled program of “Morganization” while moneyed plutocrats with increasing interest donated funds and artworks to the collections. And at the
Metropolitan Opera, Otto H. Kahn emerged with both initiative and capital to professionalize and galvanize the performing group into a company rivaling the troupes of Europe.

Part Three, “The Spirit of the New Humanism,” covers the first four decades of the twentieth century, and casts the institutions within the changing circumstances prefiguring the Depression and WWII, and the modernist values, both from within and outside the boardroom, that affected the directions of the institutions. These years were dominated by large personalities addressing multiple purposes and a changing financial, political, and social landscape. At the library, the diversity of programs was matched only by the range of users. At the museum, the tenures of board presidents de Forest and Coffin, marked by a progressive and modern spirit, contrasted with the conservatism of George Blumenthal, who succeeded them in the 1930s. The opera, too, entered the modern era with a plan to move from the nineteenth-century auditorium—ultimately scuttled by an ambivalent old guard that did not anticipate impending financial catastrophe, and who almost sacrificed the entire endeavor in the process.

After WWII, with European cities in ruins, New York City legitimately became the cultural capital of the world, a status to which its leaders had aspired and indeed claimed for almost a century. Émigrés in the arts and letters came to the city to work and share ideas that influenced the work of local talents. American culture in a creative sense had come to be designated by not only the manufacture and appreciation of high art, but associated with the aesthetic values of a hard-won American civilization itself.
PART ONE:
In Pursuit of American Culture

On August 4, 1838, a small, untitled article in the Christian Register and Boston Observer announced an unprecedented act in United States history: John Jacob Astor, the wealthiest American of the day, “with an enlightened and liberal spirit,” was donating $350,000 and a parcel of land to the City of New York for the creation of a public library. A handful of libraries had long existed in the city: the Society Library, founded in 1754; the New-York Historical Society, founded in 1804; and other similar “social” libraries in New York that were supported by the contributions of members. But none were entirely “public” in the way Northeastern libraries were becoming by the 1830s. Astor’s munificence would help make up for Gotham’s deficiency in this area. But in reality, in terms of culture, the city was backward in all respects.

In 1838, New York was already the commercial center of the United States, but the country’s intellectual centers were Boston and Philadelphia. Even Baltimore, Charleston, and New Orleans were contenders in the perpetual contest for the title of the most cultivated metropolis. The British traveler Frances Trollope, however, thought New York to be “a lovely and a noble city,” and “as much superior to every other in the Union (Philadelphia not excepted) as London to Liverpool or Paris to Rouen.” Yet compared to London, Paris, or Vienna, all American cities, including New York, remained unsophisticated backwaters that could only glorify aspects of what was most original aesthetically about the New World: the utilitarian, the practical, the “democratic,” and the downright banal. Americans simply had no “usable past.”

Journals in Boston and Philadelphia immediately issued notices claiming that the Astor announcement was a hoax. “What would New Yorkers do with books?” the Journal of Belles Lettres snickered. “They are too much engaged to read them.”
The rumors were unfounded. Astor’s library proceeded as planned and opened in 1854 on Lafayette Place, the “cultural center of the city,” and boasted a collection of books organized by the scholar Joseph Green Cogswell; an elegant Italianate building that quickly became a tourist attraction; and an endowment that furthered its expressed purpose to endure as the first free public reference library in the United States. And it was in New York: self-consciously and extravagantly positioning itself as always as the first of American cities in all things.

Astor’s project was emblematic of the ambitions of both the mid-nineteenth century city and its rich citizens with philanthropic desires. By the 1890s, 45 percent of all wealthy Americans were living in New York City and its environs, so that even if a prevailing impulse among all urban leaders was to help pull the country out of its cultural illiteracy by building great institutions, it was inevitable that the largest efforts would rise in Gotham. These founders and funders were inflamed with a sense of social responsibility—sometimes religiously, sometimes personally motivated—to elevate fellow-New Yorkers of all classes. And as the nation’s financial elite, they had the arrogance to believe that they also had the taste and aesthetic judgment to determine the programs and directions of their new institutions. In light of the absence of a defined professional cultural class of trained curators or directors, this attitude was to a certain extent justified. Moreover, funding the endeavors gave the early trustees, for better or for worse, this prerogative.

With a grand urban public space, Central Park, as its anchor, the city by the 1870s had two major libraries and many smaller ones; two growing museums devoted to fine art and to natural history; a philharmonic society; and a famous opera house, the Academy of Music. All of these began with private funds and initiative, although trustees’ public spiritedness would be tested less by the extent of their pocketbooks than by the limits of their ways of appraising the
social landscape. Many of the men instigated the movement to break the city’s corrupt political Tweed ring, although machine politics ultimately would prevail and thus provide a reason for cultural arbiters to distance themselves from politicians and municipal authority—even if it meant rejecting public funds. But by and large, their private wealth and status enabled trustees to function independently anyway—not only of the city government, but sometimes of the institutions themselves, as in the case of a new entity that challenged the Academy of Music’s primacy. By the 1880s, the Metropolitan Opera House had emerged with a distinguished new program that elevated the American operatic standard even as it also elevated the social ranking of the individuals who founded it.

Part One considers the library, museum, and opera projects in New York in their foundational moments, and introduces the moneyed men who conceived of them.
PROLOGUE

By the 1850s, Americans were becoming exposed to European humanism and scholarship in an exchange as steady as clipper ship departures and arrivals. But the impulse was still to develop a uniquely American intellectual perspective. New England in particular had seized upon this growing rational sensibility, which blossomed in a transcendentalist charge that every man, in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s words, was far from “cheap and vile,” but rather was “a fagot of thunderbolts.”^1 Ultimately, the works of Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Emerson represented the long-sought beginnings of an American literary culture.^2 Meanwhile, scholars and thinkers studied and wrote in private libraries filled with books and documents from abroad.^3 Poised from within this atmosphere were the men who, crediting the small social libraries that had contributed to their commercial successes, sought ways to fund libraries as public necessities for Americans.

Even though the free public library as Americans came to know it originated in Boston in the 1850s, a precursor was the tax-supported school district library for adults, which the New York State legislature had passed into law in 1835.^4 These libraries’ purpose was to provide free reading for the population at large.^5 But the notion of what defined “public” and under what parameters a library for the people’s use might be organized was fraught with ambiguities. If the old social library had been considered public because it was open to anyone willing to pay for the right to use it, the “free public library” emerged with funding from private philanthropists with public spirits, and created with the intention for the institution to be open for all. But the term “public” also implied that the venture had a municipal or state-controlled function, and with private financial support, the library operated in a tightly negotiated manner in terms of
organizational authority and control. So, too, did many of the cultural institutions that came into being later in the nineteenth century.

In the end, the political bureaucrat was no match for the passionate philanthropist in the realm of cultural leadership. And where board composition was concerned, private funders were wary of politicians who were possibly partisan, and generally unsophisticated. The spirit of all cultural endeavors, it was hoped, was nobler than that. But the reality of institution building was expensive and potentially beyond the resources of even the richest philanthropists. In New York, this tenuous relationship of private and public interests would play out in its cultural program in distinctive ways well into the twentieth century.

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In 1854, the year the Astor Library opened, so did the Academy of Music. Located at the corner of Fourteenth Street and Irving Place, the opera house was the most elegant and largest auditorium in the United States with a capacity of approximately three thousand, and was the first large cultural institution built in New York City. It had excellent acoustics, but with too many bad seats with little or no view, it soon was deemed a “decided failure.”

The Academy’s opening night diva, Giulia Grisi, was hardly an icon like the “Swedish Nightingale” Jenny Lind, who would later visit New York in triumph in 1856. Wrapped in ermine, the “queen” who had seen “the adoring capitals of Europe fall prostrate at her feet” could not move her American audience, which was either “exhausted or insensible.” The call for “three cheers” for James Henry Hackett, the opening season’s opera manager, also was greeted with silence. It is not clear whether the audience’s indifference signified displeasure or a general lack of refinement. In any case, bringing grand opera to New York City was going to be a challenge.
While there was no disputing New York’s wealth and commercial influence after the Civil War, building an appropriate cultural infrastructure for the city as significant as its physical one was proving to be more complex. Prominent New Yorkers shared a fervent desire for Gotham to be transformed from a provincial American city into a formidable world metropolis, not only in terms of wealth, but also in terms of civilization. The success of the Academy of Music was yet another agent of this civic agenda. In a republican nation just contemplating the margins of its unique culture, and negotiating who, if anyone, was responsible for it, such institution building would be arduous. For now, rich New Yorkers were taking up the cause, if not for the city or the country, then for themselves.

At the time of the Academy’s construction, the mysterious air of exclusivity about the building and its fundamental purpose caused much speculation and pessimism. It was not known how was the theater being funded, and what its management was going to be. Indeed, what motivated a group of wealthy men to fund, build, and oversee an auditorium dedicated to Italian opera? James Phalen, a local real estate millionaire, presided over approximately eighty stockholders who paid $1,000 a share to guarantee them ownership of the parterre boxes, and give them a controlling interest in the theater. The exclusiveness of the Academy plan was not objectionable, however, so long as it remained a private enterprise, independent of the public: “If they are quite sure of support on the plan of making the house exclusive, or apportioning its best and most eligible privileges to themselves, whether to make their own circle conspicuous as friends of Art, or from the less selfish motive of giving to the opera a fashionable rather than a popular tone, by all means let the scheme go on, without opposition, as a private and select one,” the New-York Daily Times surmised.
Did social self-interest or the desire for a fashionable diversion occasion the Academy of Music? Private funds were financing an essentially private venture, in an overpowering display of cultural hegemony and affluence within the larger social arena of the city. New York’s wealth in the 1850s was growing exponentially: “plebeian and parvenue [sic] are growing rich, and the ‘best families,’ already rich by inheritance, increasing their store,” observed the *Daily Times*. Perhaps there were now enough “ambitiously disposed” New Yorkers to support Grand Opera without looking to city’s ever-expanding the masses.\(^{13}\) Or perhaps exclusiveness was itself the idea. The “best families” wished to differentiate themselves from the plebeian sort, and attendance at the opera, wearing the requisite fashionable accessories, was a simple way to accomplish this. How else in a republic could anyone really tell the patrician from the parvenu?

Consequently, Italian opera in the United States was “every where a luxury,” paid for by “those who enjoy it,” *Harper’s* observed.\(^{14}\) By contrast, European opera houses were either subsidized by the government (as in Italy and France) or by royal families (as in Germany, England, and Russia). In Europe, such “faddish indulgences” could thus be more easily sustained, as could other more educational institutions for the public like libraries or art museums. *Harper’s* predicted that American financiers would not long be able to maintain the struggle.\(^{15}\) In London, a nobleman had a box at the opera as a “part of the play” of being an aristocrat. Accordingly, the “traveled gentry” brought opera to America hoping for something similar.\(^{16}\)

Moreover, without government support in England, the opera might have languished. The English allegedly were not “a musical people,” although perhaps a notch above Americans, who appeared to know only two tunes: *Yankee Doodle* and *Old Folks at Home*. While New Yorkers enthusiastically flocked to minstrel shows, the seasons of opera in New York, regardless of
which theater—the old Park, the Bowery, Niblo’s Garden, or Astor Place—were for the most part unsuccessful. True, in all large American cities there would always be a large group of appreciative operagoers, although these were not of the class that could support an opera house. The ironic truth was that European immigrants and the middle class often had a deeper understanding of the operatic art than did the wealthy Americans that aspired to their self-proclaimed royalty.

In spring 1866 the Academy of Music burned to the ground, giving occasion to reflect on the theater’s short past and its potential future. In a little over a decade, opera in New York had begun to gain international recognition. New York City and the Academy had begun a trend that had led to the erection of similar opera houses in other large American cities. Cynical critics, however, stressed the social culture of the Academy’s audience over the high culture onstage. When the rebuilt auditorium opened, the social status quo of the boxes remained, as did the question of whether it was built to showcase opera stars or the opera-going aristocracy. In time this divide would prove fatal to the Academy, and would be revisited in the Metropolitan Opera House that followed it.

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But clearly there was an idea in the air that considerable American financial resources could stimulate an American culture. Some New Yorkers had the hubris, the money, and the boosterish urban pride to be consumed with the notion that if such a culture was developing in the United States, the best formal institutions to legitimize it should be in New York, which by 1825, for better or worse, was the nation’s art center. The plan for a museum of art was next.

On November 23, 1869, William Cullen Bryant, the distinguished journalist, poet, and editor of the New York Evening Post chaired a “discussion” at the Union League Club about a
proposal to establish a permanent art museum in New York City, “for the benefit of the people at large.”

Although smaller art galleries and repositories existed in the United States, and the Wadsworth Athenaeum was established in 1842 as the first free-standing public art museum, as of 1869, there was no large-scale art institution.

The provenance of this discussion was a July 4, 1866 dinner in Paris attended by a festive Franco-American group. After the meal, according to the Times of London, New Yorker John Jay gave a “lively and amusing speech on ‘the American invasion of the Old World.’” Although the account noted that the celebration, held at the elegant Pré Catalan Restaurant in the Bois de Boulogne, included one tent for dancing and two for refreshments, and lasted until nearly midnight, the report gave no indication that Jay’s witty commentary would initiate what would become the American museum movement. Americans might have invaded the Old World in body, but a provincial spirit still lingered over the cultural life of the post-Civil War New World. For Jay, whose namesake and grandfather had been the first chief justice of the United States, it “was time for the American people to lay the foundation of a National Institution and Gallery of Art.” Some of those at the July 4 celebration in Paris were just the men to inaugurate the plan.

Returning to New York in 1866, Jay’s associates took up the subject of a national gallery of art at meetings at the Union League. The club, at the vanguard of late nineteenth-century institution building and cultural and political stewardship, was founded in 1863 under the ideological premise of helping to preserve the Union. But it also organized practical initiatives involving the public at large like the United States Sanitary Commission, and assisted in the drives to erect the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor and the Lincoln Monument in Union Square. Locally, its members attacked the corrupt Tweed ring, and nationally, they raised funds
to outfit American soldiers. Upon his homecoming, John Jay was elected the club’s president, and, with its august art committee, initiated a public forum to reflect on their ambitious plan for an art museum.

Elihu Root, who attended the early talks, noted that American taste was in a decidedly “dreadful” period in the decades between the presidencies of Jackson and Grant. “The newly awakening desire of the American people for art was finding expression in sawed scrollwork and basswood towers. The women of America, with all the innate and natural taste of womanhood, were pressing autumn leaves and doing crude worsted work as an expression of art,” he recalled haughtily.

Nevertheless, in November 1869 Bryant came to address a “sea of upturned faces”—a large and varied representation of artists, editors, architects, lawyers, merchants, and others. While there was still no precise scheme for how such a museum might be built, the public needed to be apprised of the importance of taking “early and effectual measures” for establishing it. The esteemed man of letters noted that while no similar project was planned in any other American city, New York clearly was unrivalled in many other ways as a standard bearer for the nation. “Our City is the third great city of the civilized world,” he said. “Our republic has already taken its place among the great Powers of the earth; it is great in extent, great in population, great in the activity and enterprise of her people. It is the richest nation in the world.” And New York was the richest metropolis in the United States.

Yet Gotham had “hardly made a step” towards establishing an art museum. In a leitmotif that had been repeated in other early cultural institutions in New York, political sponsorship under Tweed and Tammany leadership would be foolhardy to depend upon. Nevertheless, Bryant wondered how “the little Kingdom of Saxony,” approximately the size of Massachusetts,
possibly could have a monumental museum of fine arts. Even Spain, “a third-rate Power of Europe and poor besides,” had a museum of fine arts, “the opulence and extent of which absolutely bewilder the visitor.”

But if American money could not buy sophistication, it could buy art. Americans in the nineteenth century had “invaded” the Old World only in the sense that nineteenth-century nouveaux riches men and women of leisure, many if not all born of the “middling” classes, were traveling to Europe on grand tours that included spending sprees on fine art and *objets* of both authentic and questionable quality. As Europeans sniffed that America had no cultural future, American city builders had to reckon with the prevailing notion that art could be cast in idealistic as well as nationalistic terms, measuring a country’s success as a society by its artistic taste. Nineteenth-century collectors were only beginning to recognize the potency of this view, and their role in realizing it. August Belmont and A. T. Stewart had amassed large collections of European and American art, and some wealthy Manhattanites even opened their mansions to the public on select days for viewing. Bryant, however, wondered where these works might find a more permanent and public home.

New York City was the obvious place for such a museum. If the metropolis, as Bryant declared, was now a “great mart of the Western World,” with greatness came responsibilities that leaders like the Union League Club members embraced. Those who used the term “empire” to contemplate and link America’s destiny with the growth of an international capitalist order, also saw New York City as the fulcrum where the nation and the world were joined.

But Bryant also recognized the dark side of ascent. He anticipated with agitation that an increased population—the “aggregation of human life”—would yield “a concentration of all that ennobles and all that degrades humanity” on an unimaginable scale. In great cities, with the
sunshine of philanthropy and talent came the shadow of squalor and poverty. Bryant was not alone in surmising that to counteract the vice and crime lurking in “such mighty and crowded populations,” art was crucial to elevating the character of the city as a whole. The proposed museum would be more than a vessel for containing works of art. It would be an instrument of moral uplift and a means by which Americans could display and acquire taste.

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With the emergence of the Astor Library and the Academy of Music, New York was already beginning to build cultural institutions appropriate for a great city. But in 1869, a purpose-built art museum was not yet part of the plan. It fell as always to the rich, but also the cultural aesthetes and the artists themselves to galvanize support for this latest attempt to place the United States on the world stage culturally. Yet control over these organizations also ascribed trustees with the power of defining New York’s cultural identity—something they were very self-consciously encouraging.

The Union League meeting featured other supporters in addition to Bryant, and they had no shortage of ideas. A young professor of art history from Princeton University, George Fisk Comfort, reminded his audience that they “were not developed from a race of indigenous barbarians, as was the case with European nations,” thus giving the Americans license to contemplate the project from a stance of relative superiority. Even though Comfort conceded that where artistic education and production were concerned, his country was “lamentably deficient,” he was convinced that Americans could “build a museum that would surpass any now in existence,” even some of the “most conspicuous” galleries in Europe, which, at least architecturally, were failures. And he was equally sure that the location of the new repository unquestionably should be in Central Park.
The park, which began construction in 1858, was already a landmark, drawing more than seven million visitors a year. Comfort wagged a finger at those who could afford to join its opulent carriage parade, but who lacked the finesse to demand an art museum there, or anywhere, in New York. “Again, a museum of art would promote a very valuable taste for improvement to that large class of our population who have several hours to spare every day, who ride up through the Park and through the avenues, and then return home.” Like the park itself, the museum could influence and inspire everyone.

The assembled mix of artistic, financial, and political authorities heard arguments for the museum from every perspective: from the aesthetic, to the patriotic, to the political, to the moral. Richard Morris Hunt, the founder and president of the American Institute of Architects, pledged the assistance of the city’s architects in erecting the new building. Henry G. Stebbins, the president of the Central Park Commission, said that the Park Commissioners would “gladly render any aid in their power to promote the enterprise.” After other related commendations, Henry W. Bellows, a Union League founder, president of the Sanitary Commission, and rector of All Soul’s Church, closed the meeting with a final appeal for the proposed museum to “redeem our civilization from the gross materialism into which our abundant wealth and lack of culture were drifting us.” This was no longer a local Union League Club affair, if it ever was.

In the days following, the “great art enterprise” was reported with anticipation and enthusiasm, although the Tribune was quick to note that the idea of an American art museum or of art collecting in general was nothing new. In fact, “scores of public-spirited men” had discussed the subject for years. “It is a singular trait of our impulsive and energetic people,” the Tribune sniffed, “to discuss questions without ascertaining what has been discovered and discoursed about them by previous inquirers, and to start enterprises without ascertaining what
has previously been accomplished in the premises.” Instead of concentrating resources, efforts had been too numerous and varied to gain any traction. Invariably, this was a waste of “time, talent, and means.”

Yet Bryant and Comfort’s sermonizing about the need for an art museum betrayed a public insecurity and self-consciousness about a larger issue. A museum on a grand scale was a sign of civility as well as civilization, and those who attended the meeting regarded themselves as the bearers of such refinement. As much as the United States was on an upward trajectory in innovation and prosperity, the country as a whole was ignorant of an artistic perspective or an empowering aesthetic sensibility so natural to European nations. This new art museum was being founded on the enormous ambition to be not only a repository, but also a symbol of national progress. Museums and the men who built them were summoning the power “to make all classes acquainted with the beautiful and curious manifestations of the human mind, and the lovely and interesting works of men’s hands.”

And yet there were also competing preconceptions about who the museums were for. Were they for art students, for the new leisure class, for city builders, or for the underclass? Or, in the name of uplift, were art museums for the entire society, and indeed, the entire nation? If the purpose was educative, whose values were being promoted, and whose taste was the model? “The want of such a museum is not the want of a place of amusement, nor even of a new adornment of our city and attraction to strangers. It is the want of an essential means of high cultivation,” the Metropolitan Museum officers later explained. New York certainly could not boast of any cultural institutions of the stature of those in London or Paris. But the trustees’ intent was broader than such parochialism; they were making an appeal for American culture as a whole.
Most Americans associated museums with “chaotic gatherings of curiosities and monstrosities, real or artificial, united to dramatic entertainments,” like at P. T. Barnum’s, or with the richly decorated palaces in Europe, filled with fine art but arranged around no particular curatorial or historical plan. In fact, the mingling of the “vernacular” popular culture of the masses with the “high” culture of the European tradition was common: Barnum’s emporium displayed fine art along with scientific curiosities. The talk, indeed, was of educating and refining a nation as much as it was about establishing a museum.

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Museums had emerged in eighteenth-century Europe, although merchant princes, aristocrats, and scholars during the Age of Discovery for decades had been organizing their personal collections—consisting of a ironically Barnumesque range of fine art to natural history specimens—into refined “cabinets of curiosities” for their private enjoyment. In time, these storehouses were opened to researchers, and eventually, to the educated public. Absent the context of royal treasuries or palaces, the American perspective was different: borne of a republican ideal, the museum functioned as a mode of enlightenment for the citizenry, an edifying and inspirational place that was but one aspect of the larger project of nation building. Museums in the United States, like the one Charles Willson Peale founded in 1784 in Philadelphia, were, in addition, typically market driven and open to the admission-paying public. By the nineteenth century, American city builders in New York and elsewhere, fueled by growing industrial power and prosperity and the nationalistic desire to compete with the old cities of Europe, looked to museums as a way to express the young nation’s supremacy, if not its sophistication.
Similarly, early library efforts were part of a national movement from cultural immaturity to maturity. The Lockean spirit behind American democratic thought—of inalienable rights that helped an individual to fulfill his or her abilities and advance the progress of society as a whole—fueled public library support in the larger quest for “useful learning.” Privately, American men of means privately began to collect books and documents, and more publicly organized voluntary library associations in which members contributed to a general fund for book purchase, owned in common. Because of the ad hoc nature of these early libraries, eventually an official arrangement evolved similar to the privately controlled public services such as education and water supply in Great Britain. Yet the founders of American social libraries were operating under a broader conviction that their purpose was to encourage the public pursuit of knowledge and virtue.

Although Americans looked to Europe for culture, there was no perfect model to replicate in terms of museums. As Americans bought up old masters and transported them away from the Old World, cities like Washington and Boston were beginning to build their own art museums in 1869. But New York, with its hundreds of rich families, had the easiest path to make a museum happen, as evidenced by the founding of the American Museum of Natural History earlier that year. With its oversupply of millionaires, New York did not anticipate encountering much difficulty in raising money or gathering art for a respectable gallery. But Boston, with a little over one-fourth of New York City’s population, also had its share of wealthy men and cultivated potential donors. It had important institutions including the Massachusetts Historical Society (the first such American repository), the Athenaeum, the Public Library, the American Social Science Association, and across the Charles River in Cambridge, the Institute of Technology and
Harvard University. The competitive impulse towards museum building was multidimensional: one part altruism, one part egotism, one part paternalism, one part local pride.⁶⁰

Even so, some observers balked at the stir caused by New York’s museum proposal, claiming it to be unoriginal. Indeed, the New-York Historical Society was already a major repository. Founded in 1804 as both a museum and a library, it had assembled a fine art collection by 1857, when it moved into its new state-of-the-art fireproof headquarters built with private funds.⁶¹ In 1858, it had received the holdings of the New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts, comprised of the collection of Luman Reed, a patron of early nineteenth-century American art. The same year, James Lenox presented the Society with the “Lenox Marbles,” a large collection of Nineveh sculptures.⁶² Two years later, through a public subscription, the institution raised funds to purchase the Abbott collection of Egyptian artifacts, considered to be the greatest representative Egyptian works in America.⁶³ In the 1860s, it purchased 433 of the 435 original watercolor paintings for John James Audubon’s Birds of America, and Thomas J. Bryan donated 381 works of primarily European art.⁶⁴ Every year, new additions arrived.⁶⁵ By 1869, however, the building had grown inadequate. Consequently, the land for an art museum in Central Park was already earmarked for the Historical Society, and in both 1862 and 1868, the New York State legislature even had designated specific building sites.⁶⁶

The Historical Society, then, was unquestionably the preeminent museum in Manhattan at the time of the Civil War. Why start yet another?⁶⁷

Unfortunately, the Historical Society members and leaders were pedigreed gentlemen of small means. Thus, they were more typical of insular Philadelphia and Boston than of the moneyed metropolis on the Hudson. Furthermore, the institution had become too exclusive an organization to consider building a home with public funds. The trustees were unwilling to get
their hands dirty negotiating with the likes of Boss Tweed, and relied instead on private largesse. Significantly, the Historical Society rejected the more practical notion of a merger with the Metropolitan Museum because its trustees thought that some of its sponsors were not gentlemen.68 Not surprisingly, the venerable old museum failed to raise the money for a new building.

Actually, the dream of a fine art museum in New York preceded even the New-York Historical Society.69 But early attempts were hampered by haphazard senses of purpose and organizational exclusivity. In 1800, Manhattan’s only museum belonged to the Tammany Society, a “fraternity of patriots” who were “solemnly consecrated to the independence, the popular liberty, and the federal union of the country.”70 The Society’s first Sagamore, John Pintard, conceived of the museum in 1790 and opened it in 1791, devoted to the enormous, ambitious, and somewhat ill-defined mission “of collecting and preserving everything relating to the history of America, likewise, every American production of nature or art.”71 (A little over a decade later, Pintard adapted a version of the same mission when he founded the New-York Historical Society.)72

Another venture was the American Academy of the Fine Arts, founded in 1802 by Robert R. Livingston, the American ambassador to France. It secured plaster casts of ancient sculptures from the Louvre, and it combined exhibitions with lectures, schools, a library, and “other agencies in art education,” modeled along the lines of the Royal Academy in England.73 Its leaders and subscribers included famous citizens like Aaron Burr, Robert Fulton, De Witt Clinton, David Hosack, and Cadwallader D. Colden, but its exhibitions “were not suited to a novelty-seeking public,” nor was its stockholding membership comprised of artists.74

It would stand to reason that artists, as much as their patrons, should have a say in the
institutional encouragement of art in New York. In reaction, the National Academy of Design and the American Art Union were formed in the 1820s and 1830s. Both were influential in the developing cause of American artistic literacy and the production and sponsorship of the work of living artists in the mid-nineteenth century. But both catered to a cultured elite.

New York also had significant private art collections. In the 1830s, like other notable art patrons, the merchant Luman Reed opened his home at 13 Greenwich Street once a week to visitors who wanted to view works by the contemporary artists Asher B. Durand and Thomas Cole, among others. The third-floor rooms became a congenial place for artists and literary men to meet and exchange ideas. Upon Reed’s death in 1836, his friends purchased his entire collection to establish the New York Gallery of the Fine Arts. Its trustees were made up mostly of wholesale grocers, even though William Cullen Bryant numbered among them. “Why, these people know more about pork and molasses than they do about art!” uttered James Gordon Bennett of the New York Herald. In any case, the institution was financially unsustainable, and its holdings became part of the New-York Historical Society in 1858.

The following year, Peter Cooper founded the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, the first organization in the United States dedicated to the free education of the working classes. The Cooper Union also maintained a reading room, art galleries, and scientific collections. By its fifth year, over 150,000 people visited the art gallery alone.

These and other smaller art galleries qualified as proto-museums founded to promote art or artists. But none had the broader ambitions, vision, and wider influence of the new proposal of 1869. A new standard was underway in New York’s cultural milieu, one that recognized the passing of the city from a colonial trading post to an international metropolis. But the movement also embraced the diversity of opinion, the array of wealth, and the orientation of the population
that was becoming emblematic of the city as a whole. In no other city was this unique confluence of factors more in place.
CHAPTER ONE
“For the Advancement of Useful Knowledge”:
Private Libraries for the Public Good

Sometime in 1837, upon returning home from a European tour of private libraries, Joseph Green Cogswell, a Harvard-trained educator and editor of the New York Review, was summoned by John Jacob Astor, America’s first multimillionaire. Shrewd in business and frugal with money, Astor, a once-penniless immigrant, had built a fur trading and real estate empire, and was being criticized for giving very little back to the society that had enriched him. At some point, possibly on the advice of his friend and biographer Washington Irving, he became consumed with the idea of endowing New York City with a library, and he had determined that Cogswell was the ablest man to help him in that pursuit. A public library “for the Advancement of Useful Knowledge” might perpetuate the Astor name while serving a more grandiose mission to give the city’s people access, through a distinguished collection of books, to the culture of the world.¹

Although Astor had a reputation for being miserly and uncouth, Cogswell liked the “old gentleman,” who had ingratiated himself to other intellectuals like Irving, Gerrit Smith, and Fitz-Greene Halleck as well.² After their first meeting, Cogswell wrote in his journal that Astor spoke well on many subjects and showed great interest in the arts and literature.³ Intrigued, Cogswell moved into Astor’s home at Hell Gate and for ten years developed his library’s plans, not only determining the terms of the bequest, but also assembling the fine collection itself by attending auctions and buying books in the United States and abroad.⁴

When the library opened in 1854, the New-York Daily Times acknowledged that the building was less ostentatious than anticipated, and that the number of books was exaggerated.⁵ A collection assembled by even the richest benefactor but over the course of only a decade was
no match in rank with the books gathered over centuries that were housed in the public libraries of Europe. At the Astor Library, there were two miles of shelves for an initial eighty thousand volumes. By comparison, the British Museum had fourteen miles’ worth. More important, the American library, like the British one, was intended less for “cursory readers” than for professionals and scholars. The books were closely guarded by librarians in closed stacks and not to be taken from the building.

The Astor Library was open without charge to “all persons” over age fourteen (later increased to sixteen). Its hours were limited, which, along with the lack of popular literature, indicated a less-than-wholehearted desire to accommodate the reading public. By 1892, in fact, Life published a cartoon depicting a sign outside the library that read, “Open every other Monday from 9:58 am to 10 am.”

Was this what was imagined as a “public” library? In the absence of a distinct template, American library builders were hard pressed to define a framework. “Public” did not necessarily mean free, or for everyone, or funded by the government. It fell to early trustees to determine the purpose and parameters of their institutions, and to understand and negotiate the limits of their own power.

Certainly the Astor was more public than the Lenox Library, a collection of rare books and manuscripts amassed by the merchant and landowner James Lenox. A religious man of few words and fewer friends, although one “of varied information, of much studious reading, of extensive correspondence, and of many books,” Lenox made large donations to hospitals, churches, a home for aged women, and other services for needy New Yorkers, always quietly and unceremoniously. In 1845, he engaged the bibliophile Henry Stevens to help in his book-collecting activities, in a relationship that would last over two decades. The London-based
Stevens had an impressive client roster that included the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, public libraries and institutions, and private clients. Eventually, Lenox’s library possessed the first Gutenberg Bible to come to the United States, George Washington’s manuscript for his “farewell address,” and Christopher Columbus’s letter announcing the discovery of a new world. His choices were unique, idiosyncratic, and certainly valuable, but not comprehensive enough to form a great library. “Mr. Lenox excelled all men I ever knew for seizing ideas and perseveringly running them out to the end,” Stevens wrote. But his mode of collecting left many gaps. “The result of all Mr. Lenox’s enormous study and labor, to say nothing of his vast expenditure, it must be confessed, is ‘a patchy library’ as he left it,” his agent admitted.

In 1870 Lenox, a bachelor, donated the land, $300,000 for a building, and his books and manuscripts to the citizens of New York City, his veritable heirs. But his purpose-built library felt more like a private country house (on sparsely populated Fifth Avenue between Seventieth and Seventy-first Streets). The books could be seen on exhibition, but not perused, and admission was by card, much as private art collectors opened their collections to the general public on certain days. The New York Times called the Lenox Library “a select resort for bibliomaniacs.” As a private individual Lenox had succeeded in building a library; but as a public trustee his effort had failed. In time this begged the question of whether free reference libraries were compatible with the growing movement for free circulating libraries. The library-using “public,” in fact, was divided into two very different groups: researchers, and readers for pleasure.

By the 1890s, the Astor and Lenox libraries both had outlived their founding purposes to aid in the course of “useful learning.” While private boards steadfastly governed both
repositories, the founders’ descendants were indifferent about the institutions’ ongoing support. Furthermore, the New York City “public” had shifted demographically: over 40 percent of the population between 1860 and 1890 was foreign born. This certainly was not the reading public that frequented research libraries like the Astor or the Lenox; new immigrants were better served by the free neighborhood lending libraries established by settlement houses and charitable societies beginning in the late 1880s. By then, the university library system for advanced study also was supplanting the privately organized research and subscription libraries, and newer philanthropists of a more bookish bent, in turn, were supporting expanding institutions of higher learning rather than perpetuating the so-called public social libraries.

In fact, Astor and Lenox’s public library initiatives had been intended for a particular portion of the public, namely bourgeois strivers and elite gentlemen scholars, not the immigrant masses. Neither benefactor could have anticipated that along with the city’s rise and growth, the population would shift such that the goals of a public library would be as much about literacy and community as they were about research and scholarship.

These paradoxes of “public” and “private” were myriad. While forging an urbane civilization in keeping with the city’s commercial ascension, New Yorkers had planned to compete with European cities on every level. But there was a flip side to the notion of “culture”: the lived experience of cultural pluralism. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, trustees were examining how best to repurpose their noblesse oblige for a different age. In New York, libraries needed to cater to different factions of citizens: the middle and lower classes who borrowed popular books from ad hoc circulation libraries, and the elites and scholars who consulted rare books at research libraries like the Astor and the Lenox. Furthermore, a public institution connoted something for the people, sponsored by the state; but in New York, libraries
were privately funded and administered. The reality of a reading “public” had become an almost abstract, multi-valenced notion.

“…access to books is almost as completely cut off in this city as it is in the Adirondacks”

In early 1879, while waiting for a Grace Church-sponsored sewing class to begin, six little girls listened intently to a sensational story that one of them was reading aloud from a cheap magazine. When their teacher arrived, she was horrified, and offered to loan each girl one book a week in exchange for never purchasing such a publication again. The girls readily complied. When other women learned of the incident, they took up a collection that yielded around five hundred books, and obtained a room on Thirteenth Street east of Fourth Avenue for a small library, which they opened once a week for two hours.¹⁴

The children were told to bring their friends—the only way the program was promoted—because those connected with the little library carefully and politely wanted to avoid “everything like advertising or forcing the Library into the notice of the public.” They preferred instead to test the value of their venture by “the demands and interest of those drawn toward it.”¹⁵ Those who came therefore did so without solicitation by a librarian or anyone on the library committee. Nevertheless, almost immediately, the library’s popularity was so great that the sidewalk was blocked during the hours of operation, and on one day in the first few months, all of the shelves were left bare but for two volumes. At the end of its first year, the New York Free Circulating Library, as it came to be known, possessed around 1,200 volumes (all of which had been given out several times each), and served both children and adults living from lower Broadway to 120th Street.¹⁶ One thousand books was not a terribly significant number, but until then, nobody had ever thought to question why the largest city in the United States lacked a bonafide free library,
when the model had long existed in smaller cities in New England, Boston in particular. “Everyone knows, however, that for the general public, and particularly for the poorer portions of it, access to books is almost as completely cut off in this city as it is in the Adirondacks,” the Library Journal declared.\textsuperscript{17}

Recognizing a pressing demand that might quickly outgrow the library’s unpretentious beginnings, the women in charge consulted “men of standing” in the community and determined the necessity of establishing a library for the circulation of books among the “very poor.” The library subsequently was incorporated in March 1880 and hoped to establish distribution points all over the city, but not “to attempt the establishment of any large and expensive building,” because the very class which they hoped to reach “instinctively shunned” such places. A single library building, moreover, would be “comparatively useless” if inconveniently located.\textsuperscript{18}

A different formulation from the research or subscription library was at work here, one that benefited from a distinctive female presence and outlook. Of the twenty-one members of the Free Circulating Library’s first board of trustees, eleven were women, including its first president. In the institution’s twenty-year existence, unlike any New York City library before it, both men and women were equally distributed on the board, the executive committee, and the working committees. Moreover, the first two chief librarians were female, as, indeed, were a majority of those who took up librarianship as a professional calling.\textsuperscript{19}

In January 1882, the library’s leaders, several of whom were associated with the Union League Club, arranged a gathering to call attention to the existence of the Free Library, of which few New Yorkers were yet aware, and to propose its expansion. Three hundred and fifty prominent citizens, taken from the lists of subscribers to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Natural History, and other institutions, responded to the invitation. Among them
were “a large number of ladies,” and Mayor William R. Grace, the anti-Tammany, newly elected first Catholic mayor of New York, philanthropist, humanitarian, and founder of W. R. Grace and Company, who presided.\(^{20}\) The meeting recalled an auspicious moment a dozen years earlier, when city leaders rallied around the need for an art museum at the Union League Club event that spawned the Metropolitan Museum. Indeed, the current Free Circulating Library president, Henry E. Pellew, suggested that the library meeting itself was about a dozen years overdue.

The talk again was of a “civilizing influence,” the benefits of which would be shared by all persons, “irrespective of class and color, race and religion.” As with its other cultural endeavors, New York was shamefully behind other cities in the matter of free libraries, and with the persistent fear of vice and disorder, the city, it seemed, might benefit from the stabilizing influence of books.\(^{21}\) “Idleness, and vacant, unoccupied minds are materials out of which crime is produced,” claimed Dr. John Hall, the pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, at the meeting. “It is hard to get good agents, and hard to gain access to all those you desire to reach. The best and highest thing in the world is a book.”\(^{22}\) Thus, libraries filled with carefully chosen volumes also were perfect vehicles for social control.

Hall argued that it was unrealistic to expect working people to buy books. Moreover, more sophisticated citizens had a moral duty to expose their less-privileged brethren to “first-rate” literature, and not “waste their strength on the tenth-rate.” The call, though, was for democracy and order: “Let the rich men aid in this work by bridging over the chasm between themselves and the less fortunate or wealthy classes, and they will lay broader and deeper the foundations of society with a regulated liberty, in which the rich might not only enjoy the fruits of their toil, and labors, and intellects, but be safe from violence and crime, and from the stupid hate and envy of those who have not succeeded as well as they in the battle of life.”\(^{23}\)
Joseph H. Choate, the gifted orator, lawyer, and trustee of the Metropolitan Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Free Circulating Library, was characteristically jovial, but no less trenchant in his remarks. “In this great city, at the end, nearly, of the nineteenth century, with a population of almost a million and a quarter, there hasn’t been a single instrumentality for bringing home books to the poor—the working classes.” How could rich New Yorkers live in houses filled with books, with neighbors not even knowing what a bookcase was? Then Choate took a swipe at New York’s more established libraries. “Any men with nothing to do can go to the Astor or Lenox libraries—I believe you can go to the Lenox library. It was never open when I was unemployed and could go there,” he said to laughter and applause. A workingman might go to “good old Peter Cooper’s Institute,” but could not get a book anywhere on an evening or a Sunday.

Choate gave complete credit for the New York Free Circulating Library to the women who founded it. “Having been ejected by the Board of Trustees for non-attendance at the meetings, I can appreciate the energy and propelling power with which its members work, and that expulsion was due to the ladies of that directory,” he said. “The men who hover about the wings here, and who appear as officers of the institutions, are only ornamental; the real work is done by the ladies, and they are determined to make the project a success.” There was nothing that could save the city or the nation as much as the education of the working classes, Choate surmised, and a growing cadre of women involved in charitable work as volunteers and as professionals were well aware, first-hand, of the issues of the poor. “This community cannot long hold if poverty and misery and crime are to increase on one side as fast as wealth increases on the other,” Choate said.
Clearly the organizers of the Free Circulating Library recognized the demographic change afoot in their city. When Astor established his library, Manhattan’s population was approximately 300,000, and Brooklyn’s around 47,000. By 1880, over one million residents were living in Manhattan, and almost 600,000 in Brooklyn.\textsuperscript{29} In 1881 alone, over 440,000 immigrants had arrived in the port of New York, of which approximately 152,00 had stayed in the state and in all probability would choose to remain there permanently.\textsuperscript{30} With the city’s increasing population, government control would become more complex, and the library’s Ways and Means Committee anticipated many questions that would need settling. Furthermore, the municipal leadership was of as much concern as was the new citizenry. Free, “wholesome” reading was ever more important to combat the ignorance that was the “basis of misgovernment”—a fear that animated not only the anti-Tammany Union League Club members, but elites of all stripes.\textsuperscript{31}

Many of the Free Circulating Library’s other founding trustees, apart from the women, also were parishioners of Grace Church, and included such leading figures in New York politics, law, and culture as Levi P. Morton, Hamilton Fish, Abram Hewitt, and Philip Schuyler. They had friends in high places—Gentile and Jewish alike—who enthusiastically lent their support. The congregation’s rector, Reverend Henry Codman Potter, was a social reformer himself who took great pride in the library’s beginnings from within his flock.\textsuperscript{32} At the Union League meeting, he quoted some stunning statistics: now outgrown its original room, the library at the end of its second year of existence circulated the equivalent of seventy-thousand volumes, each book in the collection borrowed over seventeen times, and all returned in good order.\textsuperscript{33} “In the Old World, the classes are bound together by ties not existing among us,” he said.\textsuperscript{34} Americans had to create these ties on their own. Those assembled at the Union League, he suggested, could
help begin the process of uniting rich and poor by donating funds for the new public library, not as warranted by the state, but as moved by their souls.

This was the real purpose of the meeting. The library needed money for a new building and a sufficient endowment—ideally, a fund of $200,000. It hoped to create smaller libraries—conceivably one free library to every police stationhouse—“with special books suitable to certain localities.” The result would be a boon to the community at large, not to mention a way to “place our hands upon the throat of crime in this city.” And for the time being, the trustees did not seek the support or management of the Common Council, lest the library become a “politician’s football,” and means of patronage.

Donations from five to five thousand dollars came in during the library’s first five years. Supporters included prosperous members of the Whitney and Vanderbilt families, Robert and Ogden Goelet, the heiress Catherine Lorillard Wolfe, Collis P. Huntington, Abraham Kuhn, Jacob H. Schiff, and Andrew Carnegie. J. P. Morgan was the library’s treasurer in the early 1880s. By and large, however, the sizes of donations to the library did not match the benefactors’ great abilities or sizable contributions to other causes.

But in spirit the endeavor was greater than its leaders, and in purpose more far-reaching than any other library initiative in New York, ever. New York’s masses were hardly the constituency that Astor or Lenox had considered when planning their “public” libraries. True to the Free Circulating Library’s broader mission, the branch librarians established close relationships with the public schools, and regularly sent them boxes of books. By 1897, this schools initiative had expanded to such an extent that the board established a special Traveling Library Department to take charge of it. Indeed, by 1900, the New York Free Circulating Library was no longer one library, but a network of them—eleven in all, plus the traveling
project—all over the city, serving varied populations and communities from the Lower East Side to Harlem. The libraries were open every day but four days a year for seventy-seven hours each week for lending. These buildings became more than just libraries, but functioned as community centers.

The branch on Second Avenue near St. Mark’s Place, for example, opened in 1884 with a gift from Oswald Ottendorfer, the publisher of the influential German-language daily newspaper, the *New-Yorker Staats-Zeitung*. It was located in the midst of *Kleineutschland*, or “Little Germany,” where 150,000 persons of German descent lived. With half of the original eight thousand books in German and the other half in English, the Ottendorfer Library was a welcoming place that not only cultivated its patrons’ minds but also helped assimilate them into American culture.

This, indeed, was a library for the public. But in terms of funding, was it a “public library”? 

In 1880, the per capita income in the United States was $147, and the family income (for a family of five) was $735. In New York City, however, there were families whose wealth and expendable income were exponentially higher. In April 1880, for example, the fifty-four men who came together to officially incorporate New York’s Metropolitan Opera House, each contributed at least $10,000, and one man, William Kissam Vanderbilt, invested $30,000.

Such sums from private sources did not materialize for the New York Free Circulating Library, the very antithesis of the culture of conspicuous consumption that had created the opera house. In its first few years of operation after the Union League meeting, the library relied on membership fees and donations, but the State Library Fund and appropriations from New York City gradually became the principal contributors to the library’s income. As the library system
grew, the burden of support shifted to the public, as it became clear that the small project had progressed from a private charity to a public necessity—as the Free Circulating Library leaders had presciently anticipated in 1882 that it might.

The Free Circulating Library, borne of a benevolent impulse arising from an immediate and material need, always maintained its tangible connection to those it served. True, its founders had been moved by one part noblesse oblige, one part charity, and one part fear of urban anarchy. But the library’s success in addressing larger educational goals also spoke to a significant and underserved demand. “The idea that this system of circulating libraries is only for the use of the very poor has been superseded by the belief that it is an important adjunct of the city’s educational system, and as such entitled to municipal support,” the trustees wrote in 1900.41

“A Rich Man is Primarily a Trustee of Society”

Samuel J. Tilden’s nickname for most of his adult life was “Whispering Sammy,” because a bronchial ailment left him with hushed speech. A “confirmed hypochondriac,” he was plagued with a delicate stomach, and was prone to “dyspepsia” and fits of vomiting. Although his attire was expensive and clean, there was something careless about the fit of his clothes and the untidy way he wore them; the urbane sugar entrepreneur Henry Havemeyer was even slightly embarrassed to dine with him at Delmonico’s. But once Tilden began to speak, his perceived oddities evaporated.42 He was riveting.

Tilden was a pioneer political reformer who used legal means to punish the guilty and rhetorical eloquence to galvanize public opinion.43 As a young lawmaker, he was a supporter of Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren. Unlike the radical defectors to the Republican Party
during the Civil War era, Tilden remained a Democrat, championing reform, and challenging New York’s Tweed Ring, which he took credit for crushing.44 “He wants to bring the hay loft and cheese press down to the city and crush out the machine,” Boss Tweed said of Tilden in 1869. “He wants to get a crowd of canting reformers in the Legislature who will talk about the centrifugal force of the Government and cut down the tax levy below a living rate and then when he gets everything all fixed to suit him he wants to go to the United States Senate.”45 Tilden, in fact, did even better than that. Before becoming governor of New York State and then winning the popular vote for the American presidency in 1876 (but losing to Rutherford B. Hayes electorally), Tilden was known as the “ablest corporation lawyer in America,” and was famous for settling cases out of court.46 Along the way he also amassed over five million dollars through shrewd investments.

In judgment, Tilden was methodical almost to the point of mathematical. He also was egotistical, blunt, secretive, and had the habit of declaring, “I told you so.” Irritatingly noncommittal, Tilden also often said “Not yet” when asked for a point of view. John Bigelow, his close associate, called him “one of the most difficult men to get an opinion out of that I ever knew.”47 Apparently, Tilden’s indecision stemmed not so much from evading responsibility as from taking the time to weigh all of the factors surrounding an issue. He came to sound conclusions as a result, and his business and political associates relied heavily on his counsel.48 But his negative characteristics sometimes obscured the worthy motives behind his behavior.49

Games like cards or chess did not interest him, nor did charity balls or popular cultural activities like music, theater, opera, or art collecting.50 All of his pleasures, it seemed, were intellectual. Following the 1876 election, in the last decade of Tilden’s life, a palsy affected his hands and body, and his health declined further following an “apoplectic stroke” which left him
partially paralyzed in one leg, one arm, and one eye.\textsuperscript{51} Unable to speak audibly or to hold a book or turn its pages, he stopped regularly receiving visitors and retreated to books and journals that were read to him at breakfast and throughout each day—seven hundred books in all—during his last four years. Over the course of his life, he collected works on law, art, history, biography, and general literature, caring little for poetry, fiction, metaphysics, or the natural sciences.\textsuperscript{52} By the time Tilden died in 1886 at age seventy-two, he had amassed almost twenty thousand volumes.\textsuperscript{53}

As a bachelor, Tilden had contemplated the “problem” of his wealth in considering to whom he should bequeath his assets, and believed that “a rich man is primarily a trustee of society.”\textsuperscript{54} In the end, in his will, Tilden decided to leave approximately $1,400,000 to his relatives, significantly more than the $225,000 he designated to others. The remaining two-thirds of his roughly five million-dollar estate was earmarked for the creation of the Tilden Trust, a fund to promote educational and scientific endeavors, and to establish and maintain a free library and reading room in New York City.

By the year of Tilden’s death, the New York Free Circulating Library was no longer alone in articulating a need to provide books to the larger public. A new state law passed in 1886 now granted assistance to any charitable library of over ten thousand volumes with at least $20,000 in real estate.\textsuperscript{55} The Aguilar Free Library was one of the more important entities that emerged from this program that year. Named for Grace Aguilar, a British writer of Jewish history and religion, the circulating library was established by two Jewish organizations, the Young Men’s Hebrew Association and the Hebrew Free School.\textsuperscript{56}

And also in 1886, Adolph L. Sanger, the outgoing president of the New York Board of Aldermen and future president of the Board of Education, submitted an ambitious series of resolutions requesting the legislature to incorporate a free public library which would forever
stand as “a monument of the homage paid by the people to self-culture,” supplementing the public education system—along with public schools, colleges, and the new museums of art and of science—in an institution worthy of a great city. Sanger sought a million-dollar appropriation for a large building and the maintenance of a free circulating library with reading rooms for the people of the city, on the site of the Croton Reservoir on Fifth Avenue between Fortieth and Forty-second Streets. He proposed a board of trustees consisting of twenty-two members, among them the mayor, the comptroller, the president of the Board of Aldermen, and the president of the Department of Public Parks.

Ninety-six leading statesmen, businessmen, and scholars officially incorporated the proposed library project. Sanger assured the press and others who were convinced that “nothing good could come out of the Board of Aldermen,” that politicians would have “nothing to do with the library,” and that even while the petitioners clearly did include several politicians, they were “men of standing” who would not brook any bureaucratic interference. Ironically, though, the state’s imprimatur is exactly what the resolution sought. Even though it was one of the subjects of the 1886 meeting of the American Library Association, Sanger’s proposal failed to win favor or approval.

Nevertheless, by establishing his Trust with an endowment of over $3 million for a free library, Samuel Tilden was catching the wind of the prevailing free library spirit. While by no means original in concept, the Tilden Trust in substance finally extended to New York City the enormous private financial backing it needed to fund a library for the public good. Executed with Tilden’s characteristic lack of dispatch but attention to detail, his will was ten thousand words long, with forty-three sections. Not as well-versed in trusts and estates law, Tilden had turned the document over to two different colleagues for review before signing it in 1884. When the will
was made public upon Tilden’s death, it was thought to have such clear provisions that “the lawyer who should undertake to put upon any part of it a construction other than it bears on its face, would have uphill work,” according to the *Times*.\(^{61}\)

In fact, the will turned out to be less than unimpeachable. Expressing their “bitter disappointment,” the seven heirs engaged attorneys, including the incomparable Joseph Choate, their leading counsel, to contest it.\(^{62}\) Choate consistently assumed radical positions in favor of the public good as a trustee of the Metropolitan Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, and even the Free Circulating Library. But he also was an extraordinarily skilled attorney. While he was among the many lawyers who prosecuted the Tweed Ring, he also led a practice that dealt with complex areas of the law that would take him into sometimes-unpopular territory. He was involved in the will contests of the Vanderbilt, A. T. Stewart, and Vassar families, among many others; defended the Standard Oil Company in its future antitrust suit; and took large cases in areas ranging from landlord disputes to railroad contracts.\(^{63}\) Of course, Tilden’s debt-ridden nephews were motivated more by their creditors than any true familial regret.\(^{64}\) Even so, the Tilden suit bounced back and forth between the State Supreme Court and the court of Appeals, but in October 1891, the Tilden Trust clause of the will was declared invalid.\(^{65}\) In a compromise settlement, the Trust received Tilden’s twenty-thousand-volume library and around two million dollars.\(^{66}\) While still considerable, the legacy in its depleted state was not enough to carry out Tilden’s bold plan on the scale he had envisioned.

The will’s executors and trustees were Tilden’s private secretary and lawyer George W. Smith, and the politicians John Bigelow and Andrew Haswell Green, Tilden’s close associate for over forty years. While Tilden, Bigelow, and Green were kindred spirits in matters of reform and along with Smith also shared credit for bringing down the Tweed Ring in 1871, Green went on to
fulfill an even larger mission as a public servant. His imagination for civic possibility verged on the mythical, and his extravagant vision for New York City, which began with the building of Central Park in the 1850s, would come to fruition in the 1890s. What eventually became the New York Public Library was a significant prologue to it.
CHAPTER TWO
Unabated Energy and Resolute Will:
The Founding of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

After the November 1869 public meeting to discuss establishing an art museum, the provisional “Committee of Fifty” moved quickly and met frequently at the Century Club as well as in the rooms occupied by the art dealer Samuel P. Avery. By January 16, the new museum already possessed a constitution and an official name, the “Metropolitan Museum of Art.”† But the election of officers went less smoothly over “some doubt” as to whether a quorum was present.²

More critically, there also was doubt about whether those assembled had a clear idea of what they were meant to do, or where the funds were to come from, unlike those who recently had gathered to establish an American Museum of Natural History in New York City. That undertaking, comprised of some of the same leaders, also sought to emphasize the city’s cultural stature while also appealing to the haute bourgeoisie that aspired to become a metropolitan gentry. As the project developed, its power to convey social credibility drew financial sponsors.³ But even so, of the wealthy men in the art museum “Association,” none seemed sufficiently enthusiastic. Up to one million dollars, it was estimated, would be required to launch the venture, for which considerably more energy, wealth, and enthusiasm would be needed. Not everyone shared the new officers’ optimism. For example, August Belmont, Robert L. Stuart, and James Lenox, who had been elected members of the Association, had declined the honor.⁴

What was the point? While the press justified the new venture with the dual appeals for public edification and city boosterism, the trustees’ incentive would have had to be ever greater. Many felt a sense of purpose—a social and moral obligation that coincided with their religious devotion. Others had been well exposed to the cultural examples of Europe, and felt a lingering insecurity about their country’s lack of sophistication. The daunting campaign to create a large
new institution would require far more motivation than hollow boosterism to justify participation. And thus a core group soldiered on.

On January 31, 1870, the meeting reconvened at the Century Club, and with the Central Park Commission President Henry G. Stebbins in the chair, the Metropolitan Museum’s first board of trustees was elected. While all social and cultural elites, the board was diverse in terms of professional and political representation, indicating the earnest thinking that had animated the founding committee. But in fact the implicit purpose was to identify art with wealth, and stewardship with social station or training. John Taylor Johnston was voted president, and General John Adams Dix and William Cullen Bryant vice presidents. Daniel Huntington declined the nomination for vice president, but became a trustee. Placing him in a leadership role, however, was representative of the earnest effort to include a diversity of opinion on the board, which was comprised of artists, writers, and architects, as well as businessmen, financiers, lawyers, and city officials. In spite of his value as one of the board’s only working artists, Huntington perhaps was better respected as a member of the Century Club and the National Academy of Design than as a painter whose specialty was creating staid portraits of contemporary plutocrats.

Those given charge of the museum would need to have the social and political versatility to make provisional agreements with the Central Park trustees for the site, as well as the ability to “quietly” and gracefully raise money for a building. To the clergyman Henry W. Bellows, who constructed the board profile, these trustees would be ideally middle aged, with “unabated energy, resolute will, and hot enthusiasm” for the plan, possessed of “art-culture and positive art knowledge.” This was a tall order, as men of affairs were, according to Bellows, “seldom interested in art.” He concluded that the board must be small to avoid “factions” and “to make
the responsibility deeply felt by each.” Each member’s share in the “labor and honor” of the enterprise would be considerable and “worth striving hard to get and to keep.”

For the chair of the board, Bellows wanted a veritable saint—a man of patience and resolve “in whose soul the enterprise is a principal thing, and about whom the Trustees can rally and fire up with his courage and hope and determination.” John Taylor Johnston more than met this standard.

The leaders that emerged indeed were touted as the “fittest men” for the project, and the *Independent* pointed out their relative diversity:

Mr. Johnston is a very liberal purchaser of pictures, a merchant of good repute, and a more than millionaire. Mr. Bryant and General Dix are two good figures for vice-presidents; and the trustees are men of means, in whom the commercial republic will put its trust. The treasurer (Samuel G. Ward) is an agent in New York of Baring Brothers, and of course, is a good man for his office; besides, he is a scholarly man, and has published a translation of Schiller’s “Letters on Art.” Mr. Sturgis is an architect by profession, and a good writer on the subject of his art; he, of course, is a good man for the office.

The description of Johnston spoke volumes about the prerequisites for board leadership: he was an art lover first, an honest businessman second, and a millionaire third. Like Luman Reed before him, he felt a moral obligation to open the private art gallery in his home to the public. His eclectic collection ranged from such masterpieces as J. M. W. Turner’s *The Slave Ship*, Frederic Church’s *Niagara*, Thomas Cole’s *Voyage of Life* series, and Winslow Homer’s *Prisoners from the Front*. In March 1872, diarist George Templeton Strong visited the gallery and praised Johnston’s integrity for his investment in fine art rather than on “race horses, four-in-hands, and great ostentatious parties.” Strong concluded that Johnston was “quite an enviable person,” although he mused that the collector probably had “his troubles and anxieties and sore spots like other people.”
Until his election as the Metropolitan Museum’s board president, Johnston in fact did not have many troubles or anxieties. All but retired from his responsibilities as president of the small railroad lines he had founded, he was traveling down the Nile River with his wife and daughter when word came of his election to the presidency of the new art museum.18 His daughter recalled that he was “very much pleased, sent an immediate acceptance, and made arrangements for hastening our return home.”19 However, not a year had passed before Johnston had second thoughts and penned his resignation, feeling that it would not be right to remain as “nominally the head of our enterprize [sic] of such great public importance while in reality doing nothing.” He was grateful for the honor, but felt the museum needed a president that shared his desire to help but with greater “power and leisure.”20

Huntington and Johnston were not the only trustees to express their ambivalence about assuming a leadership role in the endeavor. It was no overstatement that the most important qualifications for an effective director were indeed “power and leisure,” social and business associations, free time, and expendable income. Yet in spite of thoughts of resigning that persisted throughout the 1880s, Johnston would remain the museum’s president for eighteen years.21

But one question remained: why devote the energy to a time-consuming cause that only duplicated the efforts of other functioning art institutions like the New-York Historical Society? There were several possible agendas at work. Bryant was not the only city booster who wished to see a more complete cultural apotheosis in New York on the order of its commercial one, to elevate its status among world cities. These newly elected trustees had traveled abroad and were aware of their country’s aesthetic deficiencies. Moreover, most of the board had ties to Trinity or Grace churches or other elite congregations, and felt an almost religious conviction towards their
project. Johnston was a Presbyterian, whose devout father had declined a Papal audience because it had been scheduled for a Sunday. The younger Johnston remained true to his faith in his business life, and cared deeply about things like railroad safety, the cleanliness of terminals, and his employees’ churchgoing habits. Johnston’s impetus to open his private art gallery to the public thus seems to have been guided by a dutiful spirit rather than vain self-promotion, and the same spirit appeared to move most of his colleagues in the museum venture as well.

But without a building, a collection, or even money, the task was almost absurd. The founders had only the “clearly defined idea of a Museum of Art and the united will to create it,” recalled William C. Prime, who also later reminisced that there was “no hesitation, no pause, no shadow or cloud, not an hour of doubt of discouragement” in their desire to improve a city and a nation. In fact, while private hesitancy did exist, the leaders never aired it publicly.

**Institution Building and a Museum Building**

On April 13, 1870, the New York Legislature voted an act of incorporation in the name of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, “for the purpose of establishing and maintaining in the City of New-York a museum and library of art, of encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts, and the application of the arts to manufactures and practical life, of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and, to that end, of furnishing popular instruction and recreation.” As summer approached, there was much anticipation of the form the new museum would take. “This city is to have a comprehensive museum and permanent gallery of art upon a scale worthy alike of the city and the nation,” the Tribune foresaw. “Its establishment will mark an era in art in this country.” But like some of the failed efforts before it, the new museum was a membership organization. The constitution provided for two hundred and fifty members, and
twenty-one Trustees elected by ballot. The *ex officio* members of the board were the president and the treasurer, along with the mayor, the governor, the Department of Public Parks president, the Commissioner of Public Works of New York City, the president of the National Academy of Design, and the president of the New-York chapter of the American Institute of Architects.\(^{25}\)

Unlike the new art museums in Boston and Washington, the Metropolitan still did not own a single work of art, nor had it secured any space in which to build or house a collection. It was even unclear what the collection would consist of. American art authorities and the museum founders alike looked to sanctioned European tastes for aesthetic guidance, and the thought always drifted to casts of European masterpieces, and not originals, as appropriate objects for display and study. But for the new trustees, gathering and even contemplating the appropriate range of works remained daunting. There would be paintings and sculpture for sure, but of equal importance were the “ornamental arts” like pottery, porcelain, engravings, mosaics, metalworks, and textiles, as well as the arts “relative to life and to manufactures,” a uniquely American predilection of the time.\(^{26}\)

Up until now, Americans possessed a utilitarian attitude towards the arts that reflected the practicality of a democratic society.\(^{27}\) The “trades,” after all, were the orientation of the American people, and national taste still was developing. Commerce, manufacturing, and invention were fundamental to American civilization, and any plan that omitted them might lose the sympathy, or the interest, of the people.\(^{28}\) Consequently, the Metropolitan Museum’s founders anticipated a need to show a combination of theory and practice in order to succeed, playing to the practical American outlook. The thought was to exhibit architectural models, textiles, or photographs alongside the goods, raw materials, and machinery used to make them.
Of course, “statues and other bulky objects” obviously would require a large building, and the committee grandly noted that the Louvre, Versailles, and the British Museum together attracted perhaps ten million visitors per year.\(^{29}\) That the museum’s leaders even dared to imagine their own gallery along these lines was highly audacious, to say the least, as New York City’s population in 1870 was just over 940,000.\(^{30}\) For the time being, without a collection or funds, the trustees looked first for loans of art to place on exhibit.

One way or another, the museum promised to have an extensive collection unlike any other in the country.\(^{31}\) The trustees used the Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum) in London as a prototype; it housed every conceivable representative of the decorative and fine arts.\(^{32}\) New York still had nothing similar, and it was unclear how the grand ambitions of the Metropolitan Museum ever could be realized.

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The museum’s relatively modest initial fundraising goal was $250,000, the smallest sum that the trustees considered safe to commence operations. But one year later, the total collected was only a dispiriting $110,000, of which $10,000 was pledged by Johnston and $5,000 by William Tilden Blodgett. August Belmont still refused to contribute, and was joined by John Jacob Astor III and others who felt strongly that the institution’s survival could only depend upon massive state aid.\(^{33}\) By 1872, the museum was still $24,000 short of the goal. The second annual report put it plainly: “This state of things is very disappointing, and what makes it more surprising and more sad is that in a much shorter period than that during which these appeals have been pending here, $210,000 have been raised in Philadelphia from twenty-one persons, and $300,000 have been raised in Boston, in each case for a kindred purpose.”\(^{34}\) What an embarrassment for New York. To make up the shortfall, the onus fell on the Metropolitan’s
The trustees had proceeded under the overconfident assumption that others would support their venture based on their own stature. Perhaps James Jackson Jarves articulated the problem most bluntly: it was difficult to support a museum without knowing what would be in it. What would the building look like? In the Old World, temples, church buildings, or retrofitted stately homes or palaces functioned as art galleries. In the United States in 1870, it fell to the architect to create the template for a purpose-built museum.

The Metropolitan and the American Museum of Natural History trustees together proposed that, to that end, both institutions might occupy “Manhattan Square,” nineteen acres of land between Seventh-seventh and Eighty-first Streets and between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, that the city might make available. Joseph Choate, the brilliant lawyer and member of both boards, conceived of a plan by which the city would tax itself for $500,000 to fund the buildings, an idea supported via a petition signed by several prominent New Yorkers. In spring 1871, hoping to garner support from the petition signers, and also evidently hoping to capitalize personally on the large building project, New York State Senator William M. Tweed backed the proposal. As to the question of the building’s ownership, Choate proposed a compromise: the city would retain legal possession of the museum building, and the trustees would maintain and control of its contents—and thus own the treasures of the museum. This original idea in municipal government set the pattern for the future followed by most of the major art museums in America, except for Boston’s, which neither solicited nor received public funds.

But wider aid was needed and not forthcoming. Wealthy New Yorkers evidently were less keen on the monumental project than were the trustees. In apparent desperation, the executive committee considered appointing a committee of women to solicit subscriptions, a
suggestion that ultimately was dismissed. With no new private resources, the effort was foundering, and it had hardly begun.

Public aid was necessary. On April 5, 1871, the legislature passed Choate’s proposal enabling the Central Park commissioners to authorize construction of a museum building on Manhattan Square and to raise $500,000 towards that end, in a public and private partnership. Years later, with only a hint of modesty, Choate recalled, “It was thought impossible that any money could come from a democratic city such as ours, governed by Tammany Hall, to support such a luxury as this.” In fact, Choate’s official language invoking the educational aspects of the endeavor also helped seal the deal.

In spite of the impression of balance and relative diversity on the Metropolitan board, the Times described its leaders as “chiefly members of the Century Club,” under whose charge the $500,000 building and its contents were to be placed. Apparently that status accorded them the authority to confidently collect objects, and soundly direct the museum’s affairs. Even so, the museum, now permanently organized, was resting on the gentlemen’s promise of assured success and solvency.

The viability of the “experiment” was still in question. But the press reported that the beginning of active operations was “already at hand,” and the Metropolitan Museum had been placed on “a most favorable basis” in relation to the state. It also now appeared to have some art to exhibit as well, with loans and the new acquisition of a “most precious collection” of European paintings, which heralded “a brilliant beginning.” As it was, every newly donated dollar would now yield “immediate and valuable results.” But by and large, New Yorkers failed to embrace the idea of the museum with the kind of enthusiastic passion expressed at the Union League meeting. The trustees’ continuing resolve and conviction was almost inexplicable.
They were not seeking personal fame or gain, nor were they even particularly competitive in the cultural race with Boston, Philadelphia, or Washington. But it did appear that they were possessed of a moral duty to see the project through.

The press predicted brilliance for the opening exhibition. “It cannot fail to excite a general interest among all classes and to implant in the minds of our intelligent tradespeople, who have as yet had no opportunity to study good artistic work, a curiosity which will end in genuine appreciation and culture,” according to the Tribune.\textsuperscript{45} Issuing a word of warning to the rich, the newspaper also appealed to their vanity: “We hope our wealthy citizens will have the wit to recognize that the highest privilege and pleasure which comes with riches in our day is the assistance and patronage of such refining and civilizing institutions as this. We are sure that, before many years, it will be a matter of grave regret to any man of property that he failed to take part in the creation of the Metropolitan Museum.”\textsuperscript{46} With an earnest board of trustees, and now a charter and land, all the fledgling art institution needed was money. “The man who shall link his name with such a permanent foundation will secure himself more permanent honor than that of kings,” one journal concluded.\textsuperscript{47}

In fact, it fell to the “varnish king,” William Tilden Blodgett, to purchase a significant collection of old masters when they came up for sale in Europe, thus establishing a foundational collection for the new museum. Blodgett’s humble background as a young man from Western New York with limited education did not keep him from making a fortune in his uncle’s varnish business, which he reorganized to become one of the largest concerns of its kind in the United States.\textsuperscript{48} Even if some of his museum board colleagues may have cast aspersions on his artistic judgment, Blodgett was possessed of natural refinement, a genial disposition, and a solemn desire to do good.\textsuperscript{49} A member of both the Union League and Century Clubs, he also was a
founder of The Nation magazine, a senior vestryman at St. George’s Episcopal Church, and a founder of both the American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan. His public spiritedness included involvement in the Sanitary Commission and the Metropolitan Art Fair, as well as his support of living artists.

An unpretentious participant in all of the early organizing meetings of the museum, Blodgett was skittish about playing too strong a leadership role: in anticipation of becoming a member of the executive committee, he asked that he not be assigned to chair it. Nevertheless, his colleagues convinced him otherwise, and he served as the first chairman until stepping down to the post of vice president only when his health began to fail a few years later.

As an art collector, Blodgett pursued his purchases with deep pockets and a little naïveté, unlike many of his fellow-trustees. Frederic Edwin Church’s 1859 masterwork, Heart of the Andes, was his first significant purchase as a collector. The canvas, almost ten feet wide, caused a sensation at the Tenth Street Studio Building, when twelve to thirteen thousand people paid twenty-five cents each to see it. Blodgett, however, paid $10,000 to own it, setting a precedent for high prices for American contemporary art. Adding to this “noble beginning,” Blodgett amassed a collection valued upon his death in 1875 at $250,000, and which he exhibited to the public in a gallery in his home on Ninth Street and Fifth Avenue, one block north of his friend Johnston’s similar arrangement.

Blodgett was said to have “few advantages of early education & no youthful associations to direct his attention to pictures.” Thus, when he found himself in Europe in the late 1860s and early 1870s, he looked to advisors and so-called authorities in the art field. During the start of the Franco Prussian War, artworks, including old masters, were being placed on the market for unprecedentedly low prices, and Blodgett acted fast. By some accounts it was a possibly
suspicious Belgian dealer named Léon Gauchez, by others it was an art dealer and expert from the Royal Museum in Belgium, Étienne Le Roy, who negotiated the purchase of three important private collections of paintings on Blodgett’s behalf, which he then offered to the Metropolitan Museum at cost in the summer of 1870. The price was approximately $115,000 for a total of 174 Dutch and Flemish pictures, a sum that would absorb a sizeable portion of the original subscription funds. The fact that Blodgett guaranteed to deduct the price of any work whose authenticity could not be established attested to his awareness that some of the paintings might prove to be fakes.

Although Johnston believed that the purchase was “somewhat rash,” he had faith in Blodgett’s judgment, and volunteered to assume half the cost. He also recognized a perfect opportunity for the museum to begin building a collection. At the November quarterly meeting, the trustees discussed the arrangement, with the understanding that if the museum did not want the paintings, Blodgett and Johnston would divide them for their own collections. In spite of some opposition among the trustees and apprehension on Avery’s part that Blodgett had been duped, the trustees agreed to purchase the collection in March 1871. Decades later, Choate would recall a less tentative mood. He claimed that “the collection bought then, on the responsibility of one man, acting under the general authority of the Museum, was so good, contained so many old masters, that very few of those he bought have been rejected or laid aside.”

With an ideological rationale, municipal funds for a permanent home, and the nucleus of a collection, the Metropolitan Museum was ready to take on a more public persona. In late 1871 it signed a two-year lease on a brownstone on Fifth Avenue between Fifty-third and Fifty-fourth Streets, the former home of the Dodworth Dancing Academy. Finally, in February 1872, the
museum opened “bravely,” according to the press. In fact, both the opening and the existence of the entire endeavor were nothing short of miraculous. “To secure so many and so good pictures at such a price was a splendid bit of financiering, only to be explained by the depression in the market for all articles of luxury or art which then prevailed in Europe,” *Scribner’s Monthly* speculated. “The wonder, after all, is less that the pictures could be bought so low, than that they could be bought at all.” Indeed, the preference for reproduction casts evidently had to do with the thought that there were only a finite number of masterpieces in the world, all already belonging to individuals or collections in Europe and unlikely to be sold. This made the opening all the more triumphant. To realize the dream of establishing the Metropolitan Museum, all its leaders needed was a perfect combination of money, contacts, some taste, and much audacity.

“It is like visiting Europe, to enter the gallery,” rhapsodized the Boston journal, *Old and New*, of the Metropolitan’s opening exhibition, which was uncharacteristically restrained for New York. The elegant museum was devoid of the expected pretension or garishness. “Tone and tranquility affect the senses of the fevered New-Yorker,” the journal wrote; “it will build up in him that chapel of ease where the spirit loves to bow itself before the great altar of art, above which burns, with the radiance of altar-lights, the great constellation of the masters of the past.” Reviews granted that with the opening, New York was now the victor in the contest for the first American art museum. Now, the New York museum was poised to compete with Europe.

The Dutch paintings’ secular themes were well suited to Americans’ and New Yorkers’ practical and material orientation. The works eschewed religious iconography in favor of “the household gods”: busy housewives, “topers and smokers” at leisure in local inns, hawkers selling fish, cattle grazing, people dancing at parties and festivals, and the like. The press singled out the fine works by Van Dyck, Reynolds, Jordaens, and Ruysdael; among the most noteworthy were
Return of the Holy Family by Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Hals’s Hille Bobbe Van Harlem.64 While some paintings were overvarnished “so unskilfully” as to be mirror-like, all of the works were considered authentic, since “distinguished experts” guaranteed their provenances, which could be traced back to original owners.65

The excellence of the installation notwithstanding, some critics acknowledged that the works indeed were second rate. Yet it was exciting to view even these inferior old masters in the United States. For the trustees, however, the newspapers had only praise. “We have reason to congratulate ourselves upon the present action of the public-spirited gentlemen who procured this collection,” the Tribune wrote.66

George Templeton Strong, perpetual observer of nineteenth-century New York, visited in September, noting critically, “Collection larger and (alleged) Old Masters are more numerous than I expected. There seems to be nearly an acre of high art. In very few of these pictures did my unskilled eye detect anything to admire; High, Old Low Dutchmen preponderate largely.”67 He reserved his highest praise, however, for Turner’s The Slave Ship, which Johnston had loaned for the opening exhibition. “It is certainly among the most astonishing of pictures. Such lovely and wonderful painting of sky and cloud I never beheld,” he wrote. The painting was a work of genius and power “manifested without effort—such as one receives from a Beethoven symphony.”68

Likewise, Henry James, in an unattributed review in the Atlantic Monthly, equivocated about the quality of the new collection. “It is not indeed to be termed a brilliant collection, for it contains no first-rate example of a first-rate genius; but it may claim within its limits a unity and continuity which cannot fail to make it a source of profit to students debarred from European opportunities,” he wrote.69 Second-rate art, he reasoned, if only sometimes masterful, could still
be instructive to the art student. Moreover, and most important, the Metropolitan Museum now had an “enviably solid foundation” for future acquisition and development.\(^{70}\)

By three months after the opening, nearly six thousand visitors had passed through the museum’s doors. Artists, students, critics, and amateurs alike favorably judged the new venture and expressed “very agreeable surprise” at the quality of its art.\(^{71}\) This only boded well for the trustees’ efforts. Blodgett responded from Florence that spring: “This is a reward to me for all the patience, hard work, anxiety, etc. etc. we have all felt in launching the Bark,” he wrote, adding, “none of us can stop where we are,” stressing the importance of continuing to contribute to the fund while making “curatorial” additions to the collections. “The Public we have met and have satisfied, and now we could afford to take a high stand and avoid making many mistakes,” he said.\(^{72}\) As ever, though, Blodgett was not conceited about his coup.\(^{73}\)

It was with resentment towards Blodgett, however, that his fellow-trustee Avery wrote to Johnston from Paris the following summer about his art buying sojourns through Europe. “The M. M. of N. Y. is the great hope of all the operations in antiques (old & new)—the wonderful doings of Mr. Blodgett, the wholesale way—we (he) began, the large average price paid, the well known liberality (or folly) of the Americans as a class, the published accounts that we had 35,000,000 of francs to go into the fight of competing with the old fossils of Europe for the fossils of all time.”\(^{74}\) By mocking the way in which “several Murillos & Co.” could suddenly materialize for his perusal; how “self sacrificing foreigners of all languages” approached him “sometimes with a Raphael or so under their arm”; or how a 250-pound “ex countess” pressed him with “warm admiration (therm 90) against a freshly varnished ‘Susanna and the Elders’,” Avery was contrasting his own professed sophistication with the wealthier Blodgett’s relative ignorance. Blodgett and his steady reliance on Gauchez aroused Avery’s blatant hostility. “I met
Mr. Blodgett at the first and only time I was at Gauchet’s [sic],” Avery continued to Johnson, adding that when he tried to “haul G[auchez] over the coals” for bidding so vigorously for the Metropolitan Museum, Blodgett defended him.75

It would stand to reason that as an art dealer, Avery needed to distance himself from his less-discerning American brethren. In the mid-nineteenth century, a host of counterfeit “old masters” had flooded the American market, making buyers wary. Hence, in the prosperous years following the Civil War, American collectors concentrated on acquiring contemporary art that could be readily authenticated. Those who bought art outright often considered their support of American artists, rather than the quality of the art, as the main criteria for a purchase, particularly if the buyer had no experience abroad and thus limited artistic exposure.76 Furthermore, the undiscriminating American buyer was having more far-reaching and irritating implications for Avery, who, knowing better, was being offered “worthless” things in Europe, or worse, was being charged inflated prices for more respectable works.77

Even if the presence in Europe of Americans flaunting their new wealth was anathema to art dealers like Avery, art buying in the late nineteenth century in fact involved a more nuanced and generous negotiation between serious business and spirited philanthropy. The result of this compromise endured in the cultural institutions that came to be. However, the fact that the Metropolitan’s “old masters” had supposedly uninterrupted pedigrees alone may not have been sufficient evidence of their legitimacy. When submitted to the test of time, Avery’s concerns about authenticity would indeed prove valid. Nevertheless, in the early years of the Metropolitan’s existence, the daring Blodgett purchase gave the museum a start, a raison d’être, and a foundation upon which to build a future collection of more solid quality and provenance.
A year before the auspicious opening in 1872, John Taylor Johnston received a letter from the Count Luigi Palma di Cesnola, the amateur archaeologist and American consul in Cyprus known as “the General,” who wanted to sell thousands of antiquities. Cesnola technically was not a count before renouncing the title upon becoming an American citizen, nor was he exactly a general, the other title he assumed after claiming that his commission had been on Abraham Lincoln’s desk awaiting his signature on the night of his assassination. From Lincoln he did, however, obtain the diplomatic commission to Cyprus, where the Cesnola family lived from late 1865 until 1876. It was there that archaeology became Cesnola’s passion, and where he supervised excavations funded with his own savings, and later with a loan from Rollin and Feuardent, the leading European dealers in antiquities based in Paris. In 1870, after years of smaller, local digs, he hit pay dirt at a site near Golgoi, where he unearthed a trove of sculptures and other objects. For £20, the consul quickly secured the property from its owner, a farmer, and hired more than one hundred diggers to excavate it, despite orders from Turkish authorities forbidding him to do so. Cesnola claimed the objects as his property, having obtained prior official permission from the Turkish governor general for the exploration, which he supervised with his own funds.

A perpetual self-promoter, Cesnola transformed his house in Larnaca into a museum, which became a tourist attraction. But his greater desire was to sell the collection to an important repository like the Louvre, the Hermitage, or the British Museum. In spite of a command from Constantinople preventing the objects’ transportation from the island, through some subterfuge Cesnola managed to export over two hundred cases to New York. But several thousand coins, engraved gems, vases, and other smaller articles were lost on board the Napried, a Boston vessel
that caught fire at sea in June 1872. Later, another shipment arrived safely in London with Cesnola.  

When the British Museum proposed to buy only a portion of the collection for £10,000, Cesnola refused. “What I desire above all is that my collection should remain all together and be known as the Cesnola Collection,” he said. “I have the pride of my race, and that of a Discoverer who wants his name perpetuated with the work if possible.”

The rejection of the British Museum offer created an opening for the Metropolitan, and, acting quickly, Johnston proposed to buy the collection himself for $60,000 in gold, which the museum would then reimburse through public subscription. “I do not doubt that you will feel a great interest in seeing that a collection so large, so ancient and unique, and so valuable in point of history, as mine is, which has cost so much labor, time, and money, is secured for America and not scattered,” Cesnola wrote, appealing to the museum’s somewhat deluded self-importance, while revealing his own. “I did not undertake archaeological diggings for a commercial purpose, and though my collection represents today my whole fortune ‘in toto,’ yet I am disposed to be very reasonable when a public Institution would like to purchase it.” In fact, it was said that the collection might have brought $200,000 if broken up and sold at auction in Europe, and Cesnola’s protestations about keeping the collection together notwithstanding, he did sell some pieces separately to the British Museum.

At a meeting at trustee John F. Kensett’s painting studio the spring of the museum opening in 1872, Johnston informed the trustees of Cesnola’s intended sale. There was much more on the agenda as well, as a movement had been afoot to change the proposed permanent location of the museum building from Manhattan Square to Reservoir Square, the space at Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street occupied by Croton Reservoir. That location’s accessibility and
convenience might have attracted a broad and diverse attendance, although the possibility for expansion was more limited there than at the site the park commissioners soon after designated, farther north on Fifth Avenue between Seventy-ninth and Eighty-fourth Streets. The museum was becoming a reality, and with the approval of Calvert Vaux, the co-designer of Central Park, as the architect of the proposed buildings, the trustees were only beginning to envision what kind of collections might be housed there.

That summer, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* published a twenty-page-long, heavily illustrated article by Hiram Hitchcock about the Cesnola discoveries. Hitchcock, a hotel developer and the president of the Madison Square Garden Company during its formation, was Cesnola’s erstwhile New York representative, friend, and champion, who had traveled extensively in Egypt, Syria, Cyprus, Greece, and Italy. He had made the official announcement in 1871 of Cesnola’s discoveries, and had lectured and published widely on the subject. The flattering, highly descriptive *Harper’s* piece issued a challenge for the United States, and by extension, the Metropolitan Museum, to enter the pool of possible suitors for the collection’s purchase. “It is to be hoped that America, of which the discoverer is a worthy and honored citizen, will anticipate the action of London, Berlin, and St. Petersburg,” Hitchcock concluded.

Without a trained curatorial staff, the trustees had to do their art vetting themselves, much as they did for their personal collections. While the trustees were men of taste but not bonafide art experts, their support of the purchase was based on reputation and instinct, and little else.

Johnston arranged for the American financier Junius Spencer Morgan to inspect the objects in London, where Cesnola had rented a house and was exhibiting the best examples in a private gallery near the British Museum. Morgan visited twice, the second time bringing along Blodgett, who came from New York to see the collection as the chair of the executive committee, the
The museum’s de facto curatorial board. Morgan, Blodgett, and at least two other museum members, Robert Gordon and Cyrus W. Field, expressed enthusiasm about the purchase, which the trustees ultimately approved. Ultimately, Johnston paid the $60,000 through the offices of J. S. Morgan and Company. It was only in May 1874, months after the collection’s first public exhibition in New York, that the trustees were able to fulfill the subscription and assume ownership of the collection.

With this considerable new acquisition, the museum prepared to move to a larger temporary space in the old Douglas mansion at 128 West Fourteenth Street. It had taken Cesnola and eight professional packers seven weeks to box up only the portion of the collection that was in London. To prepare the artifacts for exhibition, Cesnola was paid $500 a month to unpack, inventory, clean, repair, and arrange his collection, which had sustained considerable damage in transit. Cesnola had sent two hundred crates to the United States, with one thousand more pieces still coming from Cyprus. Upon his arrival in New York in January 1873, he was celebrated as a great archaeologist.

By then he had already been paid $20,000, with the remainder to follow over two years. The “General” quickly commenced speaking to the press about the collection. The “fresh look” of the statues or reliefs, and their “perfect condition” was surprising given how long the figures had been buried, although nobody thought to question the authenticity of Cesnola’s claims. Some eminent British antiquarians had dated the collection from 1800 to 1200 BC. “Of their high antiquity, however, there can be no doubt, and great praise is awarded to the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art for obtaining these antiquarian treasures for the City of New York,” the Tribune boasted. Furthermore, the British Museum had requested the “privilege” of taking casts, copies of all of the inscriptions, and photographs of the most important statues,
which the Met proudly granted. The *Tribune* triumphantly noted that the British Museum’s Lang Collection of Cyprian antiquities, “upon which the institution prides itself, merely contains 90 pieces, among which there is only one statuette entire.” Now New York’s museum was in at least one respect competitive with London’s.

New Yorkers anticipated the museum’s opening in the new location on Fourteenth Street, and even as the *Times* looked askance at the Blodgett old masters (“purchased so unwisely”), it looked forward to seeing the Cesnola Collection alongside a loan exhibition of art treasures belonging to “numerous millionaires of the City.” The variety of the loans—apart from paintings, the exhibit was to include jade carvings, pottery and faience, rare bookbinding, and Japanese pottery—would “present an attraction of which New-York has never seen the equal.” These works, gathered from “dusky corners in the houses of the wealthy,” and placed “into the glare of day,” might be “completely strange” and even cabinet-of-curiosities-like but nonetheless instructive to a majority of visitors. Best of all, they could furnish “mines of ideas” to the manufacturer and artisan.

But it was the Cesnola Collection that was generating interest—“gratifying evidence that the New World is on the right track, after all,” William H. Goodyear of the *Independent* wrote. Indeed, New York was seeking to accomplish the inconceivable: to compete with the cities of Europe, whose culture was centuries in the making. Such an ambition was staggering, but unsurprising for the city. To aim for less would have been “unbecoming,” the *Times* admitted.

It had taken three years to raise the $250,000 from private sources, and the Legislature was responsible only for the building, and not the institution’s expenses. By contrast, in the previous year, the British had allocated more than a million dollars of public money for art institutions in London alone. That was the reality the Metropolitan Museum trustees faced.
Appropriations of public money in the name of art were not in accordance with the American policy, even if public feeling was to the contrary.\textsuperscript{105}

Moreover, nineteenth-century American philanthropy was commonly more functional than aesthetic, and focused on benevolent causes with religious or moral agendas. It was one thing to feed and clothe the poor, quite another to educate the public about art. Furthermore, art buying was seen as a rich man’s extravagance, not a public benevolence. Individual donations of art or money that went into a larger pool simply did not appeal to the vanity of many a potential philanthropist.\textsuperscript{106} Thus, the Museum had to look forward to years of “slow and painful” growth until it conquered the respect of the public and commanded their support.\textsuperscript{107} Donations of art also proved problematic to accept, given the American level of taste; trustees preferred to rely instead on their own dealers and advisers to make more studied and sound purchases for the collection. After the embarrassment of exhibiting an eight-foot-high statue of a dancing girl by a German sculptor at the museum’s opening, Johnston complained to another trustee, “It may be very fine, but eight feet of dance is a trial to the feelings. Hereafter we must curb the exuberance of donors except in the article of money, of which latter they may give as much as they please.”\textsuperscript{108}

Even so, in its “modest condition,” the Museum was showing vitality in three short years. One vexing change for its trustees and members, however, was the necessity of charging admission with the move to Fourteenth Street. The hope was to continue to keep the museum open to the public for free on certain days, but the legislature failed to include the museum among its city expenditures. “This evidence of the lack of sympathy among our public men with the efforts of the members of the Museum to provide gratuitous art instruction for the whole public, is chilling, and is not creditable to us as a people,” the \textit{Times} complained.\textsuperscript{109} Indeed, the museum still appeared to be a private hobby.
One year later, on March 27, 1874, the trustees held a public meeting to discuss ways they might successfully procure the popular Cesnola Collection from Johnston, who was still its rightful owner. If the aesthetic argument for its purchase was too lofty to incite city leaders to action, a competitive spirit with other cities might better goad them. The Tribune reasoned:

There is intelligence enough among our business men and mother-wit enough; let the scholars, the artists, the connoisseurs appeal to these with vigorous arguments and show them, as they easily can, that this city cannot afford to lose the Di Cesnola collection—cannot afford to let Boston have it, or Philadelphia, or the British Museum, one of which must become its owner if the merchants of New-York do not do their duty in the matter. It seems to us high time in virtue of our metropolitan brag, that we should have something in our city to make it a place worthy living in for scholars and cultivated people. There is no third-rate town in Europe that is not better equipped than New-York in the matter of museums, libraries, and galleries of art.110

Because someone unintentionally neglected to bring the list of those who had contributed under $1000 to the well-attended meeting, it furthered the impression that the venture was the sole province of the rich men whose names were read, and that smaller supporters mattered very little. The museum’s trustees were forgetting their republican roots, and unwittingly suggesting a class divide. “I have no doubt that they have, as a body, the best intentions in the world,” an art student wrote. “But they are rich men, all of them, and all their associations are with rich and flourishing people, who live in an atmosphere of ease and comfort, with the moderate culture that satisfies our easy society, and not so much wanting in sympathy with the mass of the people, those with small means and small opportunities, as completely ignorant of their needs and their desires.”111

The fact that small contributions from small donors could have an impact on the future of the museum was a revolutionary concept that eluded the trustees. “The sooner the enterprise is put where it belongs—on the shoulders of the general public of educated, cultivated men and women—the surer the success will be, and the better worth having,” the unnamed student
suggested. Perhaps without realizing it, the museum’s trustees also were reluctant to enlarge their subscriber pool precisely because it challenged their authority, and the paternalistic spirit of their endeavor.

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Soon after the collections were relocated to the Douglas mansion, an international financial crisis hit the American economy, causing a deep financial depression, one of the worst in American history. The Panic of 1873 began in September, when the New York Stock Exchange closed for ten days. The international depression would last until 1879, and in its wake, 89 out of 364 American railroads were forced into bankruptcy; 18,000 businesses failed; unemployment reached 14 percent; construction work and real estate values dried up; and corporate profits evaporated. Clearly, acquisitions would be difficult for the museum through this period.

Nevertheless, in August 1873, just as it was becoming evident that the museum’s collection was outgrowing its building, the Metropolitan broke ground for a permanent headquarters in Central Park. Cesnola, his immediate task with the museum complete, returned to Cyprus, where he expected to engage in more archaeology: this time, he hoped, with the Museum covering his expenses. In September 1874, he announced that he had discovered the Treasure of Curium—over 1,500 objects in gold, silver, gems, bronze, alabaster, and terracotta which allegedly rivaled the important archaeological work of Heinrich Schliemann in Mycenae and Troy in 1873. The discovery, however, was later proven to be a group of unconnected objects the General had gathered from different places around the island. His desperation was caused in part by the desperate financial times, which affected the museum as well. It still owed
$15,000 for the first Cesnola purchase and had collected only $207,000 from the original
subscription drive.\textsuperscript{114}

But the museum persevered. Another appeal was announced in November 1876, when
the British Museum joined a bidding war for the Curium cache. In the end, the Metropolitan
Museum raised $40,000 of the $60,000 purchase price in order to win the collection. It also
agreed to pay for shipping and once again engaged Cesnola to install his combined collections in
the new museum space. The trustees raised the initial sum almost immediately, and secured the
remainders two weeks after making the public appeal.\textsuperscript{115}

The successful purchase was tempered by a bittersweet sale that December. One casualty
of the financial depression was John Taylor Johnston, who fell to financial ruin, and was forced
to sell all of his art at auction—323 works in all. By 1876, it had become one of the largest and
most valuable private collections of paintings in the United States. Under the direction of
Johnston’s friend and fellow museum trustee Samuel P. Avery, the pictures were to be sold
without reserve.\textsuperscript{116} Johnston had been a towering patron of artists and art education, and public
sympathy was widespread. He had bought “with such intelligence that the entire group has a
certain unity which more pretentious galleries do not possess,” the \textit{Times} lamented.\textsuperscript{117} Thousands
of people had seen the works in Johnston’s art gallery as well as at the Metropolitan Museum
that summer, in a benefit for the Academy of Design. Regret was appeased with the knowledge
that in the collection’s dispersal, American art education as a whole might benefit.\textsuperscript{118}

The sale was held at Chickering Hall on the 19th, 20th and 22nd of December 1876. On
the first evening, at 11 pm, Turner’s \textit{Slave Ship} was brought before the filled auditorium and sold
for $10,000, about one-third of its believed original price, to a buyer from Boston. That work,
along with Cole’s \textit{Voyage of Life} series and Church’s \textit{Niagara}, among many others, would now
be scattered to other American cities. “Probably New York retains the largest numerical proportion of the collection, but the few most famous pictures go to other cities,” the *Times* reported bravely.¹¹⁹
In 1878, August Belmont, the investment banker and newly elected president of New York’s Academy of Music Board of Directors, wrote that Manhattan’s operagoers were “a very music loving & enthusiastic audience, but not yet of sufficient culture to do without the additional stimulant of some European celebrity or some native phenomenon.” In courting “Colonel” James H. Mapleson, the famous British opera impresario, to assemble an opera company for the twenty-four-year-old Academy, Belmont could not overstate the importance of European “stars” to attract the American public.

A self-styled American aristocrat, Belmont was using his position as the leader of America’s preeminent opera venue to affirm his social status. But he and others like him were aspiring to sophistication not necessarily by appreciating opera, but by imitating the superficial construction of a European upper-class tradition of sitting in a box in the opera house. Unbeknownst to Belmont, the Academy was soon to be obsolete—not so much because the operagoing culture would not endure, but because other plutocrats would seize upon this template for social success and improve upon it.

By now, New York already was reputedly the American operatic capital reputedly on a par with Paris, London, Berlin, Vienna, or Milan. But the opera house would need a good resident company and a broader audience to maintain this standard, and looked beyond the elite boxholders for the theater’s sustenance. When Belmont pleaded the case for good Academy publicity to Charles A. Dana of the Sun, he also betrayed a self-conscious desire to extend his city’s continuing cultural preeminence, and suggested that an interested public might help accomplish it. What the New-York Daily Times had predicted in 1853 had become the case: the
press was now being called upon to “appeal, on behalf of the Opera House, or one or more of its unhappy managers, to a more popular support.”

It was one thing to create an exclusive club, but it was another to ask for the public to help pay for it. Belmont’s argument, however, looked beyond such glum prophesies of the past and cast his boosterish plea in the context of the city’s future, which he assumed would be of interest to any New Yorker. “If New York wants a good Italian Opera, if she wishes to rival Paris & London, her citizens must show a liberal patronage & good will.” Opera stars, and the cult of celebrity that surrounded them, were proven to encourage that patronage. The fact that Italian opera implied European pretentions and social snobbism also appealed to ambitious aspiring elites. And New York’s press, which by 1870 was the veritable core of American newspaper publishing, had the power to disseminate both good reviews and the offstage stories of the performers and their elite Academy of Music patrons.

In spite of rumblings about the theater’s inadequate box capacity, it held more seats than London’s Covent Garden or Paris’s Italian Opera House. In contemplating Belmont’s offer in 1878, Colonel Mapleson would certainly know of the “very handsome profits” that a New York season gave opera impresarios and divas. “I know that the receipts of our Academy, notwithstanding the much abused 200 seats of the stockholders, have averaged much higher when we had a good Opera, than the most brilliant seasons of Covent Garden,” Belmont wrote to Levi P. Morton, his fellow board member, New York financier and politician, and, in 1878, emissary in Europe assigned with the mission of securing Mapleson. “You ought to insist that Mapleson pledges himself not only to give us a first class Stock Company, complete in all its parts, but that he agrees also to bring over one or two of the great Stars, like Patti, Nilsson, Nicolini or Fauré.” If New York City itself was just beginning to become a cultural mecca, there was no disputing its economic importance, and Belmont knew that a financial line of reasoning
might win over the impresario and his opera stars. With resolute bravado, Belmont equated his city’s financial capital with the social capital of European aristocracy: “Mapleson would make a fortune & Patti herself would have a people of Sovereigns at her feet, instead of the Czar alone, & the three parties, Gold, Silver & Greenbacks would vie who could offer the largest amount of its special panaceas for all financial ailings.”\(^9\) The payback indeed could be lucrative. As a prodigiously wealthy financier, Belmont knew whereof he spoke, and was also a financial advisor and investor to famous performers.\(^{10}\)

“You know that our people will rush & pay liberally for celebrities & for real good artists,” he wrote with shallow enthusiasm, “while the second class (using a very mild term) leanings of European Operas served up to us for the last four or five years by Maretzeck & Strakosh [sic] will not in the future more than it has in the past attract an American audience.”\(^{11}\) Both Max Maretzeck and Maurice Strakosch were European musicians and impresarios, and it is unclear why Belmont thought disapprovingly of their tenures at the Academy.\(^{12}\)

Strakosch had balked publicly at the nature of a business that commodified performers over composers.\(^{13}\) To him and Maretzeck, the music was the thing—not the stars, and certainly not the social spectacle of operagoing. Indeed, there remained a gulf between managing the Academy of Music as a theater and managing the opera company that performed there. It is no wonder that Belmont was calling for artistic consistency in addition to gathering the stars that New Yorkers craved to see.

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As with operatic endeavors, August Belmont’s approach to life was pragmatic and calculating. Born August Schönberg in 1813 in the Rhineland Palatinate (now western Germany) to a poor Jewish merchant, Belmont was never a member of the “Our Crowd” group of
successful nineteenth-century New York City German Jews. Indeed, August Belmont did not even associate with them, having converted to the Episcopal faith; marrying Caroline Slidell Perry, daughter and niece of American naval heroes; and effectively erasing his past by joining New York’s most exclusive and restricted clubs.\textsuperscript{14}

He went to work at age thirteen as an unpaid apprentice to the Rothschild banking house in Frankfurt. After showing great promise but possibly lacking in social skill, he was transferred to Naples and then Havana, and finally New York, where he had rushed upon hearing news of the Panic of 1837. During the subsequent downturn, every American bank stopped payment in gold and silver coinage, causing a five-year depression, financial failures, and record high unemployment. Because Baron Nathan Rothschild had famously advised that the best time to buy was when there is “blood in the streets,” the young banker, who by then had assumed the name Belmont, began buying in a hugely depressed market.\textsuperscript{15} He repeated this service in subsequent panics, stabilizing United States debtor banks with House of Rothschild loans, and in the process ingratiating his firm and himself both to bankers and the United States Government alike. Thus, in 1837, the newcomer August Belmont launched his career by operating a veritable Federal Reserve System.\textsuperscript{16} He was twenty-one years old.

New York City was the perfect place for Belmont to reinvent himself: it was foundationally mercantile, recognized success in trade as much as family pedigree, and socially was the antithesis of such places as Boston, Philadelphia, Charleston, or New Orleans. The eighteenth-century politico and New York patroon Lewis Morris was thought to have said, “As New England, excepting some Families, was ye scum of ye old, so the greatest part of the English in the Province [of New York] is ye scum of ye New.”\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, the Morries were the only prosperous New York City family not “in trade.” The rest—the Roosevelts, Bayards, Van
Cortlandts, Rhinelanders, Verplancks, Beekmans, Brevoorts, Goelets, and Schermerhorns—all had to work for a living. It was a perfect place for Belmont to settle as a sophisticated man of means.

The emergence of etiquette books in the 1840s—filled with unintentionally comical caveats about proper manners in public—was an indicator of just how gauche Americans could be in the nineteenth century. Even John Jacob Astor, the wealthiest American of his time, was known to have had atrocious personal habits. But Belmont, a keen observer and the ultimate social climber, maintained an aristocratic existence. He behaved with elegant European manners; owned fine horses and coaches; entertained grandly with fine wines, food, and porcelains; and collected tasteful art. And, of course, he supported high culture. Belmont was the only Jew admitted into the opera’s magic inner circle.

In fact, at the Academy of Music, that circle was closed to anyone but the “Knickerbocker aristocracy” that had created it. The Academy’s exclusivism grew to be more profound than whether or not the public would be called upon to pay high prices for bad seats in someone else’s social club. It also was about class and “race”—in this case, not-so-veiled anti-Semitism. It was about taste, manners, and style as markers of social rank. It was about forging an upper class by virtue of inclusion and exclusion. It was about a persistent and gnawing American insecurity.

New Yorkers may or may not have been sensitive to their own inexperience with high culture. If taste, to Pierre Bourdieu, is “an acquired disposition to ‘differentiate’ and ‘appreciate’”—to distinguish and recognize an object “without implying knowledge of the distinctive features which define it,” then taste did not happen intuitively to the average nineteenth-century American. Even though the United States was already a century in the
making, the notion of “taste” in the European sense was something that might have eluded even the most sophisticated Bostonians, precisely because it was associated with a European past that they had repudiated. As John Kouwenhoven has explained, the young republic encouraged a utilitarian attitude towards the arts that paid little heed to aesthetics, bespeaking the practicality of a democratic society. Even the Academy of Music was prone to flights of tasteless fancy. A panel in front of the conductor was decorated with a painting of a guitar and a banjo entangled in the strings of a lyre. “It might be thrown away advantageously,” the Daily Times sniffed.

P. T. Barnum, the über-impressario of the nineteenth century, promoted not only his museum, but also plays and other popular entertainments. His fare represented “low culture,” while the Academy of Music’s operas represented “high culture.” Taste was equated with status, which, in turn, required money. One cannot fault the nascent New York upper class for its attempts to buy taste. At the Academy, however, only a few of the rising many that were financially able and willing were permitted to purchase it.

In the 1870s, New York’s “world of fashion was still content to reassemble every winter in the shabby red and gold boxes of the sociable old Academy,” wrote Edith Wharton, in an often-quoted passage from The Age of Innocence. “Conservatives cherished it for being small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the ‘new people’ whom New York was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to.” Whether Belmont’s plan to secure Mapleson for the Academy of Music was successful or not would prove to be irrelevant. The dreaded “new people” wanted the opportunity to participate in the spectacle of operagoing, and the Academy’s social exclusivity, reinforced by the physical reality of its limited number of boxes, were insurmountable constraints. Armed with great wealth and even greater social initiative, the so-called newcomers resolved to establish their own venture: The Metropolitan Opera.
Act Two: A New Opera House for New York

During the years between the Academy’s inception and the beginning of Belmont’s tenure as board president, Manhattan’s population had more than doubled to well over one million, and New York became one of the largest and richest cities in the world. Once a veritable urban village in lower Manhattan, the city steadily expanded northward, filling in blocks of development in areas that on the 1811 Commissioner’s Plan were merely represented by grid lines laid over uneven terrain. Gotham was the place where Thomas Edison came in 1881 to install electric lights and establish the first permanent central power station a year later. Gotham was where, in 1883, a bridge of unprecedented scope and scale was erected, linking the cities of New York and Brooklyn, the country’s first and third-largest metropolises. Gotham was the location of Wall Street and its great stock exchange. Gotham was the place where the robber barons and merchant princes built their opulent mansions. An economically polarized city of growing ethnic diversity, Gotham also was home to the penniless immigrant and the peripatetic street peddler. In 1880, when the United States per capita income in was $147, and the family income (for a family of five) was $735, New York City had thousands of families of far more prodigious means.27

On April 10, 1880, fifty-four men incorporated the Metropolitan Opera House Company Limited of New York. The cost, entitling each subscriber to a box at the proposed opera house, was a minimum of $10,000.28 Many paid more. William Kissam Vanderbilt signed on for $30,000; his father, William Henry Vanderbilt, for $20,000; as did George Henry Warren, George Griswold Haven, Robert Goelet Sr., and James A. Roosevelt. The remaining men—among them Cornelius Vanderbilt II (William K.’s brother and William H.’s son), the brothers Robert and Ogden Goelet, J. Pierpont Morgan, John Jacob Astor III, Bradley Martin, William
Rhinelander, Adrian Iselin, Henry Clews, Theodore A. Havemeyer, Joseph W. Drexel, Samuel L. M. Barlow, and D. Ogden Mills—all purchased 100 shares for $10,000. These and other enthusiastic plutocrats with money to spare easily raised the necessary money to build a new theater. After establishing the bylaws of the opera house company, thirteen directors were elected, and were scheduled to meet each month during the early phases of construction. But a quorum was rarely present until 1883, the year the theater opened.

With appreciation of the operatic art form still fickle at best in New York City, what precipitated the rise of a new opera house and the marginalization of another? The New York Times stated it plainly: “It is . . . safe to assume that every New-York family desires to own an opera-box as that every Englishman wishes to get into Parliament. And a box in an unsuccessful opera-house is worse than no box at all. Thus, by the Times’s estimation, “more than a hundred of our best families are therefore irretrievably committed to a social war of extermination,” pledging to either the Academy or the Metropolitan, “like our Revolutionary fathers, ‘their fortunes and their sacred honor’ or the social prestige which may be taken to be a modern substitute for the same.” From the outset, the “war” was social rather than artistic or philanthropic, and female rather than male. By design, there were not enough boxes at the Academy, and it was clear that in order for New York society to remain exclusive, there should never be enough.

For their part, the Academy leaders showed no willingness to relinquish their boxes to any of the new New Yorkers—millionaires who had made fortunes elsewhere in the country—who aspired to the financial and social distinction of an opera box. The supplicants were typically female, and the necessity of box ownership had nothing to do with musical appreciation. Vanderbilt himself was unashamed to admit “he cared little or nothing for music”
and that he bought into the new scheme simply for the sake of his family. In reality, if all one wanted to do was to hear the opera, it was relatively easy to purchase a ticket to the Academy of Music. “No actual hardship is attached to a seat in the parquet,” the architecture critic Montgomery Schuyler observed. “In fact the music and the spectacle are at least as available from that humble station as from the coigne of vantage in the box tier, and the philosopher who occasionally goes to the opera . . . can not have failed to remark that the most attentive looking and listening is not done from the boxes.” The parquet or orchestra seats were rarely crowded, while the boxes were always taken.

Contrary to reports, the Academy leaders actually had been generous to the plutocratic newcomers. Although it was rumored that a $30,000 offer (allegedly by William K. Vanderbilt) for an Academy box was rejected, in fact, George H. Warren, the lawyer, financier, subsequent Metropolitan Opera investor, father-in-law to Robert Goelet Jr., and Vanderbilt legal advisor, conferred with August Belmont and other Academy stockholders in early April 1880 and learned that there were nine available boxes. The Academy directors presented him with a proposal that would add twenty-six more to the existing thirty in the reconstructed (post-fire) house. An offer of an astonishing total of thirty-five boxes could hardly be considered inflexible, although perhaps the proposal came too late. In conflicting reports, one of the directors of the Academy board allegedly was obstinate about the plan, and scuttled it. Whatever the case, Warren and the men he represented barely contemplated the bid, for by April 7, he was already announcing to the press that $600,000 had been subscribed to create a new opera house.

Both critics and ordinary observers alike were puzzled. Schuyler mused, “In what other cause of charity or of culture would it be possible so to enlist the men of business who have for years carried the New York Academy of Music, and cheerfully threw what, from a commercial
point of view, was the good money of assessment after the bad of hopeless investment? . . . Here was not only the certainty of no pecuniary return, but the additional prospect to the stockholders of paying their admission into their own building like the undistinguished throng.” Such phenomenal civic and artistic philanthropy was rare, even in New York. “When we compare this alacrity,” continued Schuyler, “with the struggles of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or with the languishing condition of the project for the erection of a cathedral by the richest Protestant denomination, it shows that whatever may be the nature of the hold of Italian opera upon the ‘high-dizened, select populace,’ it is at least very powerful.”

What did this power represent? Perhaps the Metropolitan Opera group realized that to own a box at the Academy was not tantamount to joining its inner circle, and that box ownership alone no longer conferred sufficient social leverage. The assumption was that Warren and his group wanted not only to join, but also to lead, and it was patently clear, particularly in an age of untaxed wealth, that they had virtually unlimited financial means to do so if all it took was the construction of an opera house. In the end, the Academy’s manager, still Colonel Mapleson, dismissed the Metropolitan investors as “a number of rich persons who want some new way of spending money.”

But something was clearly amiss with this line of reasoning. The Metropolitan Opera’s founding shareholders included many with long-established wealth and social importance, such as William Rhinelander, Robert L. Cutting, Samuel L. M. Barlow, Levi P. Morton, and John Jacob Astor III, the brother-in-law of the Mrs. Astor, reigning arbiter of society and grand dame of the Academy of Music. Thus, while the story of the nouveaux challenging the old guard made good copy in the newspapers, it was hardly true. In fact, one might recall that Morton, as an Academy board member, only five years earlier had done August Belmont’s bidding in
Europe for Mapleson to come to New York as the Academy’s manager in the first place. Now Morton, and others like him, had a foot in both camps.\textsuperscript{45} The Academy was hardly inferior, but it was left over from another, more conservative time. Even the old guard could not help but recognize that new energy and money might infuse a staid social and cultural activity with a new spirit.

The Metropolitan Opera House’s construction proceeded with difficulty, and the project faced mounting debt that required further financial intervention on the part of stockholders. At the March 8, 1882 board meeting, stockholder Egisto Paolo Fabbri suggested that the venture be abandoned entirely: “no enterprise of this character can prosper if handicapped with a heavy debt, or indeed with any debt at all,” he said.\textsuperscript{46} His proposal that the property be sold and outstanding contracts liquidated was roundly voted down.\textsuperscript{47} Since the expensive building would need to be leased to a worthy opera impresario for little or no cost in order to secure him, Fabbri soundly anticipated an issue that would affect the opera house for years to come: “The experience of every Impressario [sic] in Europe and in this country almost uniformly shows that as a rule such business is unprofitable and hazardous, and I know that the company will find it necessary to offer at least its building free of rent to induce a reliable Impressario to undertake the arduous task of furnishing us and the public with satisfactory operatic performances.”\textsuperscript{48} Nevertheless, the board soldiered on, and new box purchases injected more money into the project.

Significantly, in May 1883, as the Metropolitan Opera House was nearing completion and the final group of stockholders was preparing to draw lots for their boxes, \textit{the} Mrs. Astor herself joined the list.\textsuperscript{49} Granddaughter-in-law to the paterfamilias John Jacob Astor, Mrs. William B. (Caroline) Astor Jr. was possessed of neither wit nor beauty, but nonetheless was
society’s “queen.” On Mondays, her preferred night for opera, it was her habit to arrive late, in haughty splendor, to her Academy box and then to leave early. An invitation to the yearly ball at her home at 350 Fifth Avenue at Thirty-third Street (and later farther uptown at 840 Fifth Avenue) was tantamount to acceptance into New York society. In 1888, Ward McAllister, Mrs. Astor’s “court” major domo, estimated to the New-York Daily Tribune that society consisted of approximately four hundred individuals. Beyond that number, he reasoned, were those not at ease in a ballroom—Mrs. Astor’s or anyone else’s. Even during the 1880s McAllister struck many observers as dim-witted and out-of-touch. “It is hard to believe in the existence of such a Rip Van Winkle of snobbery as the Tribune’s interviewer would make this gentleman appear,” wrote Life.

When the Vanderbilt clan took the lead in funding the Metropolitan Opera plan, they had yet to be invited into Mrs. Astor’s inner circle. It was primarily this fact that prompted the belief that the social aspirations of these nouveaux inspired the new opera house. The Vanderbilts, however, did not emerge out of nowhere. By 1869, the family wealth, mostly in railroads and shipping, already had surpassed the Astors. The deaths between 1875 and 1877 of the city’s three richest men, William B. Astor Sr., A. T. Stewart, and Cornelius Vanderbilt, occasioned an easy comparison of their net worth. Astor, already second-generation rich, had inherited his capital from his father, and took few risks with the family’s real estate holdings. The other two were self-made men, the Staten Island-born Vanderbilt being not only the “rougher and less cultivated” of the group, but also the richest, with a fortune valued at nearly one hundred million dollars. With little philanthropic spirit, Vanderbilt left the bulk of his estate to his son, William Henry Vanderbilt, who died only seven years later, in 1885. Similarly, William B. Astor Sr., also worth approximately one hundred million dollars, had spent little on himself, living in striking
contrast to New York’s current nouveaux riches. Until their father’s own death in 1875, his sons William B. Jr., and John Jacob Astor III also lived austerely and frugally. Later their tastes and indulgences changed. Likewise, the Commodore’s grandsons and William Henry’s sons, Cornelius Vanderbilt II and William Kissam Vanderbilt, bucked the miserly family spirit and spent lavishly on themselves and on their favorite extravagances. Notably, even though Vanderbilt wealth was not aged nearly as long as the Astors’, it was the third generation of both families that was caught up in the social whirl of 1880s New York City.

In 1880, the Vanderbilts remained barred not only from the Astors’ social “visiting list” but also from the Patriarchs’ Ball. By January 1883, however, both Cornelius and William Kissam Vanderbilt and their wives were on a list of invitees to tea at Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant’s home, along with Mrs. Astor. Around the same time, thirty-year-old Alva Vanderbilt, William Kissam’s wife, was planning an opulent costume ball of her own as a housewarming for her family’s Richard Morris Hunt château at Fifth Avenue and Fifty-second Street. She sent out 1,200 invitations to New York’s new and old guard, but left off Mrs. Astor, whose daughter had eagerly anticipated attending with her friends. Consequently, the queen had to capitulate and acknowledge the Vanderbilts’ social existence in order to receive an invitation for herself and the young Carrie. With or without Mrs. Astor, the party that March was a triumph. “The Vanderbilt ball has agitated New-York society more than any social event that has occurred here in many years,” stated even the staid Times. The Tribune compared it to the most celebrated balls of the previous half-century. Thus, the social barriers to the Vanderbilts finally fell in 1883. The same sort of exuberant and extravagant mix of wealth and generations would be present at the Metropolitan Opera’s opening later that year.
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For all the financial outlay necessary to construct the Metropolitan Opera House, little attention was paid to creating an innovative or modern theater. Josiah Cleaveland Cady, the chosen architect, had never designed an auditorium. His initial plan to fit a site of square proportions at Vanderbilt Avenue was adapted with little revision for the more rectangular final site on the block bounded by Thirty-ninth and Fortieth Streets and Broadway and Seventh Avenue. In fact, the opera house’s design itself bore an uncanny resemblance to Covent Garden in London, the plans of which had been made available to Cady. Following a European template for a theater struck some observers as absurd, since royal boxes were arranged according to the prevailing titled social hierarchy. This concept in theory could hardly be translated into anything American, even if the Metropolitan Opera group viewed itself as American nobility.

Even the name of the original corporation, the Metropolitan Opera-house Company, Ltd., was ambiguous. The word “opera” was little more than a modifier for the word “house,” and the word “company” also could be taken to mean an opera company or a corporate entity that owned the house. Whatever the intended meaning, detractors insisted that only the culture of display appealed to the founders, “not the attendant responsibilities,” which indeed were myriad. The public uncertainty of whether the Metropolitan Opera was a theater or a performing company would follow the endeavor into the twentieth century. But the early mission was plain: it was a real estate investment in opera, and by extension, perhaps also an investment in New York’s culture. Nevertheless, the founders of the Metropolitan Opera revisited some of the same issues that the leaders of the Academy of Music did before them, but with one crucial difference: in time there came to be two entities that shared the Metropolitan Opera name—the real estate
company, which controlled the auditorium, and the body which managed the opera troupe that performed there.

The unveiling of the grand new opera house was much anticipated as a harbinger of a new era in New York City culture. The implicit social competition between the old and the new venues also was a source of fascination. Semi-hyperbolic assessments compared every aspect of the Academy and the Metropolitan: from its impresarios, Mapleson and Henry E. Abbey; to its soloists; to, perhaps most importantly, its board leadership. Mapleson likened the New York “blue blood” Academy leaders to “the Faubourg St. Germain” sophisticates of Paris. The Metropolitan Opera founders were merely the rich “monopolists.”

No other city in the world, except for Paris, was able to sustain two opera houses, and it was improbable that both would survive in New York. The Metropolitan Opera evidently was going to be large, opulent, and flashy—a physical manifestation of its financial backers and their ambitions. In September 1883, the Metropolitan Opera’s prospectus describing the coming season featured on its cover an image of a defiant American eagle—probably intended as a challenge to Mapleson, the Times suggested, although as much a self-important herald of a new American cultural institution. The Academy was expected to fall short in its “primitive surroundings” and “archaic interior,” which would not stand the comparison to the dazzling gold, crimson, and silk of the new house. However, the endless and shameless speculation was more about how well the new auditorium would function as the setting for a “brilliant audience”—not about how it would function as a glittering temple for opera.

Abbey was not above controversy. Less than a week after his arrival in New York, the press reported that he anticipated charging stockholders an additional $1,200—the cost for non-stockholders—for them to use their own boxes for the season. Sparking outrage, Abbey
fervently defended and denied this; in fact, the $1,200 assessment as well as a reported $600 one were part of another plan by which the directors were bound to protect manager Abbey against loss, sharing the financial risk of the coming operatic season.\textsuperscript{70}

Indeed, the risk was great. The Metropolitan Opera House cost $1.7 million to build, over twice its original estimate.\textsuperscript{71} The boxes, 122 in all, accounted for 732 seats, or one quarter of the total capacity, which was 3045, half again as large as the New Opera in Paris. Ironically, this amounted to only forty-five seats more than the old Academy. More important, the founders were determined that there was to be no Academy-like controversy over the number of boxes.\textsuperscript{72} The sightlines—a lingering problem at the Academy as well—was another issue. Pointedly, because “persons of inferior status” occupied the balcony and family circle, their complaints of poor visibility were ignored.\textsuperscript{73}

Not surprisingly, the Metropolitan Opera House was built to be the largest opera house in the world, as befitted a city that in a few decades would become the largest and richest metropolis in human history.\textsuperscript{74} Even so, the architecture of the building was disappointing. Its style was called Romanesque or Italian Renaissance—but Cady’s apparent intention was for the building to be timeless and devoid of “transient fashions” or “architectural humors” of the day.\textsuperscript{75} The interior was painted pale yellow, anticipated to mellow into ivory by gaslight, but thought by the society magazine \textit{American Queen} to resemble lemon ice cream.\textsuperscript{76} The ceiling was fitted with a huge sheet of metal suspended from the roof with painted decorations that were likened to “an immense imitation majolica platter.”\textsuperscript{77} The stage curtain was sage green instead of the more conventional crimson or gold. There was no main grand staircase. The acoustics were not as good as the Academy’s, although opinions on the subject were, according to one account, “as wide as the seats.”\textsuperscript{78} Sounds in the auditorium were muffled, there was no echo, and it was hard
to enjoy the performance if one was sitting beyond the parquet or the boxes.\textsuperscript{79} The common refrain from Cady and critics alike was that the theater would grow on the beholder in time.

Yet underlying the public’s condemnation of the auditorium was resentment that the Metropolitan Opera’s founders had built a place not for opera, or the public, but for themselves. “A more amazing example of wealth working without taste or conviction or public spirit was never seen,” wrote the \textit{World}. “The general impression made upon the observer by the Opera-house is that the capitalists instructed their architect to build as big a house as possible and not bother about its appearance or its convenience.”\textsuperscript{80} The founders’ civic agenda, if there ever was one, was imperceptible.

Within a week of the opening, Abbey found it necessary to make at least a few changes to the new opera house. A gold proscenium curtain replaced the green one, and eleven of the second tier boxes were made smaller to make way for a “dress circle” group of chairs for sale at a moderate price.\textsuperscript{81}

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Lost in the hoopla was the fact that on October 22, 1883, the much-anticipated date of the simultaneous openings of both the Academy and the Met, two operas in fact were performed: Bellini’s \textit{La Sonnambula} and Gounod’s \textit{Faust}. Nobody commented on the ironic significance of the choices of operas themselves—the stories of a sleepwalker at the Academy and of a pact with the devil at the Met. In fact, comparatively little was said about the performances at all; much more was said about both audiences, and about the new theater.

Even though both houses were sold out, Mapleson expressed concern that the other (lowbrow) openings on the same night—of the National Horse Show and at Tony Pastor’s variety house—might diminish the size of his audience. His fears were unfounded: loyal long-
time patrons filled the boxes, and Mapleson missed “no one of significance.” Even the insignificant attended the Academy that evening, filling the house to standing-room capacity.

When the Met’s conductor lifted his baton twenty minutes late at 8:23, people were still “pouring in from every side.” Christine Nilsson, the star that evening, was a seasoned performer who had created her role in Faust at the Paris Opera premiere; she was almost unanimously thought to be in perfect voice. The scenery and costumes were rich and beautiful, the artists were all warmly received, and the production as a whole was a “lyric and dramatic representation.”

Yet, in an odd reprise of the Academy’s opening night decades before, the first two acts received little or no applause. Certainly the five-hour length of the performance had something to do with the lethargy. Almost as likely was the fact that Abbey played it safe. “In spite of the magnificent apparatus which Mr. Abbey and his musical director have at their disposal they did not go beyond the conventions in the manner of the production in anything except the stage settings,” the Tribune wrote.

But that was not the point. As anticipated, the opening at the Metropolitan Opera House was a social, not a musical event. “The audience was apparently more interested in surveying the house and seeing who was there than in listening to the music,” summed up the Critic. The arts and letters journal the Independent conceded that the Metropolitan Opera House indeed did outshine the Academy. Moreover, it probably surpassed any recent gathering of “the beauty and wealth and fashion” of New York City. “Everybody who was anybody” was there, shimmering in costly outfits and diamonds and pearls. Not to be outdone, however, at the Academy, the Times noted that there was “such an audience as has rarely been seen in the old Fourteenth-street opera-house except upon occasions of more than usual interest, and it was liberal with its applause to the limit of indulgence.”
Yet the final judgment about the Met was limited to its physical success as a setting for its brilliant audience in terms of complimentary paint colors and architecture. But given the run-up, the audience also was surprisingly sophisticated. The Tribune wrote:

Everybody was in full dress and in the glorious good spirits that a consciousness of elegant clothes inspires. When the opening notes of the overture sounded through the house were was a momentary hush, and then as if everybody had made his bow and done his duty by that everybody turned to his neighbor and began to chat in the liveliest manner, or turned completely around in his seat to get a full view of the house. A more sociable gathering it would be hard to imagine. Everybody seemed to know everybody and everybody seemed to have something to say. But when the curtain arose the conversation ceased at once and from that time forth, except between the sets, the audience was attentive to that which was taking place upon the stage, applauded heartily, if not with the greatest enthusiasm, and seemed to be satisfied with everything.

Mapleson might have deemed them the rich unwashed, but the Metropolitan Opera’s opening night audience was comprised of a diverse mix of New York’s wealth and privilege as well as hundreds from the circles of art, science, letters, and foreign society. By any serious estimate this crowd had a combination not only of affluence, but of influence—socially, culturally, and politically. In spite of its faults of exclusivity and superficiality, in the Metropolitan Opera House, forces had consolidated into a new and possibly better operatic venture. But this striking fact was not yet apparent to observers.

It was the “jewels, gems, diamonds, bright eyes, and dazzling teeth” of the new wealth that were all the focus. The newness of the newcomers’ gold luster, according to American Queen, would be fleeting, and the group would “never hold long the same society following,” even if the music was good. Nevertheless, at intermission, those in the audience who had brought along the day’s newspapers could verify who was sitting where by consulting the diagrams of the boxes that were published that day.
The absurdity about splitting hairs about who was aristocratic and who was not in the United States, and in New York in particular, was not lost on the humor and satire journal *Puck*, which had a short continuing column written in the voice and argot of one of the nouveaux. Of the Met opening, “Fitznoodle” wrote:

“Well, we went, and on entering the building I was struck by the resemblance of the opera house in some respects to Her Majesty’s Theatuh, and in others to Covent Garden. Some of the Amerwican families who profess to be of verwy ancient and arwistocwatic wace and aw lineage were not present. I aftahward discovahed the weason. It was because some of the wecent millionaires—the nouveaux wiches—had contwibuted the gweatah part of the funds necessarwy faw the constrwuction of the house. I almost wo-ahwed with laughah when I heard this. It was weally too widiculous. As if one millionaire were any maw wespectable or belonged to a maw illustwious family than anothah!”

The peculiar triumph for the Academy that evening was one of survival. Mrs. Astor did not attend, and sent her regrets from the country; the press failed to note that she owned boxes in both theaters, which perhaps explained her uncharacteristic absence from an unusually auspicious opening of the opera season. But August Belmont, his wife, and son were present at the Academy, as were several judges and government officials, as well as other “Knickerbockers” whose prominence had peaked in the 1870s. With the opening over, the Academy was still standing—undamaged musically and socially.

The following day, comparisons between the houses abounded. And as the season progressed, reviews for both opera venues appeared, usually side-by-side, and typically without overt preference for one company over another. If anything was becoming clear, though, it was Mapleson’s over-reliance on his stars, of which there were at first only two. Yet in November, the operatic superstar, Adelina Patti, returned to the Academy stage, and new to the company’s mix was Lillian Nordica, a great young American soprano. And every “habitual opera-goer in New York” was there for Patti’s triumphant return.
Even so, Americans were still somewhat provincial about how they took their opera, and were fond of hearing operatic feats like a tenor hitting the high C, the Met’s Roberto Stagno’s stock-in-trade. “An American audience will go anywhere, sacrifice anything, to hear this one note,” the Critic claimed.101

By December, the journal *Life* was bold enough to surmise that “in the Metropolitan Opera House, we have really an opera,” and that at the helm, Abbey was “not a bad sort of impresario.”102 The exemplary artistry of the performances as a whole was slowly being recognized, interpreted by a company dependent on not one or two stars alone, but a troupe of excellent soloists, chorus, orchestra, and conductor. Mapleson, on the other hand, had less than a handful of great singers. “Is it surprising, then,” asked *Life*, “that a night at the Metropolitan Opera House is more than likely to be one of brilliancy and enthusiasm?”103

Thus there was hope that the Metropolitan Opera might succeed not only socially, but artistically, and become a great venue for all New Yorkers. Even while the productions were gaining respect, however, a notice posted in the boxes reminded the denizens of the parterre not to talk too much during the performances.104

As the Met’s the first season was coming to an end, Mapleson was in severe debt, having drawn on reserve sums to secure Patti’s contract in order for the Academy to function competitively. Sheriffs served notices on him, and Mapleson’s guarantors only half-heartedly offered their support. The Met was not faring much better, the season having lost a half million dollars.105

It would have cost the Academy only $100,000 to include more boxes. Instead, between $1.7 and $3 million was spent to build the Metropolitan Opera House. The mix among the directors was an unprecedented combination of old and new money coming together to create a
better and stronger undertaking that also helped secure New York City’s place on the world cultural map. Their great wealth also enabled the opera house’s investors to continue to sustain the money-losing venture somewhat indefinitely, thus guaranteeing its survival.\textsuperscript{106}

In 1833, Philip Hone, the elite merchant, New York mayor, and diarist, wondered about the opera: “Will this splendid and refined amusement be supported by New York? I am doubtful.”\textsuperscript{107} In the half-century that followed, opera indeed could be supported, albeit only in one place, and while continuously treading a fine line between success and failure, and its social versus aesthetic purposes. When the Metropolitan Opera’s first season was over in late April 1884, at least a few Academy directors were willing to concede defeat, and led a movement to investigate a merger of the two houses. But of two hundred votes, only thirty-eight were in favor of amalgamation.\textsuperscript{108} Perhaps more significantly, at that meeting, August Belmont announced his resignation after five years as president of the Academy, citing business interests. His gamble with Mapleson had not paid off, and opera in New York was taken over by a richer group with greater imaginations and ambitions.

The city’s cultural framework was changing, and for the opera, so, too, was its entrenched social structure. In 1895, Cornelius Vanderbilt transferred some shares of his stock to enable Belmont’s son and namesake, August Belmont Jr., to become the owner of Box Four at the Metropolitan Opera House. And in 1896, in an example of the enduring new mix which she herself helped initiate, the now-divorced Alva Vanderbilt married Belmont’s son, Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont. Although the Academy continued to exist as an occasional venue for opera, it also showcased vaudeville, balls, and other gatherings. The Metropolitan Opera board, on the other hand, reiterated in an 1896 resolution that the House was strictly to be used for opera, and made a particular point of refusing to allow the auditorium to be used for political meetings.\textsuperscript{109}
The cycle was complete, and the Metropolitan Opera had realized August Belmont’s earlier vision for opera in New York by drawing on a new group of supporters with ample resources to implement, almost by accident, a greater civic agenda.
PART TWO:  
Into the Twentieth Century

By 1898, the year of the consolidation of the five boroughs of Greater New York, cities were becoming an American focus, and with massive urban growth came interventionist efforts to guide an altered social and cultural landscape.¹ The New York Public Library, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Metropolitan Opera were continuing to build on the frameworks their trustees had established years before. And as the institutional missions expanded, the buildings themselves did as well.

The New York Public Library seized the wave of consolidation in a larger sense: borne of three separate entities and united into a colossal enterprise, by the turn of the century it expanded to incorporate the city’s disparate free circulating libraries as well as a branch system funded through Andrew Carnegie’s stunning $5.2 million donation. Likewise, the opening of a permanent building in Central Park publicized not only the growth but the ambitions and ascension of the Metropolitan Museum, measured by the steady flow of important donations in art and in cash. And the Metropolitan Opera House, rebuilt by the governing Real Estate Company after a fire destroyed the theater in 1892, and gradually refurbished along grander specifications, was becoming as famous for its performing troupe. Led by a separate and idiosyncratic board of trustees, the company respected the protocol of the past but set in motion more professional management and a forward-thinking artistic program.

All of this required money. New York had maintained its position as the “Empire City” and grand marketplace of commerce, and with these developing cultural programs came a slow and necessary acceptance of official city involvement. The library and museum both were built on public land with public dollars, but the collections and general operating missions were the
purview of the private trustees. Carnegie, who had contemplated his philanthropic activities in simultaneously practical, abstract, and emotional terms, predicated his library donation on the equal participation and maintenance of the city, thus forcing the trustees into ongoing involvement and negotiation with the public servants who served the library users. Similarly, the Metropolitan Museum trustees under J. P. Morgan’s presidency recognized the need for municipal cooperation. By opening the board to three ex-officio members from the city government, the institution was able to parlay the association into support for new wings in the 1910s.

For the library, museum, and opera, the personalities and agendas of the important trustees Carnegie, Morgan, and Otto Kahn loomed large. At the museum, Morgan rejected the common practice of organizing a benefaction around a donor’s name, as others like Henry Gurdon Marquand forced the notion further by distributing their collections without restriction before their deaths. This sort of altruism may have appeared quietly self-effacing, but it did not escape public notice. In the case of Carnegie’s millions for the library, it also opened him to criticism for his motivations in giving away his “tainted money.”

Indeed, a philanthropist’s adoption of the dual role of cultural and moral arbiter was, to say the least, arrogant. In the late 1880s, the museum trustees faced censure over the question of opening the building to the public on Sundays; a little over a decade later, the opera would encounter some of the same moral concerns (and public condemnation) over performances of Richard Strauss’s controversial modern opera *Salome*.

Even so, trustee presumptuousness in employing some of the corporate practices that had enriched them had some benefit for their chosen cultural institutions. Morgan, for example, was famous for restructuring troubled businesses, and under his leadership the museum revised its
constitution, capitalized on the ways and means of public support, and professionalized the staff. Similarly, the library embraced the Dewey Decimal System and new scientific approaches to the profession. While this sort of organizational efficiency was a hallmark of the progressive era, so, too, was the more disturbing control that many of the trustees—all members of an intricately connected philanthropic cohort—had over corporate boards and money trusts as well.

Indeed, the era’s paradoxes were complex. As American culture was becoming increasingly heterogeneous, charitable impulses were ever more ambiguous. As committed Protestants, many of the trustees’ activities advocated reform to improve the quality of life for all classes, even while possibly moved by a more conservative inclination to intervene and stem the tide of further change. “There is great confusion,” wrote Walter Lippmann in 1914, “due in large measure to the persistency which men follow tradition in a world unsuited to it.”

Part Two investigates the ways in which the trustees of the library, museum, and opera built on the accomplishments of the past and responded to the future in a rapidly changing and growingly modern age, even as their institutions, and they, as directors, were becoming recognized as national cultural standard bearers.
In December 1868, Andrew Haswell Green presented a report to Central Park’s Board of Commissioners that extended in scope far beyond the acreage of the still-unfinished urban park. The board, in fact, already had enlarged its authority to cover the city’s urban planning, and Green’s communication ostensibly focused on a scheme for improvement to Manhattan’s northern end. The Harlem River, which connects the Hudson and East Rivers, was a potential boon to development if only bridges or tunnels could be built to span the waterway. Northern Manhattan and southern Westchester (the future Bronx) were the subjects of Green’s focus; they were still rural, and it was difficult to imagine as grandly as he did that the Harlem River had the potential to become a veritable Thames or Seine, with serious roadways connecting densely populated areas of an international city.¹

Green looked to the past—to the land in Yonkers granted to Adriaen van der Donck in the seventeenth century, and to the city’s rapid development northward following the gridiron scheme of 1811—to inform his view of city planning. He scrutinized territorial administration in the city as well as the state. He contemplated the “great procession” of European immigrants flowing into the city, and pondered new means of communication and transportation. He had an unfailing faith in technology, and the optimism that the ambitious infrastructure he imagined could and would be built.²

And he saw consolidation—in terms of territories and of “squabbling” entities—as the wave of the future.³

“Let this be done,” the Tribune wrote, “and New-York in the course of one or two generations will be one of the grandest cities of the world.”⁴ That was precisely Green’s intent,
and his plan to achieve it was through the consolidation of the City of New York, Kings, Queens, and Richmond Counties, and a part of Westchester County, under one common municipal government, to be arranged in departments, under a single executive head. This notion of annexation certainly was not original to Green, and in varying degrees had existed since the 1820s, but Green’s tenacity and passion for city building finally saw it through in 1898, thirty years after submitting the germ of the idea in his report.

Over his long career, Green never would shrink from using public resources to enhance private ventures, particularly where his consolidation initiative was concerned. He gave consideration to the human shape and physical scaffolding of the metropolis, and responded imaginatively with a corresponding solution to the city’s cultural complexity. New York’s library system would become one grand result of his program.

In 1845, when he was twenty-five, Green began a lifelong business and personal connection with Samuel Tilden. “He is surrounded with political hangers on which in my humble opinion is of no especial advantage in a business point of view,” Green wrote in his diary, dubious of Tilden’s potentially conflicting political interests. Yet the two men ultimately did practice law and politics together for decades, and Tilden, although only six years older, became Green’s mentor. The young Green’s initial reticence about working with his future partner demonstrated the singularity of focus and sober integrity that would characterize his life of public service.

The Consolidation of Greater New York in 1898 was the capstone of Andrew Green’s long career, which included a leadership role on the Central Park Board of Commissioners. Green used the Park Commission bureaucracy to further an aesthetic agenda that promoted his ideals of the city beautiful and leveraged his broader notion of urban planning, which
encompassed both a physical and cultural infrastructure. Imagining a world-class city, he supported the proposals for both the American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art to be built on city land, setting a precedent by which public support could aid private initiatives organized for the public good. For Green, the Park was the nucleus of a comprehensive program of progress in his quest to make New York the great urban center of the country.\(^8\)

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the shape of the city was a perpetual question of public debate. One of the more active members of the planning movement was Frederic C. Howe, the lawyer, Ohio politician, tax specialist (a devout follower of Henry George’s single tax proposal), and polemicist on the urban condition.\(^9\) “A new conception of municipal purpose has come in,” he wrote. “It is neither conscious nor defined as yet, but in the midst of the outward manifestations of municipal activity, an unrecognized broadening of the culture and life of the city is going on, of immense significance to the future.” That this expansion was proceeding “unrecognized” had much to do with the fact that it had emerged quietly through private channels. “But that the private activities of to-day will become the public ones of to-morrow is inevitable,” Howe wrote.\(^10\) Private initiatives like settlement houses, playgrounds, and hospitals, he anticipated, all were “surely and slowly” passing under public control.

Consolidation, in the intellectual as well as the physical sense, was part of the spirit of the times, and the library movement was about to be swept into its midst.

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At the 1886 meeting of the American Library Association, the controversy over taxing the public to pay for public libraries was foremost on the agenda. While eastern and western
states had over time come to accept the necessity of public support, the middle states, and New York City in particular, still were wrestling with the issue. “Is the municipal government of New York City so much worse than that of other large cities—Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, and Milwaukee—that it cannot be trusted with the interests of a public library?” the Association president William F. Poole asked incredulously.11

New York was no different from other large cities in the presence of “disturbing elements” like large immigrant populations, socialists, communists, or anarchists; yet the most disturbing element of all was “the reluctance of wealthy men to be taxed for such an object.” To Poole, the problem of state support could not be solved in New York without rich private citizens who would be willing to create a library endowment of $4 or $5 million. “The large legacies and gifts which have recently been made for the founding of libraries in this country are among the most cheering signs of the times,” he said.12 But he doubted that any such rich philanthropist would appear in the Empire City.

At the conference, Adolph Sanger’s recent proposal for a New York Public Library also was a topic of discussion. He had shrewdly selected prominent men to be the bill’s incorporators as a signal that no New Yorker of stature could deny the significance of a public library housed in a large building “worthy of the city.”13 But almost immediately the Senate Cities Committee heard arguments against the bill from among others, Melvil Dewey, the librarian of Columbia College and inventor of the library classification system, and three trustees of the Free Circulating Library. They favored small, scattered libraries around the city instead of a central branch, and argued that New York already had the fine Astor Library for reference. Sanger’s suggested site at Forty-second Street seemed too far out of the way for poor people to visit, dooming the library to become merely “a club house for the rich” should it be built there. A
public library needed to serve the public, which in New York consisted of mainly those who could not afford to buy books. Building and equipping a library on the Croton Reservoir site would cost at least $2 million, and the interest alone on that sum, $100,000, could sustain ten branch libraries, “doing ten times as much good.”

Meanwhile, even with the lingering fear of municipal corruption, the Free Circulating Library trustees eventually did seek public aid. William W. Appleton, the Library Committee chair, believed that with public support, “the libraries at present in existence should be strengthened & the money given to some non-political board of trustees, who would see that the money was expended in a way to do the most good & to develop some comprehensive scheme of library work.”

When Samuel Tilden died in 1886, the nature of the debate changed. The Tilden bequest was going to serve as an example of how great private fortunes might be returned to the public good, and in this case, enable New York to match the free public libraries of Boston and Chicago. In response to Tilden’s relatives’ litigation of the will, Green, Bigelow, and Smith quickly incorporated the Tilden Trust in March 1887, specifying its purpose to establish and maintain a free library and reading room in the City of New York.

Four years later, when the Court of Appeals decided against the Trust and in favor of Tilden’s relatives, the New York Times called it “a public calamity” that deprived the city of a great public monument. But in a surprise compromise, Laura Pelton Hazard, Tilden’s grandniece and reluctant participant in the suit, agreed to sell her interest in half of the residuary estate for $975,000, guaranteeing that around half of the Trust, minus her payment, would survive for Tilden’s intended use. The Times, along with other newspapers, condemned the other heirs for greed and “indecency” and called upon them to imitate Mrs. Hazard; while they had a
legal right to the money, the beneficiaries had “not a shadow of a moral or equitable title.” The Tilden Trust emerged with his book collection and only $2.5 million to accomplish its grand purpose. With a yearly income of only approximately $100,000 to build, equip, and run a public library, by itself it could never be of the scale of Boston’s or Chicago’s, which operated for hundreds of thousands of dollars, and which would soon feature large new central buildings, with branch and delivery stations, erected by their municipal authorities.

After the verdict was handed down, the Tilden trustees met, more to bury their hopes than to consider the disposal of the remaining Trust money. “We have no plans to make public, for the simple reason that we have none at all,” one trustee said. The lesson was that Tilden and community-minded philanthropists like him would be better advised to make their contributions during their lifetimes, rather than entrusting descendents or trustees with the task of carrying out their intentions.

As a case in point, a few weeks after the Tilden verdict, William Waldorf Astor refused a trusteeship of his great-grandfather’s library. His decision not to continue to take an active part in the Astor Library was allegedly to free it from the appearance of being an “appendage of the Astor family which controlled it for purposes of self-glorification to the detriment of public interest.” Because he was living abroad this was understandable, although the implication also was that the Astor family was as indifferent to the endeavor as they were in protecting John Jacob Astor’s interests. Indeed, one year later, when William Waldorf’s uncle William Astor died with an estate estimated at up to $50 million, he left the Astor Library only $50,000. For the Sun, it was a “mystery of wealth” that the Astor family, with an estimated net worth of over $100 million, would not think to endow their library with enough money to sustain it, but would rather let it fade away. The institution had fallen startlingly short of its founding ambition as a
public library: it was supported by an exclusive patronage; run perfunctorily and secretly by a “close corporation” of trustees; and its use restricted to adults over the age of twenty-one from 8 am until 4 or 5 pm, depending on the time of year. Essentially, it was closed to the working and poor classes. The board was apathetic about improvements in this regard, although one Astor trustee speculated hopefully that if the Tilden entity became New York’s long-sought great circulating library, the Astor Library might still fulfill the wants of the city for reference works.  

While awaiting a final judgment on the suit, the Tilden trustees had weighed their anticipated options. The Free Circulating Library, of which Bigelow was a trustee, had made overtures for a merger, as had the Lenox Library and the Scientific Alliance, the newly formed body devoted to scientific research and education. After the decision, Green presented the now-available alternatives. They could establish a library in Tilden’s Gramercy Park home, a plan he quickly dismissed as unwise. They could combine forces with the Lenox Library, and either together or alone request the city to erect a public library building on the reservoir site, as per Sanger’s scheme. They could manage the smaller, undersupported libraries of the city. Or they could adopt some version of a consolidated plan.

By now, Green had been championing the consolidation of Greater New York for decades, and what was once thought to be “Green’s folly” or “hobby” was beginning to gain traction in the state legislature, which had created a commission, headed by Green, to explore the possibility further. In March 1892, the on-again off-again Greater New York bill was once again on the table. “The time is coming, and is not far distant, when New York City will be the financial centre of the world,” the bill’s proposer, General James W. Husted, the powerful former speaker of the assembly said, echoing popular boosterism. “New-York City will become the wonder of the nations of the earth by reason of her power and her great wealth,” he added.
Immigrants were more than doing their part in making it the great city of the future. “She needs more room,” he said—namely, Brooklyn, Staten Island, and Westchester County.28

The state of library development in New York City, and the prospects for the Tilden fund, remained a hot topic of discussion for many months. The circulating library system continued to be the most practical approach to the public’s needs, yet the reference library model still prevailed. The two most obvious alternatives for the Tilden bequest were to build a great public reference library for scholars, or to support free circulating libraries for the masses. Funding both was not possible.

Historically, the reference library, best exemplified by the Astor or Lenox, had relied on private funding. Because circulating libraries already were receiving small state grants, the thought was that the city was bound to support a popular library eventually, with or without private munificence, making some observers reason that the public reference library was a more logical alternative for the Tilden money.29 Even so, the argument made clear that the shortcomings of the Astor and Lenox Libraries were so great that the notion of one more reference library hardly seemed impertinent or extravagant.

But Andrew Green had bigger ideas. He and his Tilden trustees by now had accepted the fact that the Trust would be unable to establish and build a comprehensive popular library. He also could not avoid knowledge of the constant financial woes of the smaller individual circulating collections. Moved by his proclivity for consolidation, Green found it both efficient and logical that the scattered city libraries might benefit from a movement towards amalgamation as well. So, too, might the Tilden Trust. Publicly protesting that he was acting on his own to appear politically dispassionate, although evidently proceeding with the support of his fellow Tilden trustees, Green proposed a bill to permit the consolidation of library companies in
New York City that passed in the state legislature in May 1892. Under the law, any organized library in the city and county of New York could join with any other similarly organized corporation and reconstitute their interests into a new corporation. Coordinating the interests of all of New York’s public libraries—to avoid duplication and to assemble as complete a collection of materials as possible—was the obvious solution to the problem of inferior library services.

Almost immediately there was no question that the consolidation had to start by combining the Astor and Lenox libraries with Tilden money. The new library would be in the full sense of the term a “public library,” differing in scope from the Astor, which was expressly intended as “a working library for studious persons,” and from the Lenox, whose precise public or archival function was not really clear. With such an arrangement, New York could have facilities equaling those of London or Paris. Furthermore, the United States was a leader in the modern study of library science. Even in its potentially reduced state, if the new library were to get the benefit of this progress, it might still stand as one of the most valuable libraries of the world. The press envisaged the possibility in rhetoric that recalled the past calls for the necessity of “useful” learning and knowledge in the public realm.

The misfortune of the diminished Tilden funds, in fact, had forced the hand of consolidation, which was turning out to be an advantage. Had the $5 million remained intact, the trustees might have thought to establish some form of a scientific library as originally favored by Green, or something more limited like the Astor or Lenox Libraries, which were noble memorials to their founders but of little practical use to the masses.

Instead, Tilden’s monument would be more abstract: it enabled the establishment of “a great public library for the people.” In his proposal, Green now envisioned the consolidation of
all of the existing free circulating libraries into the plan. As editorials trumpeted, this was indeed a chance for a great library. With a fine central building of architectural distinction, many satellite branches, and combined private and public support, the library was predicted to grow rapidly.  

For two years the three separate boards discussed the complicated undertaking both on and off the record, often at the home of Lewis Cass Ledyard, J. P. Morgan’s personal attorney. By early March 1895, the press reported that an announcement was at hand. New Yorkers owed a debt of gratitude to the three groups of trustees whose “disinterestedness” made the anticipated achievement possible, and some accounts singled out William Waldorf Astor for his “powerful support” in influencing the outcome. Somewhat unexpectedly, he and his cousin John Jacob Astor IV not only consented to the alliance but also helped initiate the meetings of the joint committee. Members of the working group were impressed by the willingness of the Astor family to lose the Astor name in the public mind by subsuming it into one great consolidated library.

While other generations of Astors might have considered it “an hereditary glory” to enrich the Astor Library with additional wings and collections, William Waldorf Astor interpreted that calling quite differently. True, he had shown more than a passing interest in the institution when he presented it with one of its rarest possessions, the Latin translation of one of the two letters written by Columbus on shipboard while returning to Spain after the discovery of the New World. But he also heeded the critics who protested that the Astor Library had become closed and irrelevant. Was this his great-grandfather’s intent? In a letter of support, William Waldorf Astor recognized the library’s censure by the American press “along comprehensible and occasionally upon unintelligent grounds.” Although hardly a populist, Astor had grown
weary of New York society and his aunt’s antics with “the 400,” even wearier of the United States as a place “not fit for a gentleman to live in,” and would soon abandon his native land for England, where he could live like real aristocracy. In the end the Astor Library also was as irrelevant to William Waldorf and John Jacob Astor IV as it was to New York, for the Astor name was living on in more significant ways to them. Nevertheless, the credit they received for promoting consolidation was not altogether out of place.

News of the libraries’ official consolidation in the press allegedly took the trustees by surprise. “We did not intend to have the plan made public so soon,” Green told a Tribune reporter, “but now that the consolidation scheme has been published we propose to push it through as rapidly as possible.” Positive public opinion, of course, was critical. The aspiration was for New York to have a public library worthy of a great metropolis, and the successful final negotiation on February 22, 1895, Washington’s birthday, was heralded as one of the most important steps ever taken in the American educational realm. The more the boards thought of the advantages of a consolidation scheme, the greater the advantages seemed. A joint committee consisting of, among others, John L. Cadwalader and Bishop Potter from the Astor Library; John S. Kennedy and George L. Rives from the Lenox Library; and Green and Ledyard from the Tilden Trust, presented a plan of consolidation for each of the boards’ approval.

In spite of each entity’s individual shortcomings, it was not hyperbolical to suggest that the consolidation of two of the largest and richest libraries in New York, along with Tilden’s money, gave the trustees ample means for establishing one of the finest libraries in the world. The Astor Library had over 260,000 rare and well-chosen books particularly in the areas of art, mathematics, and law; the Lenox Library over 100,000 volumes, important manuscripts, Americana, and 3,500 bibles, including Gutenberg’s Mazarin Bible, the first printed book
published with movable typography; and the Tilden collection included Audubon’s *Birds of America* as well as the first, second, and third folios of Shakespeare and a first edition of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which also were in the Astor and Lenox collections. Even more important were the considerable assets available from joint endowment funds and real estate. All told, the combined assets of the three libraries were estimated at $8 million, and while the approximately 450,000 books could not yet match the two million volumes each in the French Bibliothèque Nationale or the British Museum, with the additional capital, the new behemoth could accomplish great things.

Although the committee also considered a more thorough consolidation that included some of the free libraries in the city—the New York Free Circulating, the Aguilar, and the Mechanics’—that complex topic was deferred until a later time. When the formal agreement was executed in May, the terms were simple: to establish and maintain a free public library and reading room in New York City, “with such branches as might be deemed advisable,” and to “continue and promote the several objects and purposes” of the Astor, Lenox, and Tilden entities. More pointedly, the reconstituted library could advance the level of New York’s library resources to compete with, or even exceed, those of other cities. All that remained was to determine the site of the library, which was to be called “The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.”

Immediately, the presence of a monumental new depository of knowledge fired New Yorkers’ imaginations as a signal of Gotham’s greatness and power. Libraries had come to be a bragging point in a city’s claim to be metropolitan, and this library was going to be distinctive in its dual objectives of circulation and reference. While researchers and scholars also would benefit from the library (“New York within half a century will be the Mecca for students from all
over Christendom,” one publication crowed), New Yorkers as a whole also would be the greater for it.  

There were two serious options of where to build this great intellectual “lighthouse”: the Lenox Library property at Seventieth Street and Fifth Avenue, and the previously proposed reservoir site at Bryant Park, on Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue.  Wherever it was destined to be, accessibility was paramount, as the library was intended for every class of readers. With a warning to “make no mistake,” the Mail and Express joined other tabloids and even the Tribune in begging the new generation of trustees not to repeat the errors of the past in selecting a location for the library—that is, to ignore the progress of New York City’s development northward by advocating an unwise location which might in decades be inconvenient and far removed from the central district. Following this logic, to some, the ideal place was the “Acropolis” rising on Morningside Heights and anchored by Columbia University and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.  

Although the vote for consolidation had been unanimous, the committee on site selection was divided. The Astor trustees, recognizing the impracticality of their own library’s location, favored the Bryant Park site; Thomas M. Markoe, the board president, went so far as to suggest a public partnership in which the city donated the site along with a building for the use of the free library.  The Lenox trustees, with their large Richard Morris Hunt-designed edifice and additional undeveloped lots surrounding it, preferred their own site. It was left to the Tilden trustees to place the deciding vote. Green was vehemently against the Forty-second Street site, because he felt strongly that if the reservoir were dismantled, the property should become a part of Bryant Park. His fellow Tilden trustees, Ledyard and Bigelow, disagreed. “I am too well convinced of the need of parks in the city to favor the reservoir site,” Green persisted, loathe to
allow his enthusiasm for a consolidated library to exceed his commitment to New York itself.\textsuperscript{51} He did admit, however, that the Lenox building was “not the very best place in the city.”\textsuperscript{52}

The New York Public Library trustees met for the first time on May 27, 1895 at the Astor Library.\textsuperscript{53} In December, they elected John Bigelow as president, and appointed a site investigation committee. Its eventual report raised serious doubts about the efficacy of the Lenox land, and caused the committee to think more broadly about the new institution and the future metropolis it would serve.\textsuperscript{54} The constant changes in the city’s population and development, and the shifts in locations of businesses and residences, taken together with the promising 1895 bill for the consolidation of Greater New York, rendered it impossible for even the most experienced leaders to make a “trustworthy judgment” concerning the future.\textsuperscript{55}

What they anticipated and even assumed was the epic character of their endeavor. The New York Public Library ultimately would be like the British, French, or Boston libraries—all of which were supported, however, by municipal funds. “It seems but just that public aid should be extended to those higher forms of public instruction, designed solely for the benefit of the public, which are embodied in the work performed by public libraries,” the committee wrote. New York hitherto had done little or nothing for the support of public libraries, except small appropriations for free circulating ones. The time had come for the city to do its part in “this great work.”

Unlike Boston, New York was not obligated to rely on public money for library funding. Nevertheless, the committee did recommend that the trustees petition municipal authorities to grant a site for the library building, namely, the site of the Croton Reservoir. It was ideal in terms of its central location, large area, and accessibility.\textsuperscript{56}

But in considering the site, the committee first had to contemplate the purpose of the library as a whole. With current resources, they could reasonably build an impressive new
reference library, which, as such, probably would be used by scholars regardless of where it was. But a larger plan encompassing public instruction, education, and general circulation would need an accessible location. The prevailing expectation was to establish something greater: an institution open to the public, as opposed to a closed and exclusive club for bibliophiles. “Useful” as a reference library might be, the trustees had to acknowledge the even larger measure of usefulness a broader plan would engender. Moreover, they were convinced that the public might take a more active interest in the library and its affairs if its principal function was to reach and serve the people. If they were proposing merely another reference library, it would be, quite simply, a disappointment.57

By spring 1897, the library had won all necessary approvals from the state and city to build on the reservoir site, and a committee of the most energetic trustees was fast outlining a plan of action.58 John S. Billings, the first director of the library, was gathering information on library buildings. The Commissioners of Public Parks authorized the erection of the building for $1,700,000, after which the trustees sponsored an architectural competition.59 Twelve selected finalists would take part in a second competition requiring more detailed drawings.60

Charged with developing a structure to be contained within a footprint of 482 by 455 feet, the committee prepared a document outlining its expectations. In fact, the committee’s wish list of interior spaces helped frame their larger discussion of the potential programs and initiatives the library might offer. Beyond stacks for over one million volumes, the library would need rooms for public documents and children’s literature and reading; a library for the blind; a manuscript department; a picture gallery; administrative and processing offices; and mechanical areas. One major requirement was for all public and clerical chambers to have as much daylight as possible, with large and unobtrusively framed windows running nearly to the ceiling.61 In a
refreshing shift from the past, the trustees were foreseeing wide use for this library, and taking
into consideration the needs of the public.

No fewer than ninety-one architects participated in the competition, and in November
1897, the trustees announced the winner: the Beaux Arts-trained partnership of Carrère &
Hastings. The firm, established in 1885, had already completed some notable residential and
commercial projects, including the redesigned interior of the Metropolitan Opera House,
although none were on a par with the unique stature of the New York Public Library, nor of their
future work like the House and Senate office buildings in Washington, DC. Skilled as an
architect and administrator, John M. Carrère had an abiding interest in public affairs and city
planning, and was a leader in the movement in 1893 to convince the U. S. government to support
open design competitions for its public buildings. Thomas S. Hastings was the son of the dean of
Union Theological Seminary and had contacts with wealthy people from both his wife and his
father. The jury said their “direct and dignified” submission would give New York “a beautiful
and monumental building.” Both the exterior and interior conveyed a stately grandeur, and
provided a clear physical representation of the ambitious undertaking.

The winning design demanded an imposing stone in keeping with the substantial and
“conspicuously placed” new library. Marble, the ideal material for the commanding edifice,
would necessitate an additional appropriation of $500,000. Would the boss of Tammany Hall,
Richard Croker, and the new administration of Mayor Robert A. Van Wyck be inclined to favor
a cost increase with no possibility of a kickback?

With unusual urgency, the Board of Estimate and Apportionment unanimously voted to
adopt the winning plan, representing the first time that the city ever was accountable for a
“public” library. “We have plans for a library which we can say advisedly is [sic] better than
any other library in the world,” Cadwalader stated. From the outset the trustees had considered it best to try to anticipate public demands. Most significantly, this included the imperative condition that the institution be open every day and evening of the year, including Sundays from 1 until 9 PM. It had been only six years since the trustees of the Metropolitan Museum, with great controversy and much recalcitrance, had agreed to a Sunday opening “experiment.” This was progress indeed for the leaders of the New York Public Library to categorically include Sunday hours as one of its founding promises, particularly in view of the fact that several of its trustees were part of the Metropolitan’s board, which was famously divided on the issue.

Significantly, the final proposed cost of the New York Public Library building, $2.5 million, was the amount the rival Boston Public Library spent for its own McKim, Mead and White “palace for the people,” on Copley Square that opened in 1895. The City of Boston also gave the library around $200,000 annually for the building’s maintenance. The contrast between the Massachusetts capital’s early library support and New York’s initial neglect was never far from the thoughts of those at the forefront of New York’s library movement. In further developing a plan, Cadwalader argued for a system that included reference, circulation, and a “considerable number” of branches and delivery stations to reach all classes of readers. Boston, Chicago, Baltimore, and many other American cities already had implemented this system, but not New York. Indeed, in 1890, Massachusetts had set up a commission that granted $100,000 in books to any town library meeting state law requirements, thus taking the public library out of the private sector. Many other states were already following this example and adopting its scheme, as libraries became civic monuments not merely for conserving scholarly resources, but for disseminating more general information to the people. New York was behind. Its citizens
needed a free public library on a scale that acknowledged both their wants and the magnitude of their city.\textsuperscript{70}

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At midnight on December 31, 1897, Greater New York came into being.\textsuperscript{71} Green’s once-preposterous “hobby” of consolidation had occasioned the birth of one monumental metropolis, second in population to London, created out of five separate areas comprising the first and fourth largest cities in the United States along with their adjacent counties and annexed districts.\textsuperscript{72} Green’s years of cajoling the legislature to consolidate the boroughs now known as Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island, had earned the consummate booster the sobriquet “Father of Greater New York.”\textsuperscript{73} And he also had a larger mission: to make the city beautiful as well as great. The esoteric cult of beauty was becoming a serious trend in the years after the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition and the advent of the City Beautiful Movement, although it was, at best, “an avocation of the few.” Money-grubbing with little regard for design but an enduring focus on utility, had always been New York’s controlling disposition.\textsuperscript{74} Green’s next project was to safeguard the city’s potential beauty against the forces of financial expedience.

Carrère and Hastings shared the aesthetic vision of city builders like Green. Carrère conceived of beautifying New York City by way of municipally sanctioned public art and architecture, much as he had contemplated the relationship between the federal government and architects in Washington in 1893. Carrère championed his idea to the Fine Arts Federation in 1896, and in 1898 the Art Commission of New York City came into being, with a mission to review works of art, architecture, and landscaping on public property.\textsuperscript{75} Carrère encouraged
officials to incorporate the agency into the new city charter, a task he successfully accomplished with the help of his former client, the statesman Elihu Root.76

But almost immediately, the grand scale of the bold project was problematic. Around 1898, the library leaders George Rives and Lewis Cass Ledyard paid a visit to Bird S. Coler, the first comptroller of Greater New York, to discuss the city’s financing of the library building. The $2.5 million sum, they discovered, would not be enough to finish the structure. Rives and Ledyard came away with two possible courses of action: for city authorities to place a definite cap on construction, or for the city, or the Library trustees with the approval of the city, to ask the Legislature to remove the limit of cost imposed by the original 1897 act authorizing the building.77 The public/private partnership was proceeding relatively smoothly.

In fact, nothing hampered the realization of either the library’s architectural plan or any inspired programmatic ideas. The missing piece completing the ambitious vision was a circulating system that might serve the entire city, but this undertaking would be onerous. In late 1899, the Free Circulating Library approached John Cadwalader to discuss the possibility of a consolidation with the Public Library. “They wish to put us in charge of circulation and are quite prepared to turn over their corporation to us, and in fact to put it out of existence; except that they fear (without having examined the law) that it might in some way affect some of their legacies present or prospective,” he wrote to Ledyard. Clearly Cadwalader was approaching the next step towards a more complete library consolidation in New York City with apprehension.

He anticipated, however, who his greatest champion might be. “When the thing is brought to a point, probably you had better explain to Green how it stands; but do not let him run away with the subject,” he warned Ledyard.78 In fact, Andrew Haswell Green had stated to the press that as much as he believed in a general union of all of the greater city’s free libraries, he
thought that the project might be too complex for the New York Public Library to handle, at least for the moment.\textsuperscript{79} After the trustees became aware of Cadwalader’s ongoing talks with the Free Circulating Library, however, Green badgered Ledyard for progress updates, particularly relative to the manner in which they were approaching the mayor, the Tammany-backed Robert Van Wyck.\textsuperscript{80}

He had no need to worry. In July 1900, Coler asked the Public Library to investigate and report on the circulating libraries in Manhattan and the Bronx. His objective was to improve the system of public payments to the free libraries, with an eye towards consolidation. Interestingly, he sought this information not via the smaller libraries themselves, but from the significant New York Public Library’s trustees. Already engrossed in the issue, Cadwalader set the machinery in motion for the requested report, which fell to John Billings to research and write.\textsuperscript{81} Billings found that fourteen institutions (sustaining twenty-seven branch libraries) were already receiving aid from the city.\textsuperscript{82} Several additional “distribution centres” were needed on both east and west sides of town. Almost as important, Billings found the main deficiency in the circulating libraries to be a lack of financial accountability. Furthermore, among American cities, New York ranked a dismal ninth in per capita spending on libraries.\textsuperscript{83}

In September, the Library’s executive committee recommended that municipal support continue with the free circulating libraries, but that they reorganize under one central authority—assumed to be the New York Public Library.\textsuperscript{84} In early February 1901, an official bill was introduced in Albany amending the Library Consolidation Act of 1895 in order to permit the amalgamation of all of the public libraries in New York City.

That month, the New York Free Circulating Library voted to put both its name and corporation out of existence by becoming part of the New York Public Library. Their property
and purpose would remain devoted to the free circulation of books, even under the public library’s authority. While funding problems may have accelerated this action, as the New York Public Library gained in legitimacy, the city was promoting the idea of incorporating circulating libraries into its system, and combining forces seemed the obvious thing to do. “The idea that this system of circulating libraries is only for the use of the very poor has been superseded by the belief that it is an important adjunct of the city’s educational system, and as such entitled to municipal support,” the Free Circulating leaders observed.

One relatively silent member of the Free Circulating Library’s board was Andrew Carnegie, a consistent supporter beginning in the 1880s. In the late nineteenth century, Carnegie’s Horatio Algeresque life story had captured the American public’s imagination; as a Scottish immigrant to the United States, Carnegie was an example of how hard work, good luck, and overwhelming tenacity could produce one of the richest men in history. By 1889, he was assessing the meaning of his wealth amid both the excesses of the era’s conspicuous consumption and the developing wave of American philanthropy, which had begun during the Reconstruction era. Carnegie was playing a large part in this movement, even as he was defining his responsibility in patently Social Darwinist terms.

While some of this public-spiritedness was part of a culture of ostentatious public display, there also was a rising sense of what Arthur Schlesinger has termed “richesse oblige,” an idea that Carnegie captured in his essays on wealth and the best fields for philanthropy in the American Review. In “Wealth,” he pondered the duties and responsibilities of the moneyed class—once possessed of a healthy surplus of cash—to designate their money for significant community uses. In a way that no affluent person had thought to before, Carnegie articulated the straightforward alternatives for how to dispose of excess wealth: it could be left to families—the
most common approach; or “hoarded” and then bequeathed for public purposes; or administered during the donor’s lifetime. Of the second option, Carnegie balked that many bequests became “merely the monuments of the testators’ folly,” and the “amount of real good done by posthumous gifts was ridiculously disproportionate to the sums thus left.”88 One thing he knew for certain: “I would as soon leave to my son a curse as the Almighty Dollar.”89

In 1899, the Free Circulating Library trustees had approached Carnegie about donating a parcel of land on Twenty-third Street near Sixth Avenue. As he had already begun a program of granting considerable sums for libraries throughout the country and the world, the local circulating library, now with over one million volumes, felt justified in asking his support to help alleviate its overcrowded spaces.90 Carnegie did better than that.

In March 1901, Carnegie and Billings corresponded about the New York Public Library’s thoughts about incorporating branch libraries into its developing system. With the new Free Circulating Library merger in process, along with the amendment of the Library Consolidation Act, Billings and the trustees had done some further thinking about circulating libraries, and estimated adding at least forty branch libraries, twenty-five small distributing centers in public schools, and one large traveling library to the great central reference building on Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street. That would give Manhattan and the Bronx about one branch library for about 50,000 people. Compared to Boston, New York City was still deficient, but it was a start.91

Carnegie proposed to fund the establishment of not only forty, but sixty-five branch libraries, which, while a “large order,” would only begin to satisfy a need that was being better addressed elsewhere in the country. “The system must be extended over the entire city,” Carnegie told Billings, who had based his estimate of forty libraries on the needs of Manhattan and the Bronx alone.92 If New York City supplied the sites and maintained the buildings “for the
special benefit of the masses of the people,” Carnegie would pay for their construction, calling it a “rare privilege” to donate the then-colossal sum of $5.2 million for that purpose. It was a world record. In one sweeping gesture, Andrew Carnegie closed the gap in New York’s emergent library scheme: the city had covered only operating funds and maintenance, while the Library endowment focused solely on research collections, leaving no capital to build up the vital circulating libraries.93 “Sixty-five libraries at one stroke probably breaks the record, but this is the day of big operations,” Carnegie’s typewritten letter stated, to which he inserted in his own handwriting, “and New York is soon to be the biggest of Cities.”94

Two months later, the New York Public Library’s executive committee met to discuss the details of the ambitious Carnegie agreement. But the meeting agenda also included granting the final approval for the Forty-second Street structure’s building material. It would be white marble, and when the architects were done, 530,000 cubic feet of it would be used for the exterior and part of the interior.95 Referencing the pure classical forms of ancient Greece and Rome as symbolic of the integrity of the noble library enterprise as a whole, Carrère and Hastings intended to produce an original version of American Classical, replete with stone from Vermont.96 And in just a few years, the New York Public Library would go from being a laggard to being the crown jewel of American public libraries, competitive with the greatest such institutions in the world.

“I have only just begun to give away money”

On March 13, 1901, the day after he offered $5.2 million to the New York Public Library for a branch system, Andrew Carnegie embarked upon a seven-month trip to Europe. When asked about his future plans as he paraded around the deck of the steamer St. Louis with members of
the New York press in tow, he replied jovially, “Well, you have got me this time.” After reminiscing about the thrill at age seventeen of having an article accepted by the New York Tribune (and his consequently warm feelings for Horace Greeley), he answered a pressing question. How much had he contributed to libraries thus far? “Well, I cannot tell. You see, I have only just begun to give away money,” he said with a smile.97

News of Carnegie’s record-setting donation to the New York Public Library would not be revealed for another four days. On the record, however, in March 1901 alone Carnegie was continuing to distribute tens of thousands of dollars to libraries in smaller communities as far and wide as Massachusetts, North Dakota, North Carolina, Utah, and Virginia, and that was news in itself.

On March 14, Carnegie announced a different $5 million donation: $1 million for the maintenance of the libraries he already had built in three Pennsylvania towns in the Allegheny County of his childhood; and $4 million for an endowment fund for retired and disabled employees of his company. Any of these gifts alone was unprecedented; together with his other grants, Carnegie’s generosity was astounding.

This flurry of activity no doubt was precipitated by his other big news: less than two weeks earlier, J. P. Morgan had completed secret negotiations to purchase Carnegie’s share of his steel company for $480 million. Carnegie immediately became in Morgan’s words, “the richest man in the world,” and also a retired one.98

At this auspicious moment, he issued only two public statements. The first he addressed to “the Good People of Pittsburgh,” to proclaim loyalty to his adopted city, which he now would be leaving for New York. The second message, to the management of the Carnegie Company, expressed concern for his employees: “I make this first use of surplus wealth upon retiring from
business as an acknowledgment of the keen debt which I owe to the workmen who have contributed so greatly to my success,” he wrote.  

Actually, Carnegie had had a home in Manhattan as early as 1867, and in 1898 purchased a lot at Fifth Avenue and Ninety-first Street, north of the chateaux of “millionaires’ row.” The mansion’s sixty-four rooms, large garden, and the latest modern conveniences notwithstanding, Carnegie intended for his new residence to be “the most modest, plainest and roomiest house in New York.” From his private office there, he would carry out the substantial philanthropic projects he anticipated realizing in retirement.  

Similarly, J. P. Morgan used his New York residence as the headquarters for his own avocation, art and book collecting, and while it was the first electrically lighted private house in the city, it also was austere in comparison to the opulent mansions of his peers. In 1900, Morgan commenced plans for an adjacent private library building designed by Charles Follen McKim. At the time, he was keeping his massive art collection in England, along with a portion of his books and manuscripts. Morgan’s ambition was to gather the finest and most exemplary objects of European culture. “Mr. Morgan’s Library” aspired to be not only a repository of rare treasures, but a treasure house in and of itself, with architecture that telegraphed the magnitude of its contents, if not its owner.  

At the beginning of the twentieth century, these two tycoons had a mutual professional respect for each other and similar board and philanthropic interests. Yet Carnegie was consumed with giving away his vast holdings, while Morgan was still amassing his, both as a financier and as a collector. Nevertheless, along with other millionaires including John D. Rockefeller, they sought to enrich New York City by adding to its culture. The metropolis’s philanthropic boards, in turn, welcomed them. “The country’s multi-millionaires and rich men certainly cannot be
accused of greed unmixed with generosity,” the Kansas City Star wrote in an editorial reproduced in the New York Times. “New York, where the extremes of luxury and poverty stand out with vivid irony, where splendor and squalor touch each other at almost every turn in the vast tide of activity which surges through its thoroughfares, is worthy of the Nation and of the people who are making it the most magnificent capital on the globe—and the most merciful,” the article proclaimed. Some observers even credited Carnegie and his musings on wealth for causing this new surge of charitable activity.

Others, however, were offended by such philanthropists’ presumptuousness. In truth, a tycoon’s largesse may have had long-lasting benefits for culture, but it also provided a hegemonic advantage for the philanthropist himself. The great wave of consolidation that rationalized the geographical and physical disorder of Greater New York had less triumphal connotations in the corporate realm: the same impulse of efficiency, here combined with greed, was the driving force behind the new corporate monopolies and trusts that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Critics balked at super-rich industrialists like Carnegie preaching a “gospel of wealth” even while exploiting workers for personal gain. The acts of charity through which Carnegie, Morgan, and Rockefeller chose to dispose of their riches were at best beside the point, and at worst self-aggrandizing vehicles to perpetuate their questionable legacies.

Chief among Carnegie’s detractors was Washington Gladden, the outspoken leader of the Social Gospel movement who turned Carnegie’s argument in “Wealth” on its head. In his 1895 essay, “Tainted Money,” he questioned the morality of nonprofit institutions accepting “tainted” funds earned from extortion or outright crime. That many millionaires’ prosperity had been won by “the most daring violations” of political and ethical laws was widely believed. “Is this clean
money?” Gladden asked. “Can any man, can any institution, knowing its origin, touch it without being defiled?” It was one thing for a rich man like Carnegie to publicly air his thoughts and search his soul to justify his wealth, and even give it away. But it was quite another thing, and hitherto unthinkable, for a charity to consider rejecting such a gift. Where once nineteenth-century benefactors of libraries and other charities had lavished the grateful towns of their modest beginnings with conspicuous donations, now their paternalism and even the very nature of their wealth was coming under scrutiny.

Unlike most of his fellow industrialists, Carnegie believed in the rights of labor to unionize. But by supporting his associate, Henry Clay Frick, in a violent effort to break the union at the steel works in Homestead, PA in 1892, Carnegie exposed himself to criticism from Gladden and other Progressive reformers. “To separate the money from the history of the processes by which it was won is not practicable,” Gladden concluded. “To wish for ill-gotten gains is to condone the wrongs by which they were obtained.”

Yet Carnegie considered it his moral duty to support cultural institutions. And, as a devout Presbyterian, he also considered it a high calling to spread his wealth wisely. True, Carnegie believed that “the man was more important than the money,” but he also accepted inequality as a byproduct of progress. For him, rich men had the advantage of being able to offer benefactions “from which the masses of their fellows would derive lasting advantage, and thus dignify their own lives.” To Carnegie, this was the proper mode of administering wealth, and he felt he knew “the best means of benefiting the community”—to place the proverbial ladders of success like free libraries, parks, art education, and “public institutions of varying kinds”—within reach of the people. Carnegie was never prone to random almsgiving.
The post-Civil War financial boom had affected the country as a whole, for better and for worse. The political and social innovations of the Progressive era that followed embraced new corporate structures, while recognizing the need to impose order upon the urban condition. This reformist sensibility also spawned movements to expose corruption in government and improve the health, education, and welfare of Americans. It was in this atmosphere that Carnegie commenced his program of international philanthropy, beginning with his first library, which opened in 1883 in his birthplace, Dunfermline, Scotland. The following year, the opening of Toynbee Hall in London inaugurated the international settlement house movement of interdependence among volunteer middle-class workers and their low-income neighbors. Americans immediately followed suit with the University and the Henry Street settlements on New York’s Lower East Side, along with Hull House in Chicago and many other similar efforts. Established in areas populated largely by immigrants, most of whom knew little English and even less of American culture, settlement houses offered educational and cultural programs, kindergartens for children, and a safe haven for community meetings. Circulating libraries like the Ottendorfer, the Aguilar, or the St. Agnes, also located in diverse neighborhoods, proffered complementary support, functioning as part-book repository, part-community center. As with the settlement houses, the staffs of the libraries were women who seized an opportunity to fill unique professional roles in work that society deemed acceptable and appropriate for them.

Carnegie began building public libraries in the United States in 1889 with a library in Braddock, PA, near his adopted hometown. By 1898, he had built fourteen more libraries throughout the country. Such unbridled patronage, however, resembled the “indiscriminate charity” he considered patently unwise. He thus developed a procedure that came to be known as “the Carnegie Formula,” which took into account a community’s willingness to help themselves,
as well as its ability to answer a set of questions he and his secretary, James Bertram, had developed. Carnegie offered to erect libraries in towns and cities that guaranteed 10 percent of the construction cost for annual upkeep, demonstrated the need for the building, provided a site, and offered free library service to all. The libraries he proposed building in New York were to be no exception.

Carnegie’s interest in libraries had more complex underpinnings than his critics may have realized. While employed as a messenger in Allegheny City, the fifteen-year-old future multimillionaire, along with other working boys, looked forward to visiting the four-hundred-volume library of one Colonel James Anderson each Saturday afternoon. “Every day’s toil and even the long hours of night service were lightened by the book which I carried about with me and read in the intervals which could be snatched from duty,” Carnegie recalled.114 It was from this early experience that Carnegie became convinced that the best way to benefit young boys and girls was through public libraries, which he offered to build in communities willing to support them as municipal institutions.

While this story, of course, was fodder for his myth, Carnegie also seemed genuinely moved by his personal experience. Responding to the “tainted money” critics, he reevaluated his thinking and emerged even more resolute to do good on a colossal scale. He began in 1901 by reissuing “Wealth” in a collection of his writings entitled *The Gospel of Wealth and Other Timely Essays*, adding a religious element to his title that implicitly answered Gladden’s rhetoric. Carnegie then examined the largely unmethodical way philanthropy was practiced in the United States, whereupon, using a corporate model, he invented a unique method to monitor and expedite his benefactions, with a systematic schedule of requirements and expectations.
With Carnegie only two days at sea, the New York Public Library got to work raising public consciousness as it prepared to announce his gift. Beginning with a meeting between George L. Rives, John Bigelow, and John J. Cadwalader with Mayor Robert A. Van Wyck, the executive committee suggested that Brooklyn and Queens, where there were already well-established library organizations, as well as Richmond, be left to administer their own boroughs’ branches. While this move was not necessarily in the spirit of a consolidated library community, it was both practical and pragmatic. The mayor was “most heartily in favor of the plan,” and was prepared to do all in his power to carry out Carnegie’s vision.

Billings updated Carnegie while still en route to Europe, sending along a package of positive newspaper clippings. Any difficulties with his proposal lay with the City bureaucracy, he noted. “Naturally the Municipal authorities desire to retain as much control of the matter of sites, architects, appropriations, etc., as possible,” Billings politely warned, “but the Mayor and the Comptroller are well satisfied to have these things entrusted to the New York Public Library, and the immediate representative of Tammany on the Board of Estimate will not hold out against your requirements.” Acutely aware of image and opinion control, Billings included the text of the cable from the library that would be awaiting Carnegie upon his landing in Southampton, as well as a suggestion for Carnegie’s reply, both of which he anticipated distributing as a news item. Apparently somewhat distrustful of the public partnership, Billings wished to make it clear for the record that the legislation at Albany was giving the City full authority to ensure satisfactory provision for the libraries’ maintenance.

The New York Public Library, already a massive enterprise, now had the potential to be even bigger. Carnegie envisioned his system including a portion of the central library at Forty-
second Street, about forty circulation libraries in Manhattan and the Bronx and twenty-five in the other boroughs, small distributing centers in public schools, and a large traveling library program. Each branch would include reading rooms large enough for one hundred adults and one hundred twenty-five children, outfitted with encyclopedias, dictionaries, and atlases, in addition to books for circulation. Building one library would average $100,000, including the site and equipment; maintaining the entire system would cost around $500,000 a year, counting 500,000 volumes in circulation plus at least 40,000 more additions or replacements per year. It would take at least five years to realize the project, and Billings reiterated to the mayor (and the public) that New York’s library statistics compared terribly to Boston’s and Chicago’s, a fact of which he had made Carnegie well aware. Even so, Billings surmised to the press, the New York Public Library was poised to become “the greatest free public library system in the world.”

The mayor, breaking his rule not to give a public interview, was even more hyperbolic about Carnegie’s offer. “Mr. Carnegie speaks in his letter of the fact that this is a day of great things,” Van Wyck said. “He is the greatest man of his time. He is the greatest human product of the nineteenth century.” More to the point, Carnegie had hit on something by recognizing that “unqualified” and “unmitigated” giving was liable to do as much harm as good. By requiring a community to provide a site for a building and to comply with other conditions, Carnegie was forcing a joint commitment and insuring the continued usefulness and value of the gift. He had noted the failings of cultural institutions that had begun with the best of intentions, and clearly resolved to do better than Astor, Lenox, and countless other benefactors whose projects had failed to thrive by not accounting for the future.

In spring 1901, Cadwalader and Billings began talks with the mayor about sites and the projected costs for the Carnegie buildings. Rives had anticipated that securing the properties
would be more difficult than appropriating an (increasing) amount of money every year to support them. Comptroller Coler was less concerned, noting that many rich men like former mayor Abram S. Hewitt were coming forward to contribute land.

While publicly there still appeared to be some question about accepting Carnegie’s gift, in actuality no cultural institution or municipal authority was about to turn away $5.2 million. Meanwhile, Carnegie was forcing the decades-old issue of private versus public authority over the library system. He supported the New York Public Library and its board, but the enormity of the undertaking demanded government involvement. Ultimately, while the Public Library was willing to assume the responsibility of the Carnegie libraries for all five boroughs, the City assigned it only the branches in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Richmond, and separately contracted with the Brooklyn and Queens libraries, which already had established library systems. But the site selection and construction were unambiguously under the trustees’ supervision, even if the city provided the land. As requested by Carnegie, the City also agreed to appropriate a yearly amount for maintenance equal to at least 10 percent of the expense of erecting and equipping the Carnegie-funded buildings, also subject to the trustees’ direction. Reminding Carnegie of the prevailing distrust of city officials, Billings noted optimistically that private donations of property for the libraries also might be forthcoming “partly because some persons may be willing to give sites to the Public Library which they would not give to the City.”

A year later, only one location planned before the Carnegie grant, the Yorkville branch on East Seventy-ninth Street, had yet been selected. Securing sites was costly, as the lots often included existing buildings that needed demolition and clearing.
Yet in February 1902, when Carnegie attended his first New York Public Library trustees meeting, he expressed delight that the first contract for the free library bore his friend Lewis Cass Ledyard’s name. “Two Scots working together for [the] good of New York,” Carnegie wrote.\textsuperscript{129}

Carnegie’s passion for the library also was apparent in the way he contemplated board recruits. But he expected them to work. Among his significant suggestions was “that Extraordinary Man,” J. Pierpont Morgan. Carnegie feared, however, that Morgan probably would be willing to contribute his name but not his time, which was of equal importance. “I don’t think it would be the act of a genuine friend of his like myself to put him in this false position,” Carnegie wrote privately to Ledyard, Morgan’s lawyer. “Before you go further I suggest you see Mr. Morgan & explain that under our rules one who is absent three successive meetings ceases to hold office—that it is a body of earnest workers—no figureheads—& then if Pierpont undertakes this he will be a tower of strength,” Carnegie surmised. “Pierpont Morgan has never been untrue to friends. I like him much too much to see his name used as a dummy director,” he asserted.\textsuperscript{130} Morgan, in fact, did join the board.

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As a businessman, Andrew Carnegie was an efficient innovator who originated now-common practices like cost accounting.\textsuperscript{131} As a philanthropist he was similarly systematic. Influenced by Carnegie’s outlook, the executive committee supported a team of architectural advisors that recommended that the branches be uniform in design, materials, and scale, and for two to five firms to design the buildings, rather than award them in open competition. This way, the structures might be built cheaper and faster.\textsuperscript{132}

The advisory committee consisted of John Carrère (with Thomas Hastings, the architect of the central building), Charles Follen McKim (of McKim, Mead and White), and Walter Cook
(of Babb, Cook & Willard, Carnegie’s favored architectural firm), and nobody complained when their firms got the final contract to collaborate on the branch buildings. The gnawing fear, though, was of lack of architectural variety, even in the face of the opportunity to wrest some control away from politicians affecting the aesthetics of the city’s landscape.

Unexpectedly, Carnegie objected to the scheme, particularly the architects’ percentage fees and the choice of only three fashionable firms. But Billings convinced him of the plan’s appropriateness in terms of “economy and efficiency.” Furthermore, the designers were well aware of the need to acknowledge the views of librarians vis à vis the best arrangement and lighting of rooms to serve the convenience of the public, and to ensure economic and efficient administration in quite a different sense. As for the apprehension about architectural monotony, the alternative of bidding out the design of forty buildings might prove unwieldy; at any rate, Billings actually embraced the idea of “one distinctive and uniform type,” in part “so that the most ignorant child going through the streets of the City will at once know a Carnegie Library when he or she sees it.” The branches would be taken as a whole to be a collection of buildings with a distinctive identity, rather than individual structures spread throughout the city.

Carnegie actually did not seem intent on broadcasting a self-conscious, public image through his New York City library buildings, although of course the mere notion of one architectural style reproduced in sixty structures over five boroughs was destined to make a bold statement. More important was adhering to the mandate of what would prove to be a twentieth-century vision guiding the library system as a whole. Carnegie’s branches aspired to be not merely a group of buildings, but a vision for the library that spoke to the demands of a new century.
To begin with, Carnegie’s method of philanthropic giving in itself was a thorough departure from the nineteenth-century model. Furthermore, instead of a temple of useful knowledge erected in a rich benefactor’s name, a Carnegie branch library conveyed fiscal responsibility in design, scale, and demeanor. Carnegie’s library project also corresponded with the modern reforms in library science that Progressive visionaries such as Melvil Dewey and John Cotton Dana were promoting. Dewey, the inventor of the library classification system, was a pioneer in professionalizing the field and an early advocate of libraries that served the entire population, including children. Dana, of the Newark Public Library and the founder of the Newark Museum, was a leading proponent of library collections for special groups ranging from immigrants to businessmen. He initiated the open shelving method to engage the library patrons—“customers,” really—directly with the books themselves. “The storehouse idea must be discarded at once,” he wrote.

What is wanted is a workshop, a place for readers and students, not a safety-deposit building. . . . The library, if it is to be a modern, effective, working institution, cannot forego the demands of its daily tenants for light, room, and air, and submit to the limitations set by calls for architectural effects, for imposing halls, charming vistas, and opportunities for decoration.

The palatial designs of the past simply were inappropriate for the times, which demanded a form that addressed the function of the library itself. A modern library was for the entire community, and emphasized the reader as well as the book.

Embedded in the question of whether a library should follow the model of closed stacks for reference versus accessible stacks for circulation lay a tension between nineteenth and twentieth-century ideas. That both could coexist in the New York Public Library system represented an enormous paradigm shift. The modern library was active, not passive, and embraced a new conception of facilities and a greater range of services: book lending for home
use; free access to shelves; rooms for children; space for educational or community gatherings, lectures, and exhibits; longer hours of operation; and all within a cheerful, “homelike” building. Carnegie’s project was in line with this fresh way of thinking. This revisionist notion was uniquely American, and Carnegie’s steadfast investment in a branch network helped guarantee the perpetuation of the new ideal.

By 1910, 41 percent of New York City was made up of foreign-born immigrants, and the Public Library trustees and John Shaw Billings were positioning the institution to be an active participant in the urban experience. Nevertheless, this also made them vulnerable to the greater charge that middle-class reformers and wealthy philanthropists were imposing their values on the masses. Carnegie’s rigid conditions governing his library gifts were no exception to this apparently antidemocratic impulse. Yet Carnegie obviously saw things differently, and had extolled the virtues and economic dominance of the American system as he saw it in his 1886 book *Triumphant Democracy.* To him, the successful growth of American cities was happening with the aid of a definite design as opposed to a vague directive to “‘just grow’ like Topsy.” Carnegie explained: “In these modern days cities are laid out under definite, far-seeing plans.” Nevertheless, even as he pondered the urban condition along somewhat Progressive lines, Carnegie also approached his gifts for the “deserving poor” guided by the more predictable paternalist sentiments of the nineteenth century.

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On January 1, 1911, the *Times* described the scene on a recent morning aboard the upper deck of a Fifth Avenue bus. As it rattled by Forty-second Street, a bright-eyed old woman craned her neck to see the passing sights. “Would you be good enough to tell me what building that is?” she asked a fellow passenger. “That, madam, is the new building for the Public Library,” he
answered impatiently. “It’s more than twelve years since Carrère and Hastings were selected for the architects, but we hope to see it finished before the end of June, 1911.”¹⁴⁵ Thousands had pondered the same question, and New Yorkers already had grown accustomed to seeing the “slow-forming” structure perpetually under construction. As it neared completion, they anticipated the opening with a new charge of energy.

At this point, it was the architectural detail that was getting all of the attention, and, although antithetical to the new practical form of the circulating library, it was magnificent. Speaking of the arched American oak screen in the great reading room, John Carrère said, “A century hence, the classic perfection attained by the artisans who executed this carving, then softened by the patina of time, will have rendered this work an antique that will be much appreciated.” Answering critics who were dismayed by the fourteen-year building project, the architect added, “How could such a result been hastily attained?”¹⁴⁶

Indeed, in June 1899, when workmen began to demolish the old Croton Reservoir to prepare the ground for the new library, the city still was mired in the old century. It had only one bridge to Brooklyn; it yet lacked the modern conveniences of subways or of train systems running under its rivers; and the skyline did not yet feature any buildings of more than a few stories. But over a decade had passed, and in that time a mass transit system now was in place, three new bridges were spanning the East River, and the monumental palace for Pennsylvania Station was built and already in use, all while the new library still had yet to open its doors.¹⁴⁷ A masterpiece on the order of the New York Public Library, with an exterior boasting 300,000 tons of marble, an interior of equally elegant detail, and library services without parallel in the world, would all take time. Legal, labor, and contractual difficulties caused delays, and in spite of a succession of City administrations, the architects, Billings and his staff, and the executive
committee consistently worked with the authorities, although the construction legally was the City’s responsibility. Moreover, 530,000 cubic feet of pure white marble, the largest use of the material in the United States, was extravagant, as the wastage of stone bearing streaks and discolorations ran at 60 percent, instead of the anticipated 25 percent. Along with the expense of custom-designed furniture and fittings, there was not even $4,000 left for the exterior plantings by 1911, and none of the trustees was “much interested in the subject,” Rives explained to Carrière. The final cost of the building amounted to $9 million, over $2 million more than the Library of Congress.

The building, however, was Carrère and Hastings’s masterpiece, built “as the ancients built,” for eternity. Unfortunately, the fifty-three-year-old Carrère died two months before the grand opening from injuries he sustained in a taxicab accident. Two thousand prominent men and women paid their respects as he lay in state in the great hall of the new library, opened for the first time for a few hours for the somber occasion.

When the library opened in May 1911, sixteen years to the day after the library’s founding, it was a national event. In his remarks, President William Howard Taft acknowledged the one-million plus volumes and the eight million people a year who would use them, but what he recognized even more was the vision of a few “master minds” who united several disparate agencies into one library worthy of a great imperial city. The building was emblematic of the aspirations of New York City itself, with its design and materials even better than the Albany state house, which had paper maché ceilings.

Moreover, it had the most innovative library facilities ever before attempted under one roof, including a reading room for the blind, a room for children with small tables and chairs, and rooms for scholars. As a “mechanism and as a masterpiece of convenience,” the library was then
without equal in the world.\textsuperscript{155} It had over 1.2 million volumes and pamphlets—almost four times the inventory of the original three foundations.\textsuperscript{156} More than fifty thousand persons visited the library on its first day of business. A female presenting a library card from the Bloomingdale Branch on West One-hundredth Street borrowed the first book, a treatise on farm management. “The attendant concealed a little surprise that the first book loaned by the great book palace related to the raising with profits of the humble potato,” the \textit{Times} observed.\textsuperscript{157}

One year later, however, the building remained unfinished, and Cadwalader sought an appropriation or bond from the city to complete it.\textsuperscript{158} And while Andrew Carnegie’s grant for the circulating system was generous, it would cost New York City more money that it had ever anticipated or would have given otherwise. By 1910, when all of the branches were to have been completed, twelve sites still were remaining to be acquired.\textsuperscript{159}

In 1901, when Carnegie’s library philanthropy project went “wholesale” (in his words), New York City was its first precedent-setting recipient, and set a benchmark in scale and impact. By 1917, he had donated more than $56 million towards 2,509 public library buildings in the English-speaking world.\textsuperscript{160} And until his death, Carnegie continued to disperse his wealth, in the name of the diffusion of useful knowledge, via the Carnegie Corporation of New York; the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs; the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; the Carnegie Technical Schools (later Carnegie Mellon University); and the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, promoting community service and voluntary organizations in Great Britain and Ireland.\textsuperscript{161}

The Carnegie Corporation was one of the first modern foundations ever established. In 1911, the year of its founding, no word yet existed to describe such a “corporation,” whose function was to give away money rather than to make it.\textsuperscript{162} In the years to come, other
businessmen-turned-philanthropists like Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller would follow Carnegie’s example with their own foundations. But before the concept even existed, Carnegie placed his total faith behind the New York Public Library and its trustees, and the city the institution served.
On March 30, 1880, the *World* observed one dignified Metropolitan Museum trustee slapping another heartily on the back, saying: “Can you believe it? Can you realize that the thing really exists?” After years of a nomadic existence, the Metropolitan Museum’s permanent building was being inaugurated in Central Park. The structure was hardly finished and far from imposing, but the institution now had an air of permanence, and with it, the sense of promise for the future.

Moreover, American art itself was beginning to make a greater impression. Displayed alongside European work, it was “not so bad after all,” the *New York Evening Post* noted, because “it stands up like a man by the side of its fellows and neither blushes nor faints.” Other critics concurred. William H. Vanderbilt, then in Europe, was so enthused by the popular reception of the new museum and its installations that he telegraphed the trustees his support by donating any ten pictures in his house. Samuel P. Avery supposedly said in response, “You may be sure we took the best he had”—such as that was.

But with a new building and greater collections came greater problems of maintenance and control. Without curators or even very many staff members, the day-to-day responsibilities fell to the trustees. But their instincts sometimes fell short of their institution’s greater ambitions.

Cesnola, who by 1877 had accepted a place on the board of trustees and in 1879 commenced serving as the museum’s first director, was praised for his professionalism. However, as an aesthete whose curatorial judgment was more intuitive than trained, he did have an unorthodox and arbitrary cabinet classification method, in which, for example, figures were shelved according to hairstyle, dress, or size, as opposed to quality.
The museum’s opening was heralded as “one of the leading events in the art history of New York,” and “one of the most magnificent social pageants the city has ever known.” The description was not mere hyperbole: it was characteristic of the aspirations of city leaders guiding a new era of art for the country. After Joseph Choate spoke on the plans of the museum to be a democratic institution to “humanize, to educate and refine a practical and laborious people,” President Rutherford B. Hayes formally opened the institution to the public. Over three thousand fashionable New Yorkers came dressed in colorful attire worthy of Easter Sunday. A large crowd of less elegant citizens waited outside in the March chill to catch a glimpse of the president as a band played music, and the Times reported that carriages filled the drives, pedestrians lined the walks, and “Central Park, in this immediate vicinity, never before presented such a picture of life and beauty.”

Choate had brokered the arrangement for public support for the building, and his “elaborate address” on the history and future plans of the museum did not fail to stir some interest. The 48-year-old trustee had a legendary gift not only for the law, but also of oratory, rendering him an admired wit, raconteur, and popular after-dinner speaker, not to mention future Ambassador to the Court of St. James. Affable and dignified, he nevertheless was prone to sarcasm and audacity, with a natural, informal, and unpretentious oratorical style, “sometimes with a hand in his trousers pockets, or a thumb and forefinger thrust into the vest pocket.” Choate preferred humor over pedantry, and the tone of his “extensive” talk at the museum opening was apparently no exception. Puck parodied its content, “quoting”:

Ladies and Gentlemen: I know nothing about Art—or at least I am willing to say I don’t. It’s a horrid fib, but it sounds funny. This is the first subsidy Art ever got out of the State of New York; and you can wager your sweet lives, my beloved fellow-citizens, there was some tall log-rolling done to get it. When I look around me and behold the various and appropriate etcaeteras, I feel very much as most orators do when they go in for that flight of fancy. We invite you to inspect this
collection, which is very large, what there is of it. When the Juke of Argyll was over here, he told Cesnola—Cesnola was talking to him kinder easy and familiar—a real live Juke—that he’d never seen anything like it in Europe.”

While a spirit of fun and obvious pride pervaded Choate’s speech, so, too, did a hubris that awkwardly revealed what the trustees perceived their role to be in the theoretically public museum. “If we have committed errors, it has been at our own expense; if time and labor have been wasted, they have been only our own; if money has been misspent, it was our own money and that of a few generous friends who zealously shared our errors,” Choate said, concluding, “and here to-day we bring before you the net result of all our labors, all our aspirations, and all our mistakes.” The dramatic words struck some observers as tone deaf to the appeals the museum had been making to the public to help fund the venture. Indeed, it was the trustees alone who had incurred the museum’s sizable debts while arrogantly presuming that they were responsible to nobody but themselves. “We would not seem captious or ungracious, particularly at the present time when the taxpayers of New York, who have paid for the Museum building and have contributed to its running expenses, are naturally rejoicing at seeing at last something tangible for their money,” the Art Amateur wrote, charging that without the loan exhibition, the net result of all the trustees’ labors would in fact look somewhat insignificant.

The fanfare of the opening and the building’s presence in Central Park had placed the museum and its trustees on an entirely new and more visible level. Its location on the park side of Fifth Avenue was a natural draw for visitors; if only a fraction of the tens of thousands of visitors to the park trickled into the museum, that would still be a far greater number than the visitorship at the Lenox Library, for example, across Fifth Avenue at Seventieth Street. By May 1880, there was one day in which eighteen thousand visitors went through the museum’s doors. On less busy days, six thousand total visitors were not unusual. By the end of the first
three weeks of August, 58,831 people had gone to the museum.\textsuperscript{17}

All of a sudden, observers and the press alike began questioning both the museum’s management and its decisions. The museum was heavily in debt caused by potentially “unwise” expenditures, and new appeals to the public for subscriptions were constant. Against the background of failed appeals for funds, it stood to reason that the recent purchase of Avery’s collection of porcelain for $35,000 seemed imprudent, especially given that the museum’s collections were lacking in so many other more important areas, and that Avery was a trustee. With still little-to-no professional staff, the trustees had been relying on their own tastes and artistic predilections to guide the organization of the museum’s collections. Now, as the museum had passed from the idea stage into reality, the early purchases of Blodgett and even the Cesnola collection were suspect. Were old masters of lesser quality worth having? Were archaeological objects art? Should fine art be concentrated in one place, like the Metropolitan? Were the Metropolitan’s trustees worthy of public trust?\textsuperscript{18}

The \textit{Times} tempered its praise of the “first-class” transformation of the museum with criticism for Johnston, W. C. Prime, Huntington, Rutherfurd Stuyvesant, and William Waldorf Astor. These distinguished citizens believed that trusteeship was an honor entailing “no labor or thought,” the newspaper accused.\textsuperscript{19} Being the custodian of American taste was a tenuous proposition for any museum leader. It was even more so in the context of a young society in which the value of art was not yet a basic requirement, as in Europe, where art support was recognized as a function of government, and aesthetic sophistication was an honorable quality for a person to have. For some Americans, it appeared that money alone was “the great aim and prize of life.”\textsuperscript{20}

And yet, the Metropolitan’s substantial merchants and plutocrats were doing the best they
could. Johnston spent the better part of the 1880s contemplating his resignation as president of the museum. Financial ruin aside, he was in poor health, and negative public opinion about his role at the museum could not have helped matters. Cesnola implored him to remember his obligation to finish the good work he began, if only to provide support for the trustees in the director’s own camp.21

In 1881, Johnston weighed the possibility of handing over the presidency to Henry Gurdon Marquand, but Cesnola and others managed to dissuade him.22 Two years later, resignation was still on Johnston’s mind, and his first vice president, William C. Prime, was as impassioned as Cesnola had been about the clear sense that Johnston was the glue that held the sometimes-fractious group together:

I cannot imagine or entertain the horribility [sic] of such an occurrence, and it would be a grievous blow to many members of the Board of Trustees. I know that I express the universal hope + confident expectation of all that as you have made the Institution, you will, for many long years to come, continue to guide it with that wonderful skill, discretion, and good calm judgment with which you have brought it up.23

Prime also was expressing the belief that animated Choate’s speech: that the trustees’ efforts alone had created the institution. Four years later, as the museum continued to expand its plant, the entire board of trustees signed a letter making it clear that they were unanimously behind the museum’s “parent and chief.”24 Ultimately, the trustees could not compel Johnston to remain president in perpetuity, and in 1889, he finally stepped down, succeeded by Marquand.

Moneyed Men and Museum Management

Samuel P. Avery very well may have been an opportunist on the Metropolitan Museum board, with his ready access to and stake in saleable art. The museum’s 1879 purchase of his china collection looked to be an act of rank nepotism to which the press openly cried foul. Indeed,
Avery was a businessman who drove a hard bargain, and his philanthropic spirit, if it existed, was tempered by a professional approach. “‘Time is short and life is fleeting’ – I am afraid that between delay in coming before the public with the plan to raise the $150,000 and the probable failure of it, the Museum will lose the porcelain,” Avery warned his friend Johnston in 1879, adding dramatically, “if it is lost, the public will not be lenient towards us, whatever may be the excuse.” In a veiled threat, Avery warned Johnston that “besides other contingencies,” he had to make his arrangements and count the Museum “out of the question.” Avery could not have been more wrong in thinking that the public would support the purchase (even at $35,000 instead of $150,000), or that the best time to call for a large subscription drive to pay for the porcelains might be coordinated with the building opening, for it only drew attention to Avery’s advantageous position, and the magnitude of the museum’s debts.

For those leaders less invested in the art world, what was the point of being a trustee? The commitment—of time and resources—could be onerous. There were regular and frequent meetings of the board, the executive committee, and the various subcommittees. There was a growing public sense of trustee accountability, which made the prospect of board membership substantially more serious than membership on the roster of a men’s club. Board membership also came with a financial responsibility.

But being present at the inception of the Metropolitan Museum of Art also held the promise of lasting greatness—for the institution and its creators. Most trustees believed in the new museum’s potential. While the arguments for the endeavor and others like it often were couched in terms of moral and cultural uplift, the opportunity to participate in the formation of a great institution also was heady stuff, even for those with already solid social, public, or financial stature.
Using their connections, the board members always kept an eye out for a potential donor. For example, William E. Dodge, a founding trustee, in an otherwise chatty personal letter to Cesnola in 1880, included a postscript about Joseph W. Drexel, the banker who had retired in 1876 at age forty-six to pursue important charitable causes in New York. "I trust you will cultivate Mr. Drexel who will be a most valuable + liberal friend of the Museum," Dodge wrote. Drexel recently had successfully bid on a fine collection of almost two thousand Egyptian coins in Cairo, intending to donate them to the Metropolitan. He excitedly wrote to Cesnola, "I wish by first mail to hurry them forward but I fear they will not be here before the opening of the museum." Two months later, Drexel enthusiastically offered for "any of the gentlemen of the Metropolitan Museum of Art" to stop by his home to look over his collections "and select what they think fit" for exhibition.

Thus, it was no surprise when Drexel joined the Metropolitan Museum trustees in February 1881. "Any man would be honored by being elected a trustee of your Museum, and I am not therefore surprised that many are anxious to be selected," he wrote. But he humbly suggested a better choice, Darius Ogden Mills, who Drexel noted was "far richer and more generous" than he was. Drexel was no novice philanthropist, however. A member of the Union League Club, he had been chairman of the New York Sanitary Commission, a member of the Academy of Natural Sciences, treasurer of the New-York Cancer Hospital, and was to become president of the New-York Philharmonic Society and a director of the Metropolitan Opera House. As for Mills, there would be room enough for him on the board as well.

Mills, like Drexel, was a seasoned philanthropist and sophisticated aesthete, so his inclination to join the board could hardly be viewed as social opportunism. However, the Central Park building indeed did change the Metropolitan Museum’s stature, and donations of art or
money now reflected favorably on a donor’s public profile. It was no coincidence that Cesnola, for example, was adamant about attaching his name to his objects. A few years after Drexel’s death, when the museum requested that his collection of Egyptian casts might be “scattered,” his executors adamantly refused, claiming that “good faith would require that the Collection be kept by itself and should not lose its identity.” In essence, this was as much about Drexel’s own personal legacy as it was about keeping a group of artifacts together.

Other trustees spent a portion of the year in Europe or vacationing in Egypt, and being part of the new American art museum gave some structure to their travels. They wrote back to New York about European museums, collections for sale, and other gossip from the art world. Those who remained closer to home also managed to devote their professional time to the museum. Huntington, for example, who felt inadequate in meetings with the wealthy businessmen he was more comfortable painting, helped hang pictures in the galleries. During the move from Fourteenth Street to Central Park, without professional art movers, the trustees feared breakage so much that they packed everything themselves.

In time, Prime would long for such simpler days. “The main trouble with our board is that when the museum was struggling, and fighting its way, many of them were perfectly willing to let those who worked & fought take the responsibility,” Prime mused to Cesnola. “They didn’t care to differ from the working men. Now that the Museum is rich in popular esteem, they are on hand with all sorts of schemes,” he brooded.

While the Times was wrong in its harsh assessment of Johnston and Prime, they were not far off in their criticism of Rutherfurd Stuyvesant and William Waldorf Astor, who lived mostly abroad, and who were valued on the trustee roster more for their names than for their participation. Stuyvesant rarely attended a meeting; as chairman of the Auditing Committee, he
even had no idea about what his responsibilities were. In spite of his requests to resign, Stuyvesant remained on the board until his death. The total of his cash gifts to the museum over thirty-nine years amounted to only $14,000, plus a bequest of $20,000. Astor was a bit more circumspect about his role. He was aware that there was a financial obligation connected to trusteeship, and offered to resign when, in spite of his great wealth, he refused to contribute even $10,000 in five years. “I am sorry that I can neither secure nor contribute this sum, + feeling that in this, as well as on other occasions I have not come up to the required standard, I request you to receive my resignation from the Board of Trustees,” he declared.

The growingly businesslike quality of the board proceedings grew out of the rising complexity of the museum itself. Expressing a prevalent opinion about New York’s cultural institutions, the Times predicted in 1880 that the future of the Metropolitan would be great if the elite trustees continued to oversee it and keep it out of the “vortex of City politics.” But negotiating the public and private aspects of institutional leadership would never be easy. Drexel, for example, was fully aware of the museum’s responsibility to the public, and the sometimes-conflicting significance of trustee control. Once a collection is given, he stated ominously, “the public becomes the master, not the trustees.”

“Few men leave behind them monuments that remind the survivors of anything but greed and an absorbing devotion to accumulation for its own sake,” the Times stated bluntly of gilded age millionaires. The Metropolitan Museum board in this respect was a cut above. Even Prime, in spite of his constant complaints, could admit that there were “a really good lot of men in the board, for the building up of the museum, who had made the institution what it was.”
“Tampering with Antiquities”

On July 21, 1880, the steamship Dessoug lay at anchor at the pier on Twenty-third Street and the Hudson River, awaiting word on where its precious cargo, an Egyptian obelisk, ultimately would be placed in the city. William H. Vanderbilt paid the expense of bringing it across the Atlantic, ostensibly in honor of his father, the Commodore Vanderbilt, who had died in 1877. The intense interest in Egyptian culture had begun in Europe after Napoleon’s expedition, sparking a craze animated by the concurrent movements of Neoclassicism and Romanticism. Tombs that had lain untouched for millennia were being opened and excavated throughout the nineteenth century. With the installation of the obelisk, New York City’s competition with Paris and London, the only other Western cities possessing such an ancient monument in a public space, continued. The symbolism of the acquisition was not lost on many observers. “Cleopatra’s Needle” had been part of a pair, the other of which was the London obelisk; now New York had its own symbol of ancient civilization. The question remained of where to put it.

“The obelisk of Luxor, removed to a country which was dimly known to the ancient Egyptians, is not a radical anachronism in Paris; and the fellow of our obelisk after many strange vicissitudes, set up as a gazing-stock for English cockneys, is at least in the middle of a civilization which has yet about it a mediaeval flavor,” the Times wrote. But the stride from ancient Egypt to the “raw, lusty, noisy land which we call the United States of America,” was vast. “There is almost nothing tangible that is older than the obelisk. There is nothing much younger than New-York. The extremes have met.” Newspapers found the whole thing ridiculous. Indeed, New Yorkers had shown “the effete monarchies of Europe that when we want an Egyptian obelisk we can have one as well as they can, and we beat them easily in the anachronism of its possession,” chortled the Art Amateur.
On the *Dessoug*, the atmosphere was worthy of P. T. Barnum. Over one hundred and fifty people visited the vessel to see the curiosity, and while the captain entertained his guests, Hassan, “the Barbary boy, in his picturesque attire,” ran about the deck and tended to the donkey and the Egyptian sheep that were on board.\(^50\) As for the monument, the hieroglyphics on the stone were hard to decipher, although most people did not much care.\(^51\)

Among the visitors that July day was one “Mr. Feuardent,” an archaeologist that some claimed to be one of the best in the world.\(^52\)

Gaston L. Feuardent in fact was also a dealer in antiquities, and with his father had been associating for years with members of the Metropolitan Museum trustees, including Cesnola, through their firm, Rollin and Feuardent, based in Paris. Only that month, the younger Feuardent was one of two men appointed by the French government to be their agents in the United States, to facilitate scientific expeditions and exchange anthropological specimens for a museum in Paris.\(^53\)

The next month, the *Art Amateur* published an even larger Feuardent scoop: a serious indictment against the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art of tampering with antiquities.\(^54\) Feuardent wished to give “as publicly as possible” his opinion on “certain deceptive alterations and unintelligent restorations” of some objects in the Cesnola collection which had been restored under the General’s supervision. The specific claim was of deliberately false restorations, repairs, and finishes made to eight objects.\(^55\)

According to Feuardent, in summer 1879 he had occasion to examine a statuette in the Cesnola collection, and was “astonished” by the apparent addition to the figure, carved into the stone, of an object representing a mirror. Feuardent explained that his motivation to reveal this
apparent deception was to serve future antiquarians, who would be puzzled by it if the matter were left alone.\textsuperscript{56}

When Cesnola learned of the allegation, he sent Feuardent a letter stating that his charge was serious enough to warrant a thorough investigation.\textsuperscript{57} The ensuing disruption for the museum lasted for years. Cesnola opined that in order for any collection to be of value, it had to be free from even the slightest question of authenticity. But clearly Cesnola personally also sought public exoneration. Thus, the trustees appointed Prime and John Quincy Adams Ward to convene with three non-board experts to investigate Feuardent’s accusations.\textsuperscript{58}

On January 26, 1881, they submitted their report. The experts sought the advice of sculptors, stonecutters, and scholars, and made microscopic, chemical, and other rigorous (and destructive) examinations of the works’ surfaces.\textsuperscript{59} In addition, they used previous documentary photographs of the objects. The committee’s conclusion was that all of the charges were without foundation, and that Cesnola and his collection were of pristine reputation.

Cesnola had responded to the charges with poise and few words—an “indefinite grandeur” in \textit{Puck}’s estimation—but also took ill with acute rheumatism. As the Metropolitan’s director and only “professional” staff member, Cesnola was, in Prime’s words, a “jack-of-all-trades”—the “Director, paymaster, accountant, builder, architect, forwarding and receiving clerk, housekeeper, and butler for the museum” who had “done most, and given most & sacrificed most” to the museum’s success.\textsuperscript{60} Cesnola was exhausted. The integrity of the entire Cesnola collection, as well as the man himself, were in question.

As for Feuardent, a \textit{Tribune} editorial stated it most succinctly: Cesnola, at least on the face of it, had no motive for “enriching” his collection by tampering with any particular objects. Feuardent, however, did have a motive to defame Cesnola: for publicity. He had come to New
York looking for business, and, while he was well acquainted with many of the Metropolitan Museum trustees, he was not able to establish an official connection with the new institution, which a few years earlier could not afford to buy large quantities of objects from him and his father. “In short, Mr. Feuardent was in the business of selling antiquities, and his eagerness to appear before the public in this matter cause a suspicion that his real object was to advertise himself and his wares,” the Tribune concluded.\(^{61}\)

While the newspaper excoriated the tabloids’ willingness to “think evil of almost any man who has achieved distinction and success”—meaning Cesnola as well as the trustees who stood behind him—it also was not above casting the accuser in bigoted class terms, something Cesnola did not discourage. “The General” was supposedly an Italian nobleman, who had abandoned his citizenship for the distinction of being an American, and fought and “periled his life” defending his adopted country. Feuardent, on the other hand, was the enterprising son of a “Hebrew dealer in antiquities,” who had pressured the insolvent museum to do business with him.\(^{62}\)

But neither Feuardent nor the incriminating news accounts would go away. In March 1882, the powerful art critic Clarence Cook issued a pamphlet (published by Feuardent) which charged that two statues in particular were “a fraudulent patchwork of unrelated parts,” and questioned not only Cesnola’s restorations but also the disparate locations of the digs in which he found the supposedly cohesive collection.\(^{63}\) Cook sought to demonstrate that the collection of Cypriote antiquities was a fraud, as was the narrative of its discovery.\(^{64}\)

This hit closer to home. Despite Cesnola’s often-pompous demeanor, the museum had to stand behind its director. With this new accusation, the executive committee ordered that the two sculptures, an Aphrodite and Eros, and a Figure holding a Horned Head, be removed from their
glass cases and examined in strong light on the floor of the great hall. Indicative of the primitive means by which such disputes were then settled, museum members, the public, and reporters, artists, scholars—virtually anyone—was invited to “examine” the works for several weeks. “Every indignity was heaped upon defenseless stone; visitors washed, chisled, cut, scraped, treated with caustic potash and other chemicals, brushed with wire brushes, and examined microscopically to their hearts’ content,” the museum’s early biographer, Winifred Howe, wrote. After being so vandalized, the statues ultimately were judged to be authentic. Several sculptors, among them Daniel Chester French and John Rogers, even sent in unsolicited letters “exculpating completely” the condemned artworks.66

But the controversy continued. When Cesnola, still not feeling vindicated, published a brief and total denial of the charges, Feuerdent accused him of libel. The trial began on October 31, 1883, with Allen W. Evarts, Albert Stickney, and Choate defending Cesnola. The trustees supported their director and bore the trial’s expense.67 In February 1884, the jury “sustained the entire integrity” of Cesnola’s collection and found all of the charges baseless. Cesnola’s dignified conduct throughout the “trying ordeal” again had met the trustees’ and the public’s approval.68 But the scandal did open the museum and its trustees to unwarranted publicity, which in itself demonstrated how significant it had become in the public eye.

Afterwards, Cesnola looked only to the future, and was particularly pleased by a note of support from Professor Charles Eliot Norton, the famed chairman of Harvard’s Art History department and the first president of the Archaeological Institute of America. Cesnola took the opportunity to remind Johnston that in spite of the museum’s recent exposure, both scholars and aesthetes alike now were recognizing its international prominence. “The aims and purposes of the Trustees seem to be understood and appreciated by the best scholars of this country,” the
beleaguered director wrote. Johnston and the trustees for over ten years had “nobly worked and toiled,” to lay the solid foundations of a museum, “the greatest institution of the kind in the New World, and the pride of this City,” Cesnola concluded.69

“A great deal of money to very little purpose”

On December 18, 1888, the wind whirled around Cleopatra’s Needle, the relic that by now had stood sentinel for eight years outside the Central Park entrance to the Metropolitan. As many as eight thousand people strode past the obelisk and into the museum for the opening of the museum’s new building, the latest monument to the art of the past and the American civilization of the future.70

The formal opening of the new wing would become one of the defining moments in the history of the institution. Among those seated on the platform for the ceremony was John Jay, whose idea years before had laid the groundwork for the museum. Johnston was unable to participate in the event, and around a month later, his weakening physical condition finally convinced the trustees to accept his long-desired resignation. But William C. Prime was as appropriate a speaker as any that day, having been the active first vice president of the Metropolitan since 1874.

Prime used his speech to ponder the subject of art. It was at once “a kind of goddess,” while the artistic process had a more functional application, echoing the foundational beliefs of many a cultural institution in nineteenth-century America. “Enumerate carpets, upholstery, wall papers, furniture, handsome houses, the innumerable beauties of life which employ millions of people in their production, and you will realize that but for the commercial and industrial love of
beauty your city would be a wilderness, your steamers and railways would vanish, your wealth would be poverty, your population would starve,” Prime said.  

Indeed, not only artists, but workers toiled to produce goods of aesthetic as well as practical value. During the decades of the museum’s founding, the laboring classes had become increasingly politicized in New York, galvanized by a successful three-month strike by one hundred thousand workers for an eight-hour workday in 1872; the first official observation of Labor Day in 1882; and the continued progress of union and labor reformers and reform organizations.  

The labor force was now largely Catholic in a still strongly Protestant and Anglo-Saxon city. This often led to conflicts over temperance, city government, and the role of religion in public education.  

The original premise of the Metropolitan Museum—that it enabled all New Yorkers to benefit from the edifying presence of a museum of art—was coming into conflict with a competing belief, and a blatant reality. Was “uplift” to be of a religious or a cultural variety? Could it be both? Given the fact of six-day workweeks and of the mostly wretched immigrant existence in New York, was Sunday, the “day of rest,” to be exclusively religious or partially secular?  

At the opening, Robb, the Parks president, expressed something that had been brewing contentiously in the press as well as in the trustees’ meetings since the museum’s inception in the 1870s: the idea of opening the museum on Sundays. “I believe I am voicing the sentiment of a great majority of the people of this city, that the day is not far distant when the museum will be kept open on Sundays as well as all other holidays,” he said.  

Mayor Hewitt concurred as he officially opened the new wing: “This magnificent addition to the Museum . . . I now declare to be open for the use and instruction and recreation of its citizens forever, and from that
everlasting future I trust the time will come when on no day shall they be excluded.” The suggestion was received with applause by the audience, and was enthusiastically endorsed by the press.

Prime, however, had never shared these sentiments. He was an impressive nineteenth-century polymath: a journalist (editor and owner of the New York *Journal of Commerce*); an art historian (and first chairman of Princeton’s Department of Art History); a lawyer; numismatist; peripatetic travel author who wrote books about Egypt; and literary executor for Civil War General George B. McClellan, whose autobiography he had edited. But in spite of his wide-ranging erudition, Prime had rather parochial views about blue laws, for which he would stake his personal association with the museum that he had helped build and lovingly nurture.

In his address, Prime emphasized that “the secret of the success of the Museum was its usefulness.” As the museum was not intended for any one class, “but for all,” its influence on both education and aesthetic taste was “stimulating an emulation for the highest purposes.” The trustees shared his exalted notion of the museum’s function: it was not a “mere show place for the amusement of the people,” but rather a place for their instruction. This corresponded with the city administration’s new attention to the institution’s regard to the interests of the people—in terms of education, to be sure, but also in offering free admission on certain days of the week. The city’s investment in the museum thus far had been about $1.1 million, while the investment of the museum members was $2.5 million. The contest over public versus private authority, and the parameters of trustee accountability, was on.

Those who sided with Prime had no issue with opening the museum to the greater public—just not on Sundays. But spending the day in church and then at home was a bourgeois notion that did not match the reality of the immigrant’s, laborer’s, or artisan’s existence and
experience—not to mention Jewish religious observation. Time at church represented perhaps only two hours out of a Sunday morning, and given the typical worker’s crowded living conditions in the tenement or the boarding house, it was unlikely that much of the day could be spent “at home,” in any case. Moreover, what was the equivalent probability of a more cultured New Yorker refraining from looking at his own collection of artworks on a Sunday, or from talking about them with his family or friends? The question of opening the museum on Sunday was becoming a secular matter regarding the institution’s popular utility and function. “To quite nine-tenths of the community it is a secular question, and to them the restriction upon the Sunday opening looks like an oppression of the poor by the rich,” the Times concluded in a widely held view.

The topic had been smoldering for years after the move to Central Park in 1880, and the introduction of public support for the endeavor. To some trustees, like Joseph Choate, the answer to the “Sunday question” was obvious. It would immediately double the museum’s usefulness and inspire public interest, he wrote to Cesnola in April 1880. “Sound religion and good morals require it, and I hope it will be put to the vote at once. Imagine the Louvre closed on Sunday!” he added.

Other trustees were less certain, and equivocated individually as well as collectively—but always privately—as they tried to balance their personal views with their public responsibilities. For the time being, the subject would be a matter of trustee prerogative, although this in itself created obvious problems of interpretation. “From the very beginning, the museum has been an exclusive social toy, not a great instrument of popular education,” the Tribune wrote, “and all its failure to secure a more generous endowment from the state, all the popular lukewarmness, and
the restless demonstrations of opposition, have sprung from the conviction that this radical fault existed."  

Consequently, tension continued to build throughout the 1880s for Sunday hours. The city administration began to voice a strong view; the Metropolitan, after all, was built on public property with taxpayer funds. In April 1881, the Department of Public Parks presented the Metropolitan Museum’s trustees with a petition signed by over ten thousand New Yorkers, including such prominent citizens as August Belmont, Oswald Ottendorfer, and Felix Adler, requesting that the Metropolitan and the American Museum of Natural History be opened on Sundays. The petition committee asked for a meeting after the Parks Department received a reply from the museums.  

But the Parks board itself was of mixed opinion, and the Metropolitan and Natural History Museum trustee Salem H. Wales moved that it was impossible to discuss the matter “on such short notice,” thus making an immediate audience “impracticable.” While both boards prevaricated, the religious dimension was depicted as tangential, and the standpoint on Sunday openings, or closings, as the case happened to be, was strictly practical. In this manner, the subject remained on the table but was not acted upon for several years.  

It appeared that the leadership of both museums had tended towards elitism to the detriment of the greater program. The Times impatiently maintained that the trustees of the art museum had spent “a great deal of money to very little purpose,” and had shown “a great deal of silly irritation” when their judgment was called in question. Furthermore, the situation was emphasizing a fact that hitherto had been overlooked to some extent: with a city-owned building and reliance on public money, the museum, even in light of its private support, could not be managed as a private institution rather than as a public trust. Aspects of this argument played out
in the popular press along blunter lines. “The people of this City would certainly resent, with a
good deal of indignation, the shutting of the Park gates in their faces on the one day when the
majority of them have a chance to visit the Park,” the *Times* concluded.88

Even with constant demands from the public, the Parks Department, and the State Board
of Estimate, the trustees of the Metropolitan and the Natural History museums held firm.89 All
protestations to the contrary, personal religious views were influencing the trustees on the
matter.90 Matching the escalating pressure in the press for Sunday openings was Prime’s rising
hostility to the Metropolitan’s current board. “How hard it used to be to get a quorum. Now,
since we have made the Museum a great institution, you find a lot of Trustees who never used to
attend, always on hand to vote Sunday openings, direct the Exec. Com. to acknowledge all gifts
by separately prepared letters, & pass other stupid & Impracticable orders.” Prime was beyond
discouraged.91

Nevertheless, both factions of the trustees believed they were looking out for the people
and the institution regarding Sundays, and they took it to be their absolute responsibility to do so.
Prime, Johnston, Marquand, W. E. Dodge, and even Cesnola himself were of one mind, as the
upholders of old-fashioned reason, temperance, and the greater cause of uplift. The equally
reasonable others, like Choate, Rhinelander, Samuel L. M. Barlow, Hoe, and Robert de Forest
also were thinking of the people. “The great public, composed of working men and women,
mechanics, laborers, and clerks are now excluded from the benefits from our collections almost
to the extent that would result from their removal to Albany,” Barlow wrote to Cesnola. “The
almost universal public voice, the press, men of all classes who have considered this question
and those of all religions, not only favor this opening on Sundays, but they demand it.”92
Choate remained consistently in favor. As a dominant member of both boards, the whip-smart jurist was unafraid to present his opinion. On moral grounds, museums were more wholesome than alternative “corrupt inducements of places of dissipation” also open on Sundays. On “prudential” grounds, Choate made his most compelling case: “The people are the chief support of the Museums, and we expect to live in the future as in the past by their bounty. Nothing can in my opinion be more shortsighted than to ignore them, to defy their wishes, and to deny to them the full enjoyment of the museums which they can never have if they are closed all day Sunday.” He warned that the trustees’ “stupid obstinacy” might result in the forfeiture of annual public grants. In short, the deference with which the trustees held certain wealthy Sabbatarians (and potential supporters) was nothing short of “contemptible,” Choate wrote, as “the very men on whose account our Trustees muzzled themselves died without leaving the Museum a dollar.”

Finally, the promotion of the very usefulness of the museums was at stake. Hundreds of “professional men and mechanics” could not possibly visit the museums on any other day than Sunday. Choate reasoned that the museum was intended for public use, and that the public demand for this change was greater than some of the Trustees appreciated.

Yet Cesnola and Jesup persisted resisting Sunday openings, and in November-December 1885 used their authority as trustees and prominent citizens to turn to the newly installed Catholic Archbishop of New York, Michael Corrigan, whom Cesnola knew personally. “An Ingersollian Society has been organized for the purpose of secularizing the Sunday,” Cesnola wrote to Corrigan, intimating that its first step was to force the museums to be open—“then the Theatres and Bar rooms will follow; and in a short time the New York Sunday will become like that of Paris and in the principal cities of Europe.” Cesnola gossiped that one of the most active
men in the secular movement was none other than the current mayor, W. R. Grace, the first Irish American Catholic to hold that office. He was “only posing for political effect and popularity,” Cesnola presumed, revealing, “I detest his policy, as I have no respect for his personal character as you well know.” Grace had blocked expenditures for a new wing for the natural history museum, in part because of Irish Catholic sentiment that the Sunday closing was “just one more bit of Protestant meanness.”

Corrigan’s secretary responded that there were two different “aspects” under which the Sunday question could be viewed. “Visiting a museum or gallery of art may be combined with the faithful performance of the duties of religious worship on the Lord’s Day, and when it does not bring with it the neglect of the day’s obligations, does not face, even as a mode of recreation, under the prohibition of the Church,” he wrote. Officially, the church did not advocate “such Sunday-laws as would hinder necessary work, or prohibit such popular enjoyments as are consistent with the sacredness of the day.” Accordingly, if Catholics objected to the opening of museums on Sunday, it would not be on account of the Church deeming it sinful to visit them.

But with an explanation of the second “aspect” for viewing the situation, the Church prevaricated, even as it seemingly approved of a Sunday museum opening. While it was true that the Catholic clergy permitted “popular enjoyment” on Sunday, neither did it recommend it or wish to introduce it where it did not exist, as the Church was decidedly not in favor of secularizing the day.

With no action on the matter, the public took to signing ever more petitions, which both Johnston and Jesup received from the American Secular Union and the Central Labor Union. There were signatures from officers of the city, judges of the court, prominent businessmen, ordinary citizens, and working people alike—several thousand in number. “These signatures of
our best citizens represent a great part of the citizenship of New York,” declared Samuel P. Putnam, the secretary of the Secular Union. The resolutions from labor organizations represented fifty thousand working New Yorkers.

Meanwhile, both boards also received petitions representing the other side. One came from certain conservative theologians like the dean of the General Theological Seminary; the rectors of the St. James and Calvary Churches; the pastor of the University Place Presbyterian Church; along with such prominent citizens as John D. Rockefeller. Another came from the Presbytery of New York. Such people feared the “Continental Sabbath”: European cities had long practiced recreation and leisure in addition to churchgoing on Sundays. Some Americans freely interpreted that custom as promoting a day of dissipation or as a capitalistic maneuver to garner seven days’ labor from workmen for six days’ pay.

For the museum trustees, the case had become one of their sole authority as institutional leaders versus their more abstract moral authority as prominent men of means. Their sort of paternalism was staggeringly paradoxical because it overlooked the reality of the laborers’ existence in New York. Furthermore, it flew in the face of their other charitable activities. The gentle, dignified, and sober Morris K. Jesup, for example, was a leader in important benevolent and humanitarian causes. As with Johnston and Prime a devout Presbyterian, his philanthropic religiosity also was bound up in the notion that Sundays were sacrosanct, and that to violate the Sabbath was tantamount to breaking a deeper religious tenet that almost would cast into question the entire museum endeavor.

Samuel Putnam persisted in pressuring to meet with the Conference Committee, and his tepid reply came finally in February 1886. The committee remained unmoved, in spite of the fact that Putnam’s petition had been endorsed by thousands of citizens of New York who were
“heads of families, officers of the city, judges of the courts, businessmen, and working people,” and that the attached resolutions from labor organizations represented fifty thousand of the working people of NYC.\textsuperscript{106}

By February 1890, the legislature in Albany could tolerate the museums’ recalcitrance no longer, and Senator Brown introduced a bill demanding the Sunday opening. Marquand and Jesup both argued that the bill was unconstitutional on the grounds that not only did both museums have contracts with the city controlling the matter in their favor, but that the museums were private corporations, and that public interference with the rights of the trustees to manage their own affairs was out of line.\textsuperscript{107} The issue now was becoming not only one of moral authority, but of institutional prerogative, and the anti-Sunday trustees were smugly holding firm.

The situation highlighted the power and influence some of the trustees had behind-the-scenes in stubbornly advancing what was evidently a losing cause, by calling upon political contacts to guide things their way. On April 13, 1890, Marquand informed Cesnola that Senator Brown “has been seen & is inclined to withdraw the bill—he was under the impression that the Museums were run by a lot of fanatics—they get this from the prominence some members take in religious matters.”\textsuperscript{108} After the municipal authorities’ determined escalation of the call for Sunday openings, a quiet withdrawal seemed strange indeed. Marquand, in fact, was contacting his political friends like Lispenard Stewart and John Bigelow, urging their opposition of the bill’s passage. Dodge and Marquand even astonishingly thought to enlist the pro-Sunday Choate to telegraph Albany to stop the bill. “He has influence at Albany. Altho’ he is anxious for Sunday opening he would not want it forced in this dangerous way,” Dodge reasoned.\textsuperscript{109} Bigelow, the lawyer who assisted Samuel Tilden in exposing the Tweed administration’s graft,
and who became the New York Public Library’s first president, wrote to Marquand on April 15, assuring him that the word was that Brown, “the author of the obnoxious bill,” had had a change of heart and “had made up his mind not to press the Museum Bill” after seeing “some New Yorkers.”

On April 21, Cesnola learned exactly why. In strictest confidence, Dodge revealed that he had “arranged quietly with Senator Brown thru a special friend to quietly drop the Bill and he carried out his idea.” The trustees had managed to quell the mounting municipal demand for the Sunday opening, going so clearly against the majority public opinion.

The hiatus would last only around a year, for the press was taking up the cause with a zealouusness that proved difficult to ignore. Newspapers exposed the fact that trustees themselves and their friends for years had been visiting the museum on Sundays, if provided with a special pass. This added an even more elitist, class element to the debate: the museum did, in fact, open on the Sabbath, but only for a select few trustees and their friends who were issued “Sunday cards.”

The practice was pronounced a “heartless outrage” and added fuel to the petitions in circulation. The Critic hoped that “before long the Museum will be as easy of access to the mass of the people on Sunday as those resorts now are, whose influence is as hostile to the spirit of the day as that of art is friendly.”

With negative public opinion rising, the trustees’ new argument against the opening was now financial. Cesnola told the press in February 1891 that the rumor that the city had made an offer of $10,000 a year towards paying the expenses of opening the museum on Sunday was untrue. It actually would cost the institution $25,000 a year, he said, money which it “had not to expend.” In addition, at least one-third of the members of the museum would resign if the Sunday opening passed, Cesnola declared, further jeopardizing the institution’s tentative financial situation.
As the months counted down for the May trustees meeting, the public and media clamor grew in intensity. More petitions in favor of the Sunday opening were circulating. An anonymous committee of women sought signatures from many of the clubhouses, cafés, and businesses. One of its stops was the Union League Club, site of the Metropolitan Museum’s founding. “All members who saw it signed it,” the Times reported, and within a few weeks many hundred signatures were on the list.\textsuperscript{114} There was another one with ninety thousand names representing a diverse array of New Yorkers, from Vanderbilts and Havemeyers to many members of the clergy, around two hundred physicians and medical students, artists, writers, lawyers, businessmen, and over a thousand letter carriers. In addition, a communication from the Working People’s Petition Committee, representing fifty thousand laborers, was on the table.\textsuperscript{115} Even religious leaders were joining the call. The Reverend R. Heber Newton of the All Souls’ Church chided some churchgoers who had “the wealth to change the city, to lift it from its degradation, to sweeten, to humanize it, and to Christianize it.”\textsuperscript{116} Specifically, he was speaking of the trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “[T]he name of religion they are driving men away from religion itself,” he preached. “When the average workingman comes up to the doors of a museum on a Sunday morning and finds that the Church has closed those doors against him, is he not very apt to sneer and turn away and conclude that the whole thing is a gigantic fraud?”\textsuperscript{117}

Meanwhile, the Socialist Central Labor Federation was beginning the fight in New York for an eight-hour workday and also passed a resolution demanding that the Metropolitan Museum of Art as well as the Museum of Natural History be kept open on Sundays.\textsuperscript{118} The trustees’ alleged concern for worker morality, safeguarded by closing the museum, was not only irrelevant on religious grounds, but absurd.\textsuperscript{119}
Turning to the museum, what now defined its “popular usefulness”? To a majority of the community, that was a secular question, and the restriction on opening was looking like the oppression of the poor by the rich. To be a truly popular institution, like for example, the park, and not a perk for the aesthetic enjoyment of a small minority, the museum had to be open on a day when it was accessible to a majority. “The Trustees are men of sense and men of the world, and there is reason to believe that they are waiting only until the popular demand shall be unmistakable in order to give it effect,” the Times concluded.\textsuperscript{120}

Whose museum was it? “The museum building is the property of the people; the Trustees of the museum are the tenants and pay no rent,” Charles B. Stover, the secretary of the Museum Opening Committee, boldly stated. In 1886, Stover was a cofounder, with Stanton Coit, of the Neighborhood Guild (later known as the University Settlement), the first settlement house in the United States, and as such had done much thinking about the larger impact of the changing urban condition.\textsuperscript{121} “The works of art displayed in the building are the property of the Trustees, and the people pay no admission fee to see them. If the people should attempt to compel the trustees to open the museum on Sunday afternoons, the trustees could then take their works of art away and leave the building empty,” he suggested peevishly.\textsuperscript{122} The museum, after all, had been conceived for the edification of the city and the development of its culture, and municipal involvement was entirely appropriate, not to mention necessary, to defray prohibitive expenses. Nevertheless, the inspiration, the energy, the resources, and the commitment to the project had been the trustees’.

On May 18, 1891, the Metropolitan’s board of trustees finally met. Vice President Daniel Huntington nervously presided over the three-hour meeting, joined by a full complement of the board, minus Prime, John S. Kennedy (another strong opponent), and Marquand, who was recovering from a serious illness.\textsuperscript{123} When the meeting was over, “victory,” the headlines
declared, “was won at last.” The Metropolitan Museum would be open on Sundays, from one o’clock in the afternoon until a half hour before sunset. Twelve trustees voted for the resolution, five against, and one abstained. But halfway through the meeting, it was uncertain whether this would be the ultimate outcome.

Public money had financed the building, but not the collections. The growth of the institution indeed was phenomenal, and there was nothing comparable, even in the countries where government support was available. The trustees were hardly unanimous in the idea of opening up the museum to further public support or management. The report acknowledged that the museum’s educational mission “for the improvement of the people” was the justification for the Sunday opening appeal, and yet the matter was a divisive one from a religious point of view, which had the power to eclipse the educational agenda altogether. Furthermore, to open on Sundays, Bigelow reported, the museum would need a “very considerable addition to its present resources”—essentially, “new and extraordinary fountains of revenue.” Evidently, these “fountains” were expected from private, not public moneys, and the insurmountable nature of such a fundraising effort provided the pretext for the recommendation of tabling the discussion yet again.

At this point in the meeting, the resolution to open on Sunday was voted upon and defeated. But then reality intervened.

The trustees suspended their discussion to receive a representative from the New York World, the editor and writer George Cary Eggleston, who presented the museum with a check for $2,500 to help defray the expenses for the Sunday opening. He was followed by a delegation representing a “committee of citizens,” who brought news of a subscription of $4,000 already
secured for the same purpose. When the trustees reconvened, the Sunday opening resolution passed.

Speaking to the press, Cesnola refused to divulge the names of those voting for or against, stating that “he had no time to waste on such trivial matters.” Indeed, preparations were already underway for the first Sunday opening in two weeks. Huntington, however, was not so circumspect, and went on the record, together with William E. Dodge, Bigelow, and Hiram Hitchcock, as dissenters “on conscientious grounds.”

“That was a funny meeting we had yesterday,” was Salem H. Wales’s understatement to Cesnola the following day. “The course of Mr. Choate was not only a surprise to our friends—but also a source of mortification—He treated the report of the committee very roughly—and much annoyed some,” Wales revealed. Choate had been the “foremost advocate” for Sunday openings for over a decade, so his position should not have come as a surprise to anyone: the Times reported that it was “largely, and in fact wholly,” due to his efforts that the master debater accomplished the result long sought by so many New Yorkers. Choate noted that the petitioners, consistent with years of press reports and contrary to the assertions of trustee naysayers, had intimated that the popularity of the movement would be so great that money would “flow into the treasury without stint,” thus alleviating the museum of its financial concern. The majority of the board was willing to test this theory.

Not surprisingly, there were rich supporters who were not strict sabbatarians. The subscribers to this fund comprised an elite assemblage of prominent Gentile and Jewish businessmen, politicians, intellectuals, and women, including Andrew Carnegie, Abram S. Hewitt, Hugh Bache, Richard Watson Gilder, Jacob H. Schiff, August Belmont, and the Schuyler sisters Louisa Lee and Georgina. In addition, on May 26, Avery quietly gave Cesnola a check for
$10,000, at the behest of a gentleman who had two years before offered the museum the money to defray the extra expense of a Sunday opening. “He made no conditions, and left it optional as to when the offer should be tendered, as he did not wish it to embarrass the trustees, as to when or how the museum should be so opened,” Avery wrote. Intriguingly, Avery made no mention of this proposal when it might have been needed to tip the balance.

Their “victory” won, the financial reality of the new situation now seemed daunting. The trustees, in spite of their assertions, had not thought through the financial ramifications of the new mandate. Robert Hoe earlier had presented a bold proposal for more public funds, which the trustees had roundly rejected without putting forward a viable alternative. Because of the annual deficit and the added expense of opening on Sunday, Hoe suggested that the city should pay the expenses of keeping the Museum open to the public, while the trustees would continue to contribute only to increasing the collections. In exchange for abolishing museum admission fees, the city would be responsible for the museum’s total running expenses.

Hoe’s view had not gained greater support not only because it was a good argument in favor of opening on Sunday, but because it opened the institution to greater political intervention and involvement. He complained candidly to the new young trustee (and Johnston son-in-law) Robert W. de Forest that he thought the board had made a mistake, and that the inattentiveness of some members who came to the meetings without taking the time to consider the matters “from all sides” resulted in resolutions being passed which were difficult for the executive committee to carry out. But he felt certain that sooner or later “(and the sooner the better)” the city would have to pay the expenses of keeping the Museum open, and “emphatically advocated” the abolition of paying an admission at all, “as they are against us, tending to lead people to think we have an income from that source to depend upon.”
Hoe found an ally in de Forest, and while the junior trustee was reluctant to take the lead in the matter, he wrote to Marquand expressing his concerns about the business arrangements of the Sunday opening, particularly wondering why the notion that the city pay the costs of running the museum was dismissed without a proposed alternative. Cesnola reassured Hoe that the museum affairs were in capable hands, and that there was no need for alarm.

On May 31, 1891, when the Metropolitan Museum opened its doors for the first time on a Sunday, eleven thousand persons poured into the building, proving that working New Yorkers indeed would “avail themselves of the privilege” of visiting it. “At the close of the day the most strenuous opponent of the Sunday opening movement could not find a word of fault to say,” the Times reported. Cesnola himself was surprised at the “character” of the crowd. “Those who expected to see Essex Street Polish Jews and Thirty-ninth Street and Eleventh Avenue hod carriers, in ragged clothing and dilapidated hats, were agreeably disappointed,” the Times asserted. And of the visitors—well-dressed men, women, and children, many speaking French, German, and other foreign languages—the only disappointed ones were those who had brought lunch baskets and were turned away.

Cesnola maintained his distance from the new constituency, who, in his estimation, knew museums only “from the specimens to be seen in Dime Museums on the Bowery” and came expecting to see “freaks and monstrosities similar to those found there.” In time, however, these new museumgoers proved to be “respectable, law-abiding, and intelligent.” In the first six months of the Sunday experiment from May 31 to November 15, more than 30 percent of the total attendance visited on the Christian sabbath.

George H. Story, the curator of paintings, drawings, and prints, gave a lively description to Marquand, peppered with insolent (and maybe unintentional) misspellings: “You ask about
our Sunday visitors, I do not believe that the names of all who come are registered in the Elite Directory,” he began. “Yet for all that I trust you will not think that the Rowdie [sic] element prevails, every quarter of this city, Brooklyn and Jersey City included yeilds [sic] its quota, and the hard fisted mechanic elbows the shopkeeper, clerks, shop girls, Chinese, and pushing Jews crowd together. But as a whole they are orderly and respectful to one another, and look with intense interest in a bewildered wondering manner at the beautiful objects which will meet their eyes at every turn.”144 Story’s arrogance was typical of Cesnola’s and the trustees’ apprehension over the manners and morals of their new visitors, and the leaders’ incremental abandonment of the museum’s democratic and educational focus.145

Financial issues persisted and increased, since all employees of the museum, including Cesnola and his curators, were expected to work on Sundays to answer questions and keep order.146 Nevertheless, the Sunday opening experiment was a success. But Philadelphia and Boston had bested New York in this regard, having become convinced much earlier that there was no danger in making such means of elevation available on Sunday.147

“*There was money in the air*”

Returning in 1906 to the “American scene” of his youth, Henry James was astonished at the Metropolitan Museum’s transformation. He remembered when it was nothing more than a “stately though scrappy” museum installed “a large eccentric house in West Fourteenth Street.”148 A critic of American provincialism, James was uncharacteristically effusive that “the Museum, in short, was going to be great,” in part, because “there was money in the air.”149

Indeed, as James observed, the money went to “all the most exquisite things.” The museum had physically expanded to include two new wings in 1888 and 1894, and in 1895 the
state and city authorized $1 million for a Fifth Avenue wing, designed by Richard Morris Hunt and opened in 1902. The imposing Beaux Arts structure broadcast an opulence that denoted a culture of consumption over an earlier one of restraint.\textsuperscript{150}

It also now was receiving many donations and bequests. Upon his election as a trustee, Cornelius Vanderbilt, the Commodore’s namesake and grandson, donated seven hundred Italian drawings.\textsuperscript{151} Catharine Lorillard Wolfe, an heiress thought to be the richest woman in the world, gave both a large bequest and an endowment to enlarge it, the first such self-sufficient gift to the Metropolitan. Anthony Drexel’s widow donated Egyptian art and a gallery of casts. Perhaps the oddest highlight of this “new and grandiose” era at the turn of the century was the large bequest of Jacob S. Rogers, an eccentric $10 annual member who unexpectedly gave the museum $8 million upon his death in 1901.\textsuperscript{152}

But it was Marquand who gave most spectacularly. In an era when donations functioned as ostentatious public displays in honor of a donor, Marquand thought first of the museum. His opposition to Sunday openings had been thoroughly disconnected from his earnest belief in the educational mission of the institution. Marquand helped fund the library, the collection of casts, the art schools, and the general endowment, and his gifts of decorative arts always met the museum’s existing needs.\textsuperscript{153}

Yet the department of paintings benefited the greatest from Marquand. In 1888, he placed his collection of old masters, recently purchased abroad, on loan at the Met for the opening of its new wing. Seeing the great stir they caused, he soon gave them outright to the Museum without serious conditions of any kind.\textsuperscript{154} The paintings, including important works by Vermeer, Van Dyke, Rembrandt, Hals, Velazquez, and Turner, had never even entered Marquand’s home, and they transformed the picture galleries, elevating the Metropolitan to the standards of the great
museums of the world.\textsuperscript{155} Larger than entire collections of old masters in many art museums, the Marquand gift of thirty-seven paintings was then the best collection of old masters in the United States.\textsuperscript{156} By comparison, Vanderbilt’s obelisk had neither educational nor real financial value, and Wolfe’s bequest came only after her death. Marquand’s benefaction was different: he shared the wealth, both financially and aesthetically, during his lifetime, and established an extraordinary standard of philanthropic conduct.\textsuperscript{157} A “new era” for the Metropolitan Museum had arrived. The institution now was deemed worthy of the city as well as the park.

Marquand had been the obvious choice to succeed Johnston. “A man who serves the public in this style acquires for the best reasons a weight in the councils of the Museum which the public will not fail to respect,” the \textit{Times} wrote.\textsuperscript{158} The Sunday issue had been larger than the man himself—a clash of personalities, sensibilities, perceptions, and generations. But it was brash indeed when, in 1895, certain trustees saw fit to test Marquand’s very authority.

It was over Luigi Palma di Cesnola, the museum’s director for sixteen years, who had become increasingly imperious with subordinates, prickly, temperamental, and contemptuous of certain trustees. As the founding board aged, younger men with new perspectives and less patience for the “General” rose to leadership. In 1895, at a meeting of the committee on casts, Robert W. de Forest, the youngest board member and committee chair, reported that John S. Kennedy, Samuel Avery, and three others agreed with him about Cesnola’s unsuitability. Soon, even Hiram Hitchcock, Cesnola’s one-time champion, and Joseph Choate, his defense attorney, conceded that Cesnola not only hindered the museum’s progress, but did not represent it. They thought he was a “martinet” who behaved as though he owned the museum, and now controlled Marquand as he did Johnston before him.\textsuperscript{159}
Marquand was outraged, and regarded de Forest and Kennedy’s action as an effort by younger trustees to seize control from their older colleagues. At the deciding board meeting for the annual election on February 18, 1895, Marquand announced that he would resign unless all of the officers, including Cesnola, were reelected. J. P. Morgan, who could not attend, threw his support behind Marquand. The nine votes cast against Cesnola were not enough to dismiss him. Cesnola’s discharge, in the end, was simply beyond the bounds of possibility, out of respect for Marquand.

In early March, the story leaked out to art circles, presumably on purpose by some trustees, possibly even de Forest himself. “The men who have been most active in their opposition to Gen. Di Cesnola are eminently qualified to judge of the necessity of his no longer remaining with the museum,” the Times reported. While not opposed to him on personal grounds, they believed Cesnola’s removal would be in the best interests of the museum. The objecting trustees were identified as Choate, Huntington, Ward, Kennedy, E. D. Adams, de Forest, Avery, Post, and Professor William R. Ware of Columbia, some of whom had been once the General’s strongest advocates, but who now wished him to see him retired.

Cesnola quickly responded in the Tribune. “The whole trouble originates in a desire on the part of recently appointed trustees to control the Museum,” he stated bluntly. He conspicuously mentioned Morgan’s support, as well as Vanderbilt’s, who had made a speech characterizing the effort as out-and-out usurpation. “You will understand that these remarks by Mr. Vanderbilt and Mr. Morgan were not solely in my defence, but a general protest against a revolution of the management of the institution, and an assumption of authority by men newly elected,” Cesnola declared. “The whole trouble lies there.”
But the trouble lay with Cesnola. Artists and archaeologists joined the discussion, and now freely called the “obnoxious” director “useless and harmful.” The common opinion was that Cesnola lacked interest in “all fine art matters” with the exception of his own collection. Cesnola had even rebuffed Avery by refusing an extremely valuable collection of prints, which ultimately went to the New York Public Library. In the lean, scrappy early days of the museum, Cesnola had worked tirelessly as the only paid administrative and curatorial staff member. Yet at the same time, the “General” also was a professional opportunist and a social climber, and all protestations of his acquired American citizenship to the contrary, he always had been an autocrat of aristocratic pretensions and dubious credentials.

Robert de Forest issued a statement regretting the leak and stressed that the board had nothing but the interests of the museum at heart. Indeed, the young trustee was merely challenging the status quo of the past, and thinking about the museum’s image going forward. He also was deeply alert to the trustees’ collective power to affect the museum’s general program. De Forest may have been one of the youngest trustees on the board, but in his statement to the press he deftly pointed out that Choate, who sided with him, could not be considered part of a newly elected faction, nor, for that matter, could Huntington, Ward, or Avery—trustees since the early 1870s. It also bespoke a self-conscious awareness of the growing influence of the institution in high cultural circles.

Cesnola’s continuing presence fractured the Metropolitan Museum board, and with a truce came the resignations of de Forest from the executive committee and Ware from the board. While the trustees stood firm with Cesnola during the Feuerdent scandal, and the museum emerged stronger from the Sunday opening controversy, this would be the most turbulent incident within the board during the museum’s early decades. Cesnola remained for another nine
years, but the founding era of the museum was converging on the new century, and with it came new issues.

Earlier concerns about the museum’s public-private alliance were proving to have been unfounded, for there was no serious contentiousness with the city. Moreover, in 1895, speaking for the art and natural history museums, Jesup declared authoritatively that “no appointments will be made to the Park Department that will not be agreeable to our Museums.”

The trustees used their political influence for higher appropriations: in 1891, the city’s annual grant was $25,000; in the early years of the century it grew to $150,000; and by 1909 it was $200,000. The city absorbed the million-dollar costs of the construction of three new wings that were added during Cesnola’s time. The monumental Fifth Avenue entrance designed by museum trustee and architect Richard Morris Hunt opened in 1901, and effectively covered up the museum’s modest past—and the original Calvert Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould building—behind a massive limestone façade. The trustees and Hunt’s grand scheme planned for gradual expansions that ultimately would cover eighteen and a half acres.

As the new century began, the leaders of the founding era of the institution were dying—nine of them between 1899 and 1904. John Taylor Johnston, president through the museum’s formative decades, died in 1893; his successor Marquand in 1902; and his successor (for only two years) Frederick Rhinelander in 1904, the year Cesnola himself succumbed (to acute indigestion and heart failure). Cesnola had worked at the museum on Friday, November 18, and had looked forward to the quarterly meeting scheduled for the next Monday, at which J. P. Morgan, the first vice president and Cesnola’s ardent supporter, was to be elected president, succeeding Rhinelander. But Cesnola died suddenly on Sunday, and the meeting, and the Morgan presidency, proceeded without him.
Looking back on the era of the institution’s founding, Robert de Forest saw the history of the Metropolitan as divided into three periods: the “voluntary service” era, which ended in 1879 with the hiring of Cesnola (and the move to Central Park soon after); the Cesnola years (“increasingly marked by the General’s dominating personality,” de Forest saw fit to add); and J. Pierpont Morgan’s presidency, beginning in November 1904. Morgan had been one of the first fifty patrons of the museum in 1871, but it wasn’t until 1888 that he joined the board. Ten years later he was elected first vice president, and upon Rhinelander’s death that same year, President.

_Inflamed by a Grand Design_

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, J. P. Morgan’s reputation as a powerful and fearsome force in finance and industry was unparalleled. He was equally intimidating physically, six feet tall with large shoulders, piercing eyes, and a deformed nose caused by rosacea, a chronic skin disease. His presence on any board carried great weight, and the Metropolitan Museum considered it a coup to get him. “Our Board decided that it is not in the interest of the Museum to have Trustees select persons who are already Trustees of the Museum of Natural History,” Cesnola wrote to Morgan hesitatingly in 1888. “If you can see any way to get out of the other Museum before next May your election in our Board would be assured. Please think this matter over and let me know confidentially what is your desire in the matter,” Cesnola suggested, concluding with a flourish, “I know too that your excellent father would be very glad to learn that you have taken an active interest in this institution which is progressing at the rate of 1000 to 1 compared with the other Museum—.”
Unlike many titans of business, Morgan disliked publicity.\textsuperscript{175} And yet his very being attracted attention, for he conducted both his professional and personal lives on a grand scale. He bought the best prize-winning horses or dogs or paintings or yachts. He was a major supporter of the biggest church in the country (the New York Cathedral of St. John the Divine); the largest and finest opera house (the Metropolitan); the “best-situated and most beautiful clubhouse” (the Metropolitan); and the “first subscription of every important public object.”\textsuperscript{176} Yet unlike other New York millionaires who built ostentatious chateaux on Fifth Avenue, Morgan contentedly lived in an unobtrusive Murray Hill brownstone.

Morgan began collecting rare books, manuscripts, and works of art in the 1890s, around the same time his involvement with the Metropolitan Museum deepened. He focused on art and artifacts of every kind—from tiny snuff boxes to large, magnificent tapestries. After acquiring the best in any field, he would turn elsewhere. For example, when his sister inquired if he would be seeing a dealer in Greek antiquities in Naples, he replied, “I have done with Greek antiquities; I am at the Egyptian.”\textsuperscript{177}

His consistent passion was for quality. “When Pierpont Morgan accepted the presidency of the Metropolitan Museum in 1904,” future director Francis Henry Taylor wrote, “it was abundantly clear that his imagination was inflamed by a grand design for the artistic enrichment of his native country.”\textsuperscript{178} His ambitions for the museum were equally great. In 1905, he decided that it needed to establish an Egyptian Department, replete with a dedicated archeological expedition. Driven by the desire to make the Met’s department the best in the United States, Morgan recruited Albert M. Lythgoe, the founder of the Egyptian Department at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and Harvard professor, who began excavations in Egypt the next year.\textsuperscript{179}
New curatorial departments kept up with the steady accumulation of treasures of Decorative Arts, Asian Art, and paintings. Armor, which, like ancestral portraits imparted the sense of a noble, noncommercial history, became a faddish collectable for Americans, and an 1896 bequest by John S. Ellis was augmented in 1904 by an exceptionally fine collection that Morgan bought from a French aristocrat, the Duc de Dino. Morgan had acted with dispatch when he enlisted Rutherfurd Stuyvesant to do the museum’s bidding for the objects in Europe, and pressured the trustees to contribute their own funds towards the successful purchase.

Indeed, Morgan approached the task of administering the institution with Progressive-era efficiency. In his professional life, his reorganization and restructuring of troubled businesses came to be known as “Morganization,” a process from which the Metropolitan Museum was not immune. Before Cesnola’s death, a committee began revising the museum’s constitution to clarify definitions and practices. Morgan’s Secretary on the board, Robert de Forest, also was a strong organizational force to whom he entrusted responsibility for this initiative. One of de Forest’s recommendations employed business methods to capitalize on any available support by creating different classes of contributing membership between the ten-dollar annual member and the thousand-dollar fellow for life. Indeed, the enlarged membership produced increased revenues.

Similarly, the trustees sought to replace Cesnola with someone of executive ability, expert knowledge of art, museum experience, and perhaps the most important thing that Cesnola lacked, courtesy, and the gentlemanly qualities needed to represent the museum sympathetically to all of the different classes of the community. They chose Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke, the director of the Victoria and Albert Museum (formerly the South Kensington) in London, the New York museum’s original institutional model. Morgan shared with Clarke his goal to make
the Metropolitan “not merely a museum and art gallery but a great educational institution,” in keeping with its original charter. Professionalization of the museum’s operations, however, eroded the authority of its patrons, and this, perhaps, was part of Morgan’s intent.

Indeed, to Winifred Howe, the museum chronicler, “the keynote” of the Morgan era was educational efficiency. It was becoming obvious that a museum did not begin and end with the collection and exhibition of works of art alone. It had a responsibility to make art both “intelligible and attractive” to the public. Under these guidelines Clarke rearranged the collections “in a more logical and instructive way,” grouping objects and acquisitions “according to a comprehensive scientific plan,” which included assembling a curatorial staff and a more ordered exhibition approach. The trustees also saw fit to issue publications, sell photographs, offer increased use to art students, build up the library, and most important, cooperate with the public and private schools of greater New York. In so doing, they self-consciously harkened back to the original mission of the museum: to offer the city a collection as well as a place to study fine arts with an eye towards the national development of an artistic aesthetic.

Recognizing the need for municipal cooperation, in 1907, under Morgan, the trustees designated that the Mayor of New York, the City Comptroller, and the president of the Department of Parks be henceforth permanent ex-officio trustees. Mayor McClellan subsequently championed Morgan and his museum to the Board of Estimate, and was able to increase its annual appropriation. Moreover, during Morgan’s presidency, the city’s special grants to the museum to build four wings, a carpenter shop, and a powerhouse amounted to over $2 million, an unimaginable sum previously. Morgan, clearly, had the power of association in his favor.
Ironically, Morgan felt his greatest achievements at the museum were of a more personal nature. Soon after Morgan’s death, Herbert Satterlee, his son-in-law, began work on a comprehensive biography in which he recounted two relatively small incidents. In 1911, Morgan had become “tremendously interested” in the museum’s new Egyptian galleries in the Museum, visiting them frequently to take his mind off business matters. Having seen the Nile Valley excavations, he was interested in how the antiquities might be exhibited. Moreover, knowing the Egyptian departments in the great museums abroad, he wanted the one at home in New York to be “as good or better than the best of them,” Satterlee wrote. At a preview before the opening in November, he gave a tour of the galleries to some friends, and told anecdotes about particular objects. Satterlee asserted that the evening, for Morgan, was the high point of his administration. 192

Satterlee and others also recalled an elegant gathering in 1909 at the museum, at which Morgan and his wife stood in a reception line in the great hall, flanked by members of the board and the director Clarke. As an orchestra played in the gallery, the museum’s leaders greeted hundreds of members. One of them was an informally dressed spouse of a museum attendant, carrying an infant. Morgan “shook hands with her as graciously as he did with the lady in full evening dress who preceded her,” de Forest later wrote, and asked him to write down the child’s name. 193 At the board’s next meeting, Morgan proposed the baby as a member of the Museum ‘in Perpetuity’ and paid her $5,000 membership fee. 194 Carried away by his enthusiasm and pride, Morgan also was consciously signifying that “in perpetuity” for the child might mean at least until the late twentieth century. The museum had a future, and it was solid.

In Pierpont Morgan’s eight years as president, the Metropolitan’s acquisitions accumulated so rapidly that the increased gallery space could not keep pace. 195 And money,
indeed, was in the air: the museum received large bequests from John S. Kennedy, Joseph Pulitzer, and Francis L. Leland.\textsuperscript{196}

In late 1912, Morgan testified before the House Committee on Banking and Currency. The Pujo Committee concluded that powerful financial leaders had gained control of the manufacturing, transportation, mining, telecommunications, and financial markets of the United States. In fact, four allied New York City financial institutions related primarily to Morgan and the Rockefeller family held 341 interlocking directorships in 112 major banks, railroads, public utilities, and insurance companies. The sum of these resources was $22 billion, or half the gross national product of the United States.\textsuperscript{197}

“A very few men,” the \textit{Times} wrote, “stand sponsor for our finances, men whose ability, whose tastes, whose strength, and whose fortune have led them into ‘big business’ and brought them high place there. And we shiver and talk of a possible ‘money trust,’ and the ‘control of finance.’”\textsuperscript{198} Yet these same men also were “captains of philanthropy” and, as such, were “interlocking directors” who similarly populated the boards of both the Metropolitan Museum and the Charity Organization Society, among others. “They do not always appear together, of course, but some of them are almost sure to be found as ‘backers’ of every public-spirited concern in the city, and every one who reads the news of philanthropy, art, science, and education has long since become almost wearily familiar with their names.”\textsuperscript{199} Seven New Yorkers in particular were “again and again” on such lists: de Forest, Morgan, Otto T. Bannard, Jacob H. Schiff, Isaac N. Seligman, R. Fulton Cutting, and Felix M. Warburg. In the philanthropic realm, how could such a “trust” be a bad thing? What would New York’s so-called public activities do without them? Furthermore, even if high culture could be deemed expendable, the charity organization movement was attempting to transform the fearsome urban
immigrant masses into a respectable middle class.\textsuperscript{200} “As we name things ‘trusts,’ here we have one—it is a trust of public spirit,” the \textit{Times} conceded.\textsuperscript{201} Furthermore, the Jewish presence on this list was not lost on the newspaper, owned by the American-born, German-Jewish Adoph S. Ochs, a serious advocate against anti-Semitism.\textsuperscript{202}

Morgan might have been a special case, with his wide-ranging and outsized accomplishments in finance, combined with his comparably grand feats of fine art and manuscript collecting, carried out with a ravenous zeal that bordered on hoarding. But there were others like him. Benjamin Altman, for example, was the son of Bavarian Jews who had settled in the United States in the 1850s. In 1870, the same year as the Metropolitan Museum’s founding, he set up a dry goods shop, and ultimately built it into one of New York’s leading department stores. Altman lived out of the public eye and spent his free time amassing an extraordinary art collection. Like Morgan, Altman sought quality. Both had fully developed tastes, but Morgan’s “feeling for works of art was basically romantic and historical rather than aesthetic” in the larger consideration of how an object pertained to culture. Morgan made his decisions with speed. Altman, on the other hand, sought out fine aesthetic quality over any historical allusions or visceral impressions, consulted experts and reflected sometimes for weeks about a potential purchase.\textsuperscript{203}

In 1909, Altman offered his collection to the museum under the condition that it be kept intact in one gallery, and managed by an endowed curator of his selection and funding. Although museum policy rejected such restrictive bequests, Morgan convinced the trustees to capitulate in this special case. The Altman collection was simply too fine to pass up. The gift remained a secret until Altman’s death in October 1913, when Edward Robinson, the museum’s director, described the $15 million bequest as “without question the most splendid gift that a citizen has
ever made to the people of the city of New York.” According to Metropolitan Museum historian Calvin Tomkins, however, Altman’s collection was but an “inland sea” in proportion to Morgan’s “ocean.”

“Every smallest ornament or richest picture had the hallmark of his individuality,” one of Morgan’s friends once said of his grand collection. “However rich the trappings, they took their proper place, merely as trappings of the man.” Because the United States imposed a substantial (20 percent) duty on all imported artworks, the bulk of his art collection was not in his Thirty-sixth Street library in New York, but remained in London, in the house he had inherited from his father. In 1909, the Payne-Aldrich tariff bill eliminated import duty on art more than one hundred years old. That same year, Britain increased death duties, prompting Morgan by 1911 to call in all of his loans to foreign museums and move his belongings to New York.

In March 1911, Robinson wrote to Morgan in Rome about finding space in which to house his collection at the Metropolitan. Although the planned Addition H initially did not appear to have enough room, Robinson suggested that if he held back on installing “certain collections” intended for the second floor, Morgan could have the seven large new galleries, among the finest in the museum. “Should the idea of utilizing this space for your collections appeal to you, as I earnestly hope it may, the installation could be regarded as a temporary one, if you so desire,” Robinson wrote, “and we could look forward to providing still more ample quarters in a future extension, with plenty of time to plan for the most effective display of the collections, having the objects before us to study and arrange for.”

The next day, Robert de Forest wrote to Morgan on the same issue, specifically the idea of building a new wing for the Morgan Collection alone, an undertaking Morgan seemed to be
angling for. De Forest cautiously approached the subject about how, where, and when the
addition would be built, as well as how to finesse the situation with the city administration.

I cordially endorse Robinson’s suggestions, unless in your judgment the occasion
of your bringing your collections to the Museum can and should be made a reason
for the city’s building another extension. I remember your suggestion about
utilizing that opportunity of having the city build our southwest wing. If we could
certainly get this wing built as a result of such an inducement, without exciting
opposition on the ground of park occupancy, I should say by all means do it; but
after conference with Cadwalader (the only trustee with whom I have ventured to
speak on this subject), I ought to express his judgment and mine, that any
proposed extension on that side at this time, before the opposite northwest corner
had been occupied, would be likely to excite opposition and be too patent a move
to occupy space. 209

De Forest thus suggested that Morgan diplomatically approach the city officials about the reason
for a northwest wing while not letting the construction interfere with the delivery and temporary
installment of his collections in Addition H. “It may be that this would be too large an
expenditure for the city now to commit itself to,” de Forest warned. 210

Around two weeks later, Morgan’s private secretary wrote to de Forest, quoting Morgan
in a cable he had just received. “‘Inform Robert W. de Forest – ‘Your letter, also Robinson’s,
received. Will it make any difference if I wait until I reach London middle of May as important
consult lawyers there before final decision. My inclination is strongly carry out your
suggestions.’” 211 Robinson wrote optimistically that the cable was “certainly most exciting as
well as agreeable,” and included details about the McKim, Mead and White adapted plans for
Addition H. 212 A week later, Morgan cheerfully cabled Choate a message which was distributed
to the trustees, most probably acknowledging their birthday greetings to the board president:
“Greatly appreciate congratulations from Metropolitan Trustees. Convey my love and thanks.
MORGAN.” 213
One month later, with no word from Morgan, Robinson cabled him in London to ask if the museum could expect a decision soon, as delaying the plans was becoming difficult. Morgan’s reply came the following day:

MY WISHES AND INTENTION UNCHANGED BUT IT IS VERY COMPLICATED AND CANNOT BE DECIDED SO SUDDENLY BESIDES WHICH I SHOULD FEEL VERY MUCH EMBARRASSED IF MUSEUMS PLANS WERE INTERRUPTED WITH BY MY DECIDING OTHERWISE LATER THEREFORE THINK YOU HAD BETTER GO AHEAD AS YOU THINK BEST CONSULTING OF COURSE DEFOREST AND CADWALADER

MORGAN

Still optimistic, Robinson cabled back, thanking Morgan for his message and stating that they would proceed with the original architectural scheme but that plans could be modified easily later.

By November, Morgan was proceeding swiftly with government bureaucracy and corresponding with William Loeb Jr., the Collector of the Port of New York, about the importation of his art collection, asking if the cases could be opened at the Museum, “a public institution upon which many million of dollars have been spent by the city Government.” Three days later a better proposition was on the table: Franklin MacVeagh, Secretary of the Treasury, had agreed to send an inspector from New York to London to examine the cases as they were packed. “I am greatly interested as a citizen in the coming of your great collection, and it will give me sincere satisfaction to render all permissible official assistance to importations by which the entire country is to be eminently benefited,” MacVeagh wrote.

Thus, in February 1912, the shipments started to arrive, and Loeb observed Morgan’s wish that the importation be kept confidential for security reasons. As the cases began to fill a basement storeroom at the museum, de Forest coyly explained in the Bulletin that the art was
indeed arriving in New York, but that the trustees had no knowledge of what Morgan’s further intentions were. While it would be a “pleasant dream” for the Museum to house the collections permanently, the museum had “no such space now,” he added. In fact, the city was not taking the hint, and appropriations for a new wing of any sort did not seem to be immediately forthcoming. Once again, recalling the Sunday issue, the conflict of municipal ownership of the museum building versus its trustee-supervised collections was proving complicated. Although editorials abhorred the notion that taxpayer money should be spent on buildings in which Morgan could “parade his wealth,” Morgan dismissed his friends’ advice to consequently “enrich a museum somewhere else” and allowed his patience to be tested with the Metropolitan. Was the museum’s installation of the Morgan Collection to be a monument to the man or to some of the finest products of human civilization that he had collected? Was this gift to the City of New York to come at too great a price for city officials? As “vanloads” of Morgan’s artworks continued to arrive, no provisions were being made for a space in which to exhibit them. Most of Morgan’s treasures were lying in the basement of the Museum in their packing cases, “apparently unwanted by the city administration,” Satterlee reported. In late spring Morgan washed his hands of the matter and went off on his yacht, and spent a month “entertaining and being entertained.”

Then in late November 1912, Morgan informed Robinson that he had no intention of giving his collection to the museum. Whether he was merely putting pressure on Robinson and the museum trustees to make a more concerted effort with the city is unclear, but his tone had changed. Morgan was intending to sail for Egypt in January after the Congressional committee hearings. He apparently wanted to tie up loose ends—or at least to get some action. Robinson solemnly recorded his meeting with Morgan in a memorandum.
Friday, November 29, 1912, Mr. Morgan sent for me to come to his Library, and
told me that he wished it distinctly understood by the City authorities and
whoever else ought to know of it, that he had no intention of giving or
bequeathing his collections to the Metropolitan Museum. He said that the value of
these collections at the present time was about fifty million dollars, and he
regarded this as much too large an asset to take out of his estate in case it might
ever be needed. He wished me to confer with Mr. de Forest as soon as possible,
report to him what I had been told, and decide with him what was the best method
of making this known to those concerned. He said further that he did not wish the
City to grant the money asked for this year upon the understanding that it was to
be devoted to the permanent housing of his collections, and then learn afterward
that the collections were not to become the property of the Museum.\textsuperscript{224}

Morgan clarified that it was his understanding that the city money was to go towards the general
purposes of the museum alone, and in any event, the request had been made before he resolved
to consolidate his collections in the United States. This was the first time Morgan had expressed
his intentions definitively.

According to Satterlee, the Hearst newspapers had opposed the appropriation
consistently and “no one took the trouble to circulate petitions asking the Board of Estimate and
Apportionment to set aside the necessary money,” he grumbled.\textsuperscript{225} In fact the \textit{New York
American} at one point had feared the collection would go to Hartford, Morgan’s birthplace.\textsuperscript{226}
Morgan supposedly was thinking about his collection enriching the future city of New York,
according to the tabloid as well as his son-in-law.\textsuperscript{227} In fact, it was Morgan who had changed the
policy of the museum away from becoming a “mausoleum” for wealthy donors and towards its
artistic integrity as a public space, with galleries organized by genre as opposed to by collector.
The museum under Morgan was no longer interested in restricted benefactions, so it was not
entirely consistent that he would demand separate galleries in the Metropolitan for his own
collection, particularly since he had already built his own private testament to himself, the
Morgan Library.\textsuperscript{228}
There were other things on Morgan’s mind. Two weeks earlier, Pujo was back in Washington to reconvene his “money trust” investigation, and was set between November 25 and December 20 to take testimony from “every prominent American financier”; Morgan of course had been asked to appear. By November 20, the date had not yet been set for his testimony, although the city tabloids for months had been continuously implicating Morgan’s complicity in trust dealings of all stripes that yielded huge profits for him and his cohort. The hearings sent rumbles through Wall Street, where a “drastic liquidation” occurred on December 5 amid rumors of an investigation of the stock exchange and anticipated repercussions from antitrust initiatives. Morgan was reported to be ill, and the Wall Street “bears” were predicting a calamity if his health weakened further.

Morgan, a man accustomed to getting his way, at least publicly was growing impatient with the museum and with the situation in general. But in truth, the museum trustees and even the city were more forthcoming with him in private than the public record recorded. With new proposed laws potentially taxing his estate and restricting his business ventures, and with the museum and the city not enthusiastic enough for Morgan about his enormous gift, perhaps the time had come for him to consider the importance of his legacy to his family rather than to New York City. At a second meeting with Morgan in late December, Robinson revealed that he had “every assurance” from individual members of the Finance Committee of the Board of Estimate of an imminent appropriation for the wing. “I asked if he was willing to tell me what his intentions were in case the money were granted,” Robinson wrote. “He replied with some vehemence that whether the money were granted or not, nothing whatever was to be done with any of his things for an indefinite time, and until I received further instructions from him everything was to remain exactly as it is. Absolutely nothing was to be taken out of any of the
cases for any reason whatever with the exception of his paintings, for a temporary exhibition of which he had already given consent.”231 With the matter still unsettled in January 1913, Morgan sailed for Egypt and Europe for an extended absence and empowered de Forest to perform his duties as president.232 Two months later, while traveling in Rome, Morgan died.

It turned out that Morgan’s wealth, in fact, was considerably less than that of Frick, Harriman, George F. Baker, or Andrew W. Mellon, and not even close to the richest men in the world, Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, Sr. Morgan, it seemed, had spent almost everything he earned on his art collections, valued at approximately $60 million. Although many important works and objects from the Morgan collection did wind up at the Metropolitan Museum, the financier actually never could have afforded to give away such a large asset in its entirety.233
CHAPTER SIX
“The Spirit of the Parvenu”: Enter Otto Kahn

Otto Hermann Kahn had a voracious appetite for the arts, but his great love was opera. Born in 1867 in Mannheim, Germany, to a cultured bourgeois family, he inherited a serious knowledge of music and literature and a scorn for those with less sophistication. Indeed, the extended family was as passionate about culture as about business—a new breed of parvenu that was anything but philistine when it came to the arts.¹

Moreover, there was an even more important aspect to cultural patronage: the Kahns were Jewish, and the national theater in Mannheim, a European artistic center, did not share the bigotry of the banking house. Artistic venues with a need for new money in the face of waning aristocratic sponsorship allowed Jews an opportunity to mix with an otherwise segregated elite society. New audiences enlivened creative activities and embraced new settings for recitals and literary discussions. Staged in affluent private homes, performances became occasions for musicians and artists to mix with politicians, intellectuals, writers, and people in society.

By contrast, in supposedly more democratic New York, “The Four Hundred would have fled in a body from a poet, a painter, a musician, or a clever Frenchman.”² Artists, like art, were for display, not friendship. In Mannheim, Kahn’s aunt, Bertha Hirsch, was hostess of the best salon in the city. Celebrities in society and the arts mixed freely in her home, one of few places where Jews could easily mingle with Gentiles.³ The assimilated Kahn family considered itself nonreligious and German, yet others still identified them as Jewish.⁴ Sophistication and fluency in the arts could transcend this social barrier; success in business alone could not. But the limits of American sophistication, and New York’s otherwise welcoming diversity, were far greater.
German Jews, more so than their Eastern European brethren, were typically cultured, educated, and experienced in trade and commerce. Similarly, in England, some of the wealthiest of them rose to noble or parliamentary ranks along with other self-made men of the late Victorian era. There, financiers could be bestowed with noble status faster and in greater numbers than industrialists. Otto Kahn entered that world in 1888, when he began working in the important London office of Deutsche Bank.

Of possibly equal importance to Kahn was the cosmopolitan cohort he encountered at another aunt’s Edwardian London home, which made his Aunt Bertha’s Mannheim salon look provincial. Elizabeth Eberstadt was married to George Henry Lewis, a noted (Jewish) financial and criminal solicitor who was knighted in 1893, elevated to baronet in 1902, and made a commander of the Victorian Order in 1905. Friend to the king and known as the lawyer in London, he was the only solicitor whose name ever became a household word, and was said to know the secrets of every family in the British peerage. The Lewises welcomed painters, sculptors, musicians, actors, writers, lawyers, and politicians; and an invitation from Lady Lewis was entrée into “a social milieu at once fluid and eclectic.” According to John Juxon, George Lewis’s biographer, Elizabeth Lewis was free from the “society” obsession with rank, while her husband’s association with the Prince as well as with financial and political personalities saved the couple’s parties from the “bitchery and narcissism” to which creative types were prone. But these were no mere temperamental artistes: among Kahn’s Aunt Betty’s friends were James McNeill Whistler, Edward Burne-Jones, and John Singer Sargent, who painted her portrait. W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan came to the Lewis home, as did Thomas Hardy, Henry James, Oscar Wilde, and Virginia Woolf. Young Otto Kahn was captivated.
In 1893, the same year that Kahn became a British subject, he was sent to New York on a temporary assignment with Speyer & Co., a great dynastic financial firm that rivaled the Rothschilds’. Echoing the financial circumstances that had brought August Belmont to New York over a half-century earlier, 1893 marked the beginning of an economic downturn in New York that lasted for four years and would keep Kahn from returning to his adopted homeland. For an ambitious financier, this was not necessarily bad, for the city presented him with a range of financial, romantic, and cultural opportunities.

At the time, the Speyer firm was engaged in a familial conflict as James G. Speyer came of age and pushed out the non-family partner, William B. Bonn, who had run the New York office. Speyer proceeded to alienate other experienced firm partners as well as some of the leading bankers of both London and New York, among them J. P. Morgan. Kahn was caught in the middle—a factotum that was neither mover nor shaker, working for a company whose upper management was increasingly unsettled.

Love saved the day. In January 1896, Kahn married the daughter of Abraham Wolff, co-founder and partner of Kuhn, Loeb & Co., a leading Wall Street firm. Despite private hesitation, Jacob Schiff, the bank’s senior partner, acquiesced to Wolff’s request that his new son-in-law be given a position as partner. Because of other even deeper generational and marital alliances in the firm, Kahn ultimately always maintained a somewhat junior role, regardless of his abilities. Nevertheless, soon after Schiff reorganized the Union Pacific Railroad in 1895, he placed his new junior partner on its board of directors. In this capacity, Kahn was flung into a complex and highly lucrative venture, and became acquainted with another board appointee, E. H. Harriman. Twenty years older than Kahn and a corporate giant, Harriman became a Kuhn, Loeb client, and a friend and mentor to Kahn throughout a period when the tycoon was
becoming the controlling force behind a national railroad empire. Kahn’s allegiance to Harriman was important in business. It also helped that Kuhn, Loeb and its partners were becoming enormously wealthy as major bankers to the railroad industry.

Harriman’s Anglo-Dutch lineage qualified him to be a “Knickerbocker,” although a catastrophic fire and 1830s financial uncertainty depleted the family fortune before Harriman rebuilt it a half-century later. Although he was a member of the “right” clubs and knew the “right” people, Harriman was a bit of an outsider—neither new money nor old—and his contentiousness both in business and social affairs did not ingratiate him to local social elites.

The conundrum of New York’s social life was that neither money nor birthright alone could buy status in a world based on subtle distinctions and manners.

Harriman recognized a kindred spirit in Kahn, and took him under his wing. At that time, the ultimate social ban was directed at persons of Jewish descent during the nineteenth century. A culture of exclusion defined the parameters of a developing class, creating not only class cohesion but class distinction. Jews were simply not welcome in the upper reaches of mainstream “society.”

Unfortunately for Kahn, elite New Yorkers, as with Britons, thought of Germans primarily as Jews. And unlike the London sophisticates that Kahn encountered at his aunt’s eclectic salon, New York’s fashionable society did not include Jews of any sort. Freed of this stigma while in England, Kahn was back where he started when he came to New York. This was partly because America’s Gentile elites, as self-sufficient capitalists, did not need financial help from Jewish bankers, as did the British aristocracy.

Yet on occasion in New York, the Jew and Gentile joined business forces, sometimes in syndicates, to pool together their access to international capital. In the railroad industry in
particular, ethnic ancestry became irrelevant, and “the best houses of Wall Street took healthy pride in their self-regulatory, gentlemanly codes of behavior.” The possibility of great profits trumped any sort of ethnic parochialism.

But polite business acquaintances did not mix outside the boardroom, and the disconnected sects retreated to their respective clubs and enclaves. And like August Belmont before him, Otto Kahn did not want to be part of a separate German Jewish elite, which he felt was too German and insular. For whatever reason Kahn felt like an outsider among “Our Crowd,” despite the fact that the group included agnostics like himself. Unlike Belmont, however, Kahn never overlooked the polite hypocrisy that he endured for being Jewish: “A kike is a Jewish gentleman who has just left the room,” he reportedly said.

“A mix of the highest class, thoroughly cultured, and lovers of music…”

In spite of the relatively fresh social mix that started the Metropolitan Opera House in 1883, the theater was founded on a distinctive premise of division, much as the Academy of Music had been. The boxholders became stockholders of an entity called the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company, a new board of thirty-five members formed after a devastating fire gutted the building in 1892. That group selected an operating company to perform and determine programming in their theater. Evidently, the reigning elite cared more about where they sat than what they heard. By 1902, the Met had engaged five principal general managers in just under two decades: Henry E. Abbey, Leopold Damrosch, Edmond Stanton, John B. Schoeffel, and Maurice Grau.

In 1903, Heinrich Conried, a Viennese theatrical manager with both creative and intellectual integrity, sought the operating contract. Unlike some of the opera and theater
impresarios of the previous half-century who were more entrepreneurial than artistic, Conried was an idealist who had taken over the Irving Place Theatre in 1892, a venue for German drama in New York. But receiving neither German nor Jewish financial support, Conried instead became a veritable play broker who secured American rights to European productions, which in turn funded the money-losing undertaking. The theater, however, was “synonymous with all that was artistic,” and the German plays were “an intellectual treat,” far from the popular lowbrow entertainments that New York audiences frequented. Indeed, the Irving Place Theatre was considered a semi-educational theatrical laboratory for college students. Conried capitalized on this connection, and lectured or had his company perform at Columbia, Harvard, Yale, Cornell, Vassar, and the University of Pennsylvania, which conferred upon him an honorary degree in 1902.

With the Metropolitan Opera, Conried saw a chance to realize his aesthetic ideals without risking his own money. He previously had tried to obtain the contract for the Metropolitan Opera House in 1886 as a venue for his opera company to perform comic works “in a style surpassing anything that has been shown along that line in this country.” His ambitions were as grand as his proposal—forty musicians, a chorus of sixty, and the best American and European principals, and featuring comic opera, a rarity for New York City. The Metropolitan rejected his application. Conried tried again in 1902, and began a subscription to raise $150,000 to obtain the Met’s lease and management. Among his prime supporters was Henry Morgenthau, the Jewish, Mannheim-born lawyer, real estate businessman, and American diplomat. Conried already had received commitments from Jacob H. Schiff, Ernest Thalman, Daniel Guggenheim, Randolph Guggenheimer, and Henry R. Ickelheimer. Morgenthau recognized that all of the men “were of the highest class, thoroughly cultured, and lovers of music,” but knowing the prejudices of the
Gentile boxholders, he quipped to Conried, “If you could only secure a Mr. Hochheimer and a
Mr. Niersteiner you would have a complete wine list, but you could never secure the opera house
through it.” 25 The Jewish Conried immediately recognized his naïveté, and asked the diplomat to
suggest an alternative.

Morgenthau requested a free hand to carry out a plan, which commenced with a meeting
with Augustus D. Juilliard and George G. Haven, Metropolitan board members who had the final
say in the matter of the leaseholder. He then won over younger social leaders to support
Conried’s application. Chief among them was James Hazen Hyde, the new vice president of the
Equitable Life Insurance Company. Some of the other associates were Alfred G. Vanderbilt, son
of Cornelius Vanderbilt II; Harry Payne Whitney, the 31-year-old inheritor of his father William
C. Whitney’s fortune and husband of Gertrude Vanderbilt; Robert Goelet; Clarence H. Mackay,
the heir of a silver mining and telegraph fortune; George J. Gould, financier and railroad
magnate Jay Gould’s son and heir; Eliot Gregory, the artist and writer; and Bainbridge Colby,
the lawyer and eventual founder of the United States Progressive Party and Secretary of State to
Woodrow Wilson. 26 Vanderbilt and Whitney joined Conried’s board after the first meeting, an
indication to the press of the desire of young millionaires “to stand as patrons of operatic art in
New York.” 27 More aptly, the addition of a few younger members of the Gentile boxholding
entity clearly served to buttress the religiously mixed group, which also included Jacob H. Schiff
and James Speyer by 1905. 28

Despite some misgivings, the board of the Real Estate Company unanimously awarded
the lease to Conried on the strength of his artistic reputation and financial backing. 29 His group
also was able to pay for a storage facility, taking that responsibility out of the Real Estate
Company’s hands. Moreover, Conried did not propose any radical changes other than a
refurbishment of the stage. Conried managed to merge high culture with crass commercialism in an inoffensive and highly effective way that did not give the opera house’s snobbish leaders a moment’s pause. While Conried’s distinguished theatrical career had earned him an Order of the Crown from the German emperor, an Imperial Franz Josef Order from the Austrian emperor, and honors from American and many German universities, in the end, his contract was all about money.\textsuperscript{30} He boasted to the press that he had received so many offers of support from subscribers that he easily could have raised \$1 million. But “only \$150,000 is required by the Metropolitan Opera Company,” he said.\textsuperscript{31}

Before Conried’s trustees met for the first time, Schiff, pleading lack of time, bowed out, but not before suggesting that his young business associate, Otto H. Kahn, replace him.\textsuperscript{32} Finally able to show off his sophistication, free of being the junior partner, and with judgment suspended on his Jewishness, Kahn energetically presided as chairman of the first meeting of the Conried Metropolitan Opera Company on March 5, 1903. He nominated Conried for president, Hyde and Morgenthau for vice presidents, and William H. McIntyre for secretary and treasurer. Rounding out the five-member executive committee was Kahn himself.\textsuperscript{33} Within the resulting Metropolitan operating company, Kahn was to mix with a new generation of rich, cosmopolitan New Yorkers who were willing to challenge the plutocratic and aesthetic disparities at the opera house.\textsuperscript{34}

Aside from the chasm between the house and the company, there were occasional differences of opinion about particular singers, or repertory, or conductors, in addition to the lingering anti-Semitism of the Real Estate Company board. Yet something innovative and radical happened with Conried’s new trustees: they were formidable financiers as well as opera aficionados. They were, plainly, the real estate company’s equals. Never before had the operatic leaseholder had such leverage. The shift was monumental, and also signaled a new era of
innovation and operatic performance, commencing in November 1903 with the legendary Enrico Caruso’s American debut in *Rigoletto*. The original board “wine list” had become a more diverse group consisting of young and old, Gentile and Jewish, and new money and old—all emblematic of the diversity at the top of Manhattan’s society. This board in time would usher in the modern era, sustaining both the Metropolitan Opera Company and its theater, and decades later, consolidated both interests.

Conried was a maverick that comprehended that the culture of the Metropolitan Opera House was not merely musical, but social. “I have been so busy,” he said to the *Times*, “that I have not had time all day to eat a square meal. It is all the time shaking hands, and when I walk through the Park everybody stops me with congratulations.” His commitment, however, was to excellence. In the next five years, Conried put in a new ceiling and chandelier and replaced the old drop curtain with one divided in the middle for ease of curtain calls. Conried also modernized the house’s theatrical machinery to include an elaborate switchboard to manipulate stage lighting; a safe “fire” machine that made use of steam and electricity; and reinforced the stage with trap doors so unique “that nowhere in America could the proper parts be found.”

His proposal to alter the boxes’ lighting was met a little less enthusiastically. According to Morgenthau, he unsuccessfully fought the box holders’ demands to be kept illuminated throughout the performance; finally they agreed to install red shades over the lights. At least in this case, social concerns trumped the artistic.

Conried, like both sets of trustees, had international ambitions for his company. Over Richard Wagner’s family’s objections, he produced the opera *Parsifal* at the Met, in spite of the late composer’s hesitation to have it performed anywhere but Bayreuth. “Here’s my chance,” Conried said. “I will win the approbation of thousands who have been yearning to hear this opera
and who will never get to Bayreuth.” The demand for seats to *Parsifal* was unusually high, even by Met standards. The lavish six-hour opera, not part of the regular subscription series, cost twice as much as the Bayreuth production: it featured new costumes, selected by Conried himself and executed by Viennese artists; an expanded orchestra; and a new ballet troupe imported from Europe. Although the house was packed at each performance, the gross receipts did not cover the costs. Meanwhile, Morgenthau claimed that he alone “made over a hundred people happy by securing seats for them.”

The *Parsifal* premiere was a triumph. December 24, 1903 was not Christmas eve, but “Parsifal night” in New York, and the two-block area around the Metropolitan Opera House was lined with crowds, carriages, cabs, and reserve policemen from the Tenderloin Station. “The eyes of the whole musical world were turned upon this performance,” said the *Times*. “In many of its aspects it was one of the most important and significant musical events that Americans have been concerned with.” It capped Conried’s reputation as a daring opera manager worthy of a distinguished company in a great city. Opera in his hands became a transformative experience for New Yorkers. In spite of the opera’s entertainment value, it was still high art.

That same month, Conried announced that the superstar diva, Nellie Melba, soon would sing at the Met. The directors of the Company were ecstatic, and passed a resolution commending Conried’s “splendid executive and artistic ability in the presentation of grand opera in New York.” The Met’s international reputation was now secure.

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In 1904, a little over a year after Morgenthau approached James Hazen Hyde with his Conried plan, Hyde consolidated control of the opera company board and marginalized his sponsor. Without Morgenthau, Otto Kahn and later Kahn’s short-lived former boss James Speyer
were left as the only Jews among the directors of the Met operating company. Like Kahn’s business mentor Harriman, Hyde was less concerned with Kahn’s ethnicity than with his refined, cosmopolitan, aesthetic, and artistic sensibilities, which Hyde shared.

Hyde’s ascent in business had been swift. When his father died in 1899, the new Harvard graduate inherited a significant block of the Equitable Life Assurance Society’s stock. As chairman of the Equitable’s executive and finance committees beginning in 1902, Hyde controlled a complex investment portfolio. Otto Kahn had entered his orbit not only through the Met, but also through various Wall Street dealings and directorships.

Hyde, however, was known less for his professional or cultural interests than for his personal overindulgence. Much as the Vanderbilt family’s social ascension began with Alva’s 1883 ball, a little over two decades later, a similar event given in honor of his debutante niece led to James Hazen Hyde’s downfall.

It was an “eighteenth-century costume fête” at Sherry’s on the last day of January 1905. Hyde himself was attired in the formal costume of the New-York Coaching Club: bottle-green coat, red waistcoat, black knee breeches, black silk stockings, and pumps. For decorations, the École des Beaux Arts-trained architect Whitney Warren converted one of the elegant restaurant’s ballroom floors into a garden scene at Versailles, and the other into a large stage, constructed and designed, along with scenery and a curtain, expressly for the evening. The ball began around 10:30 pm with a Louis XVI dance. Later, in the theater, a ballet performed by dancers from the Metropolitan Opera company was followed by a play written for the occasion. Adjourning again to the Versailles room for supper, the guests found grass on the floor, gilded tables electrically lit by Chinese lanterns, and flowering vines.
Indicative of Hyde’s eclectic and daring tendencies, his guests were an intergenerational combination of New York high society, social standing, and culture. The Astors, including their doyenne, were there, as were the Belmonts, Stuyvesants, Cuttings, Goelets, Havemeyers, Iselins, Livingstons, Van Cortlandts, and Vanderbilts, among many others. Most of the board members of the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company and the Conried company were there. Franklin D. Roosevelt was there, celebrating on the day after his twenty-third birthday. And so were Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer L. Schiff and Mr. and Mrs. Otto Kahn, in apparently their first important New York social event.

Jewish names were still rare in New York social columns. Until 1905, Kahn appeared in the press only in reports of business and railroad deals, or in connection with Jewish benevolent organizations, or as a supporter of the horse show in suburban Morristown, New Jersey. But Kahn’s Jewishness did not stand in the way of an invitation to Hyde’s party.

Also among the mix of attendees were those whose social standing was achieved by entrée through the larger cultural world. Among them was Frank Crowninshield, the critic and founding editor of *Vanity Fair*; Edith Wharton; Ralph Pulitzer, publisher of the *New-York World*; the architects Charles Follen McKim and Stanford White; the theatrical and literary agent Elisabeth Marbury and her companion, the decorator Elsie de Wolfe; and the American diva Lillian Nordica.  

Ending at seven in the morning after three separate suppers, the ball was deemed one of the most “original entertainments” of the winter. Hyde was spared public attacks along the lines of those after the notorious 1897 Bradley Martin ball because his publicists had cast the evening as a “cultural event.” But it was more than that. Indeed, it was different from the stale fare at Mrs. Astor’s three weeks earlier. To what would be the last of her legendary balls, Mrs.
Astor invited six hundred members of society. The *Times* noted that for the first time in years, few guests went to the ball directly from the opera; many went to private dinners elsewhere beforehand. At Mrs. Astor’s, there was “very little change as to decorations or lists of guests from year to year.” The formerly arriviste Vanderbilt family now had been attending for over twenty years, and many who went to Hyde’s ball later that month were at Mrs. Astor’s as well. But there was a marked difference in style and substance to the Hyde party that felt more like a changing of the guard than a challenge to unseat it.

Within days the rumors began that Hyde had spent $200,000 of Equitable’s money to pay for the event, resulting in a New York State investigation of the entire insurance industry. It did not help that Hyde already was in the throes of a company power struggle with president James Waddell Alexander, which came to a head at the Equitable board meeting a little over a week after the ball. Alexander attacked Hyde, accused him of “open, aggressive and misguided” misuse of his stock control, and berated his penchant for “recreations and enjoyments of a more or less public nature, which is exceedingly harmful to the company.” Alexander also condemned Hyde’s self-indulgent lifestyle, casting aspersions on his ability to be a responsible insurance company head.

It was open season on Hyde. Even the press in other cities joined the smear campaign. The *Boston Daily Globe* described Hyde as the “New York Exquisite”: meticulously dressed, fond of floral arrangements in his home, a passionate supporter of coaching, and a great friend to theatrical celebrities and foreigners. In other words, Hyde was an effete, dandified dilettante. “With his Henry III beard, his lustrous brown eyes and his carefully curled pompadour, he is known everywhere. He speaks in a low, cultivated voice that approaches effeminacy, and his accent is known as continental, being neither English nor French, and least of all American.”
More aptly, he was not in the least bit deferential to antiquated social standards, and was equipped with the means and spirit to defy convention not only in his choice of friends but also in his choice of cultural philanthropic endeavors.

Nevertheless, after proving that he indeed had paid for both his ball and his indulgences out of his own pocket, Hyde resigned from his position in June 1905, and spent a good part of the rest of his life in Europe. He maintained his relationship with the Metropolitan Opera as a foreign board representative until 1910, and participated in other American cultural ventures, while remaining a strong supporter and close friend of Otto Kahn’s. Around two decades later, in an introspective moment after visiting Hyde in Paris, Kahn acknowledged the depth and importance of their friendship: “I have never forgotten, and never shall forget, your attitude to me in olden days, when you had much to give and I little, when you were a power in the land and I was at the beginning of my career. It is always a sincere joy to me to see you again, and a genuine satisfaction to observe with what wise, true and rare recognition of real values, you have tackled the problem of arranging your life.”\(^6^0\) Constitutionally indifferent to social convention, Hyde had opened doors for Kahn, and in so doing, ushered in a new era of Metropolitan Opera board participation.

Ultimately, Kahn’s cultural involvements were boundless. He recognized it as his calling “to become a militant force in the cause and service of art, to be foremost in helping to create and spread that which beautifies and enriches life.”\(^6^1\) Moreover, he seized upon the fact that art had the ability to transcend national, ethnic, or even social boundaries, and so, too, might artistic patronage. Kahn funded the opera as well as theater, film, dance, and classical and jazz music, and his social circle expanded into the nascent “café society” of the modern post-WWI era. Kahn’s biographer, Theresa Collins, concluded: “He was . . . the only international financier
among these stars and celebrities, but more interesting was what this crowd meant to postwar modernity: they constituted a new internationalist elite. By comparison, the emissaries at Europe’s financial commissions were ineffectual, predictably plain and dull, lacking the wit, fashion, or excitement of the art world.”  

*A New Theater*

By 1906 Kahn was an important member of Conried’s Metropolitan Opera board, and, along with some of the same affluent New Yorkers he had encountered at the opera, he turned his focus to a new project, the New Theatre, modeled on the Comédie Française, the French state theater in Paris. The scheme evolved much as the Met’s plan had: for an idea originated by Conried, the financial outlay was steep ($50,000 per investor to the original capitalization) and the founding motivation was controversial. But finally, with this project, Kahn was an acknowledged leader among its organizers.

The New Theatre’s mission was both lofty and paradoxical: a privately supported “national” theater for the production of dramatic plays, both classic and contemporary. Engrossed in the project, Kahn allied himself with the few founders who truly knew the theater, Hyde and Eliot Gregory in particular. Even as they enjoyed a comfortable social standing, Hyde, in his self-imposed European exile, and Gregory, a cultural sophisticate but hardly super-rich, were outsiders among the mainstream of New York society, among other reasons, because they were aesthetes.  

So, too, was Kahn, who was socially marginalized as a Jew. When the New Theatre venture opened up to boxholders, the *Times* reported that for $25,000 a box, members of the Metropolitan Opera set like John Jacob Astor IV, August Belmont Jr., E. H. Harriman, J. P. Morgan, and William K. and Cornelius Vanderbilt III had bought into the project.
What made the New Theatre endeavor noteworthy was that the surviving record explicitly details the manner in which Jews were regarded, handled, and excluded. Here Kahn walked a fine line. Reporting to Hyde in Paris about how the new board was being assembled, Eliot Gregory explained that Clarence Mackay, the (Catholic) president of Commercial Cable Company, proposed an incorporation plan that was “all rot,” primarily because of its liberal attitude towards Jews.65 “We all want just what he does,” Gregory noted about the project in general, “but think our way the only practical one as his way would let all the Jews in town into the thing and they would swamp it in no time and work us all out.”66

Kahn, however, was on the inside of this equation. He may have been an important member of the Conried Metropolitan Opera board, but he still did not sit in his own box, evidently because he was Jewish. But in the New Theatre, Kahn was “the soul of the thing,” according to Gregory, and calling the shots, determining how many Jews could be included.67

Gregory described the “Jew Question” in detail in one of his many letters to Hyde regarding the early planning of the theater:

The Jew question came up point blank the other day at our meeting before Kahn. Cravath said “We might as well face this Jew Question now as later.” Kahn said “Gentlemen I have not the same prejudice [sic] that you have against Jews as I am one, but I agree with you that for the success of this enterprise It will be better to have only one or two boxes sold to jews [sic].”! That ended the matter. Schief [sic] and Speyer and Kahn will be the three Jews and we will stop there. Firm.68

It was one thing for a devil-may-care insider like Hyde to mix with Jews. It was quite another for Kahn to do the same; ultimately, he went so far as to exclude his own former boss, James Speyer, whom he hated, and whom Gregory referred to as “that beast.”69

Located at Central Park West and Sixty-second Street, and built at a cost of $3 million, the New Theatre was touted as the most expensive theater ever erected in New York City.70 Its design by Carrère and Hastings, the architects of the New York Public Library, clearly projected
the monumental, civic aspirations of the venture, with a grand colonnade and five entrances facing Central Park, a large vestibule with two staircases, a smaller theater in addition to its main stage, a roof garden, and a restaurant. Its name (which Gregory noted “even the difficult Mrs. Wharton” liked) expressed its intended purpose as a “new departure in that line.”

Although its mission was “for the sake of art only,” the non-profit theater’s larger altruistic cultural spirit, as well as the relative novelty of its mixed leadership, were both engulfed by its inappropriately large size and the very notion of a prominent horseshoe of boxes, which seemed to some to be a regrettable reprise of the social controversies played out at the Metropolitan Opera House and the Academy of Music before it. In this sense, there was nothing new about the New Theatre. Its artistic mission was hardly innovative. And the auditorium was not a space created for the intimate style of modern drama and acting. Moreover, the conflicting agendas of serious high culture and conspicuous social display here did not coalesce at all. The project suffered from a cultural lag that was out of sync with modern times, a new theater operating both socially and architecturally under an old prototype.

Walter Prichard Eaton, writing in the Atlantic Monthly, had few kind words for the project. “In its scheme of highly privileged support, its utterly undemocratic horse-shoe of founders’ boxes, around which the auditorium has in reality been built, it is a direct product, almost a copy, of conditions pertaining to that fashionable and exotic pastime of the very well-to-do,—grand opera.” The Times concluded, “the construction of the temple itself, with plenty of private boxes for the elect and exclusive, is clearly the dominating idea of the promoters.” This clearly was not what Kahn and his cultured cohort had in mind.

They might have been well advised to heed the lessons of the “opera wars.” Exclusivism of any variety rarely worked over the long term in New York. Particularly since by nature a
national theater was expected to be democratic, the New Theatre appeared to have lost its way in the planning stage. Plus, the site was too far from the theater district to draw any but the most avid theatergoers. In an editorial, the Times derided the New Theatre leaders as a group of dilettante gentlemen with “few of the required qualifications” to lead the undertaking, “except wealth, abundant leisure, observation of theatrical proceedings in Europe, and such knowledge of art as may be acquired by contemplation of it.”

Critics were oblivious to its board’s relatively radical ethnic social distinctions. “The founders of the New Theatre are chiefly men financially interested in the Metropolitan Opera House and pillars of its social prestige,” Eaton stated. Worse still, after the novelty wore off and the boxes went empty at performances, the founders were perceived as having had little interest in theater in the first place.

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Was this what Conried had in mind when he proposed the undertaking? By 1906, the director, prone to emotional outbursts and obnoxious behavior, was falling out of favor with his board and former supporters. On one hand, the New Theatre founders were funding and leading the enterprise; on the other, Conried was at least initially the creative force behind it, and placed himself “center stage” when speaking to the press. According to Gregory, Conried had been “getting himself into constant hot water” and had a personality that grated on most people’s nerves. Oblivious in private to the theater’s populist cultural mission, Gregory wrote that it was important to the New Theatre founders that the press understood that they were “founding a theatre for ourselves, and not for him [Conried],” although apparently Conried’s initial plan had included Morgenthau and some of the people from his original opera “wine list” as supporters. It always fell to the diplomatic Kahn to keep Conried in check, something he did masterfully. “Kahn has done wonders with Conried,” Gregory reported to Hyde, and had “brought him to
heel in the most wonderful way.” Gregory was under the impression that Kahn was helping Conried financially, which softened the blow of his admonishments. Kahn, Gregory, and Hyde (behind-the-scenes in Europe) were already discussing getting a director from Paris who could take his place the moment Conried “got too fresh.” Kahn informed Conried that “he had better not be one of the Directors.—to which C. reluctantly agreed,” Gregory outlined. The “sad and humbled” “Herr Directeur” was being marginalized by his boards in the gentlest manner by Kahn: “Kahn has managed Conried beautifully having stolen his idea, taken his land, chucked out his friends, wiped him off the list of Founders, and at the same time kept his [sic] in a good humor,” Gregory surmised.

In the end, Conried was too controversial and clearly too busy for the New Theatre. While still holding down the Metropolitan Opera directorship as well as the management of the Irving Place Theatre, here was yet another theatrical venue, this one with lofty artistic aspirations, free of commercialism. But he also knew from his opera experience that money and commercialism both were the proper ingredients for success. While the Sun questioned the appropriateness of Conried for the New Theatre position and furthered the rumor that he would retire from it after its proposed opening in fall 1908, the Times supported him as the “best man in sight” to direct its affairs.

In 1906, the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company renewed Conried’s contract for only three years and not the five he had requested, and issued a reprimand for performances that they felt had fallen “far below” the standard. Eliot Gregory deemed this “unfair and untrue,” and condemned the musical tastes of the Real Estate Company’s leaders. Twombly, Mills, Haven, and the unnamed other who passed judgment on Conried were “about as musical as four blue apes.” Conried, according to Gregory, went “wild.”

“The Met Real Estate gentlemen seem
to hate him,” Gregory noted. The opera company board didn’t appear to like him much either, and, according to Gregory, omitted his name on the new opera lease, calling the organization the “Metropolitan Opera Company.” It again fell to Otto Kahn to play the diplomat, and meet with Haven, after which the Real Estate Company withdrew its complaints about Conried. In fact, his management had been excellent and his notices glowing, so much so that Gregory was glad that the incident occurred to deflate Conried, who “was getting a head the size of a balloon.”

“Salome” and the Spirit of the Parvenu

After his usual summer break in Europe, Heinrich Conried returned to New York in fall 1906, refreshed and brimming with enthusiasm for the upcoming season, promising the most successful and elaborate performances of grand opera ever presented in the city. He had engaged internationally renowned singers and conductors, and was “very sanguine of artistic success.” But his real coup was in obtaining the American rights for Richard Strauss’s new opera, Salome, which was causing a sensation in Europe, and which he scheduled to be performed that winter in New York.

The opera was based on Oscar Wilde’s controversial play taken from the Biblical tale of Salome, who, after performing a sensuous dance at her stepfather King Herod’s request, asks for and receives the head of John the Baptist as compensation. Forbidden from performance by the censor in Vienna and condemned by the German emperor, the opera premiered in Dresden in December 1905 before an audience of musicians, actors, managers, and critics “from every civilized country.” It received a twenty-minute ovation, and was deemed a monumental artistic and musical achievement, on a level with Richard Wagner’s greatest works. Conried had seen Salome in Dresden accompanied by the Met diva Marcella Sembrich, who wrote that her
colleague was overwhelmed by the experience, and “considered it a duty to present it in New York.”94 Sembrich herself was less effusive about the modernist score, “a chaos of 103 instruments playing in different keys at the same time, while the singers sing—beg pardon—screech—in other keys.”95 She found the work interesting, although far from beautiful. But Conried was willing to stake his reputation on the sophistication of New York audiences, to whom he owed it, as director of its world-class opera company, to introduce the most important and distinguished existing operatic fare.

Anticipation of the New York premiere generated the same sort of fanfare Parsifal had aroused during Conried’s inaugural season. Expecting frenzied interest in the work, a New York publisher issued an analytical guide to Salome months before the event.96 New York Times music critic Richard Aldrich foresaw a bold new operatic form that by all accounts would transcend the bounds of musical art, “something that twenty years ago, ten years ago even, would not have been accepted as music at all.”97

In fact, musical aficionados agreed that the first official American performance on January 22, 1906, was perhaps one of the most remarkable operatic achievements ever accomplished in the United States.98 The singers and orchestra had mastered the “stupendously difficult” music, and Strauss’s cerebral, complex score was “dazzling, thrilling, overpowering, often beautiful, but at all events, wonderfully expressive of what he aimed to express.”99 It was an unprecedented musical experience. “The listener is captured, whirled along, dominated by it. The composer imposes himself by sheer intellectual power and the endless resources of his technical devices and compels submission.”100

Acknowledging the opera’s potential for controversy among boxholders, the Conried company scheduled the production for non-subscription nights, and New York operagoers
flocked to buy tickets. Even with higher prices for the performances, the premiere was sold out. Additional policemen were required to handle the crowds. Quite apart from the music, the opera’s sensational features—which in addition to the dance also included a long aria in which Salome caresses and kisses the severed head—“brought a throng of men and women such as no previous opera has drawn to the Metropolitan.” The audience even bought the libretto to follow along. At the performance’s conclusion, as the audience filed out silently into the night, “many faces were white almost as those at the rail of a ship, many women were silent, and men spoke as if a bad dream were on them.” This was no ordinary opera.

Four days later, Conried and his board received this message:

Dear Sir: The Directors of the Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company consider that the performance of “Salome” is objectionable and detrimental to the best interests of the Metropolitan Opera House. They therefore protest against any repetition of this opera.
By order. FRANK N. DODD, Secretary.

The censure came as a surprise. Quite apart from the fact that a number of the opera’s reviews had been tempered with moral outrage, for the first time since its inception, the Met’s Real Estate group was taking issue with the performing entity over something programmatic. Kahn and the Conried directorate had given the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company ample time for both input and protest during the planning stages of the production the previous year. One director also had sent copies of Wilde’s play to all of the members of the Real Estate board, so that they would be conversant with the libretto before hearing the performance. Why protest now? The action “by the real backers of opera in this city was hardly expected,” according to the Times.

Apparently, one of J. P. Morgan’s daughters was present at the premiere, and, disturbed by what she saw, urged her father to take action against the opera’s performance. Reluctantly,
the Real Estate Company directors went along with Morgan and demanded that any future performances of the opera be canceled.

There was an uproar as critics pointed out that it was inappropriate to judge music or art by moral or religious standards. How would the standoff between the two Metropolitan Opera boards be resolved? Salome was the talk of New York, the theme of conversation in the restaurants, and along Fifth Avenue and Broadway, and even in church, where two or three opposing directors met by accident. One operagoer suggested that the opera’s libretto was no more controversial than various others. But because of the publicity, many boxholders who had never before perused a libretto had read this one. More librettos had been sold for one performance of Salome than for four performances of any other premiere. “If the boxholders knew what they were seeing on the stage at some presentations of opera they would probably be just as squeamish,” the operagoer suggested.

Olive Fremstad, the star of Salome, regarded Strauss as “the creator of a new form of art, which was to lead to greater things, and that it would be a step backward to discontinue the performance of the opera.” Anton Van Rooy, the production’s John the Baptist, chuckled at the provincial reaction of some of New York’s leaders. “Europe will never get over laughing at America if this work of art is taken off the stage.” The musical director agreed. “If the opera is not produced again it will not hurt the opera, but it will be a set-back to musical art in America,” he said to the Times. To the Tribune he admonished, “Certainly the musical taste of the New York public is sufficiently advanced for the house to put aside its prejudices and give a thorough hearing to a work of art which has been received with enthusiasm in all the continental capitals.” In a letter to the editor of the Times, one operagoer from Brooklyn opined that the
arrogant “spirit of the parvenu” embedded in American cultural naïveté was what was really behind the censorship:

The “Salome” incident would be ridiculous if it were not so sad. While living in Germany I fancied, that narrowmindedness [sic] had reached its limit in the Royal Prussian Censor, but I am astonished to find that the “old country” is far more up to date than this new world of liberty.

The intervention of the Metropolitan Real Estate Company Directors is the business part of the affair, and consequently paramount to the average American. But more important and very significant seems to me to be the lack of feeling for art manifested in the attitude of the Metropolitan Directors.

I would like to hear an informed and informing authority—The New York Times, for example—discuss the real reasons for the non-production of “Salome”—whether it is the spirit of the parvenu, the lack of understanding to distinguish between works of art and works of sensationalism, whether it is simply the craving to attract attention by all means, or whether there are really men who honestly think they have a right to protect the morals of their fellow-citizens.115

Richard Strauss was “amazed” by New York’s reaction.116 As he noted: “In art there is never the moral nor the immoral; such conceptions are incompatible with the conception of art; are foreign to it. In art there is only good and bad. Is an artist’s work good art? Is it bad art? These are legitimate questions and these the artist must face and answer.”117

Recognizing the cultural debate and seizing an opportunity to upstage New York as a cultural center, leaders in Boston and Chicago ridiculed the censorship in Manhattan. The manager of the Boston Theatre said, “I have never received so many requests for an opera so far in advance as I have to-day for ‘Salome’.”118 Mayor Fitzgerald was more circumspect. “If the opera is considered unfit by the managers of the Metropolitan Opera House to be performed in that playhouse, it will hardly come up to the standard for Boston.”119 However, Milward Adams, the manager of Chicago’s Auditorium Theatre, saw no reason “for striking out” objectionable material.120 In a slap to New York’s alleged refinement, the Met’s musical director himself suggested, “Several performances could be given in Chicago, at least two in Boston and
Philadelphia, and one in Kansas City, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Cleveland."  

Immediately upon receiving the Real Estate group’s letter, the executive committee of the Conried company, consisting of Kahn, H. R. Winthrop, and Conried, met for almost two hours on January 26. Conried’s representatives then issued a formal statement to the press reminding the Real Estate Company, as well as the New York public, of the opera’s distinction as perhaps the most important work since Wagner. *Salome* had been produced in the Royal Opera Houses of Dresden and Berlin, as well as in Milan and in Turin, Italy, and was currently in preparation for productions at the Imperial Opera House in Vienna and the Grand Opera House in Paris. Thus New York, with aspirations to be America’s cultural capital, was the logical place for the opera’s first American venue.

Meanwhile, Kahn defended the production to the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company in a letter offset printed for widespread distribution. Written in Kahn’s elegant and instructive style but signed “Conried Metropolitan Opera Co.,” it laid out a defense of the opera and an argument for its continuation. It began: “Strauss’s *Salome* is recognized by the consensus of the most competent critics of modern music as a monumental work, probably the greatest which musical genius has produced in this generation,” and restated that it had been performed in twenty European cities, including many of the foremost Court Theatres, where a strict standard of censorship prevailed.

In essence, the letter deigned to explain to the Real Estate directorate the meaning of the art form that they had supported for decades. “It is commonplace to state that the libretto of all operas is a subordinate feature, and that what people go to hear is not the text, but the music.” The letter noted that “the only religious personage in the work, John the Baptist,” was a “sublime
and beautiful character” whose death at the behest of Salome is duly punished with her own swift execution. Far from defending Oscar Wilde’s play, however, the Conried group implored with emphasis, “the opera should be judged as a musical, not as a dramatic work.”

Speaking as one group of cultural leaders to another, the Conried board reiterated that the enthusiastic reception to the work in Europe, “where its performance everywhere was considered a musical event of the first magnitude,” prompted them to bring it to New York. The Real Estate board had made no objection during the many months of rehearsals. “It was not until three days after the first performance, and two days after the public announcement of the additional performances, and when a large sale of tickets had already taken place, that your protest reached us,” the letter politely complained.

Diplomatically, they broached the subject of the considerable financial loss that the suspension would cause, as well as the possible litigation which its withdrawal would involve. Of course, the letter commended the Real Estate board for erecting the opera house in the first place and “by establishing for it an unparalleled prestige and position, by insisting from the beginning upon the highest standard of operatic performances and by making financial sacrifices year after year to maintain the opera during the long period when grand opera in New York meant loss and disappointment.” Ever so subtly, the comment asserted that grand opera was alive and well under Conried’s company leadership, and urged the Real Estate board to allow the three additional performances for which tickets had been issued to proceed.

On January 30th at the office of the Real Estate Company board president, George G. Haven, the two boards met. The interrelationships of both assembled boards were intriguing. Haven, a banker, was by his own admission “not of a musical bent” but was a prominent boxholder who had saved the opera house from financial embarrassment in its first decade of
existence. Also on the Real Estate board, Augustus D. Juilliard, a textile manufacturer, investor, and philanthropist, clearly was of a “musical bent,” and upon his death in 1919 willed most of his estate to the cause of the advancement of music in New York and the United States. William K. Vanderbilt, no longer considered an arriviste interloper, had been a major force in building the opera house and was still enormously wealthy. August Belmont was the son of the Academy’s August Belmont, with serious opera house management pedigree. And then there was J. P. Morgan. A dominant force in corporate finance and industrial consolidation, he was a prominent collector, patron, philanthropist, and president of the Metropolitan Museum’s board.

Representing the Conried side, Henry Rogers Winthrop, the board president, was a 31-year-old banker, stockbroker, director of the Equitable Life Assurance Society, and clearly part of the Hyde cohort. Rawlins L. Cottenet, a 41-year-old relative by marriage to Mrs. Astor and member of “the 400,” had lost the family fortune and become the proprietor only of a society flower shop. But he nevertheless remained a part of New York society’s inner circle, and had been a guest at the 1900 wedding of Morgan’s eldest daughter Louisa (the same daughter who had objected to Salome). James Speyer and Otto Kahn had a complicated history, as Kahn had worked for Speyer’s family’s banking business early in his career. Recently the two had been embroiled over the founders’ list for the New Theatre. Kahn had negotiated behind the scenes to keep Speyer out of the New Theatre leadership cadre, and while Speyer was aware of Kahn’s influence in that matter, he also was under the impression that it was J. P. Morgan who had blackballed him. Kahn and Speyer often were singled out as the only Jews involved in such high cultural endeavors, and yet they were far from personally allied. Interestingly, the only Metropolitan Opera box owner of the Conried group was Goelet, whose grandfather, father, and
uncle had been of the original founders of the opera house. Yet it was Kahn and Goelet who were the designated speakers at this important meeting, with Kahn taking the lead.

Consequently, it was a fairly congenial assemblage, with deep connections and allegiances between and among the two boards. But Kahn, clearly aware of the possibility of his being accused, as a Jew, of religious insensitivity, reiterated that Kaiser Wilhelm, although head of the Protestant Church in Germany, had withdrawn his objection to Salome, and that the opera was now under production there. Kahn implored the directors to “see their way clear to permitting the production of at least the three announced performances” as advertised. After Goelet “added a few words to the same effect,” the Conried company representatives were dismissed.

Following a “very full discussion,” the Real Estate board took the narrow road and resolved unanimously to cancel Salome. There would be no more performances of the opera, although the board was willing to consider its part in compensating for the financial loss.

When the two groups conferred again a week later, Kahn and Goelet were joined by Edmund L. Baylies, a Conried board member and a socially prominent Vanderbilt lawyer. Kahn noted that the cost of preparing and producing Salome came to “at least $30,000,” and given the heavy advance sale of tickets for the three announced performances, the gross income would have produced no less than $50,000. In short, it was a “noteworthy loss,” particularly following the destruction of all of the company’s scenery in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, while on tour. While defending Salome, the Conried board nevertheless withdrew it from performance “not because our views in this respect had undergone any change,” but in deference to the Real Estate board’s wishes.
But then, without warning or any apparent pressure, the Conried faction capitulated further, concluding “it would not be consistent with the spirit of our contention, or the dignity of our position, to let you assume any part of our loss.” One week later, on February 15, the Real Estate board met once again, this time at J. P. Morgan’s library on Thirty-sixth Street. The meeting proceeded somewhat casually by ratifying actions taken at previous meetings, namely the addition of a toilet at the Directors’ Room on the parterre floor of the theater. Afterwards, they drafted a short letter of response to Conried’s board, accepting its offer to reject liability for any proportion of the expenses incurred for *Salome*. And then the subject was closed.

Clearly, the Conried board had taken the moral high ground. Kahn’s faction had the money to assume the financial loss, thus protecting their continued contract from risk. In any event, *Salome’s* supporters had the last laugh. Three months later, *Salome* had its premiere in Paris. Unlike the New York dress rehearsal, which stirred controversy partly because it was held early on a Sunday, the dress rehearsal in Paris was an event of great magnitude. When the performance concluded, the president of France, accompanied by all the Cabinet ministers, conferred upon the opera’s composer the Legion of Honor. Kahn and his wife were there, as were European royalty, members of the Rothschild family, William K. Vanderbilt, James Hazen Hyde, James Stillman, Mme. Alexandre Dumas, Edith Wharton and her husband, “and scores of others prominent in literature, finance, art, politics, fashion, sport or bohemianism.” The composer himself conducted, and “the verdict of Paris is that the work is the masterpiece of Richard Strauss, and is an absolute triumph.” Gabriel Fauré, the director of the French Conservatory of Music, called *Salome* “the only musical drama that Germany has produced since ‘Parsifal,’” and declared Strauss “the greatest living musician of Germany.” Paris had made
New York’s social and cultural leaders look like country cousins, not metropolitan sophisticates in a world city.

**Transformation**

Conried was already showing signs of stress when the *Salome* storm hit.\(^{137}\) In November 1906, his star, Enrico Caruso, was arrested and convicted of pinching the buttocks of a woman in the monkey house of the Central Park Zoo. Conried bailed out the weeping tenor and stood by him through the press maelstrom, but Caruso suffered an apparent nervous breakdown, or possibly an attack of sciatica, that confined him to his bed.

In January 1908 Conried finally was forced out. Conried’s threat to rally his supporters had come to naught as Kahn implied that resignation was preferable to termination.\(^{138}\) Claiming ill health publicly, Conried privately settled his claims against the opera company for $75,000, payable in four installments until January 1912.\(^{139}\) With characteristic politesse, the Real Estate board commended Conried on his standards for grand opera and complimented his five “brilliant” seasons.\(^{140}\) The impresario may have elevated the standard of the opera house to the levels to which it had always aspired, but the ultimate significance of the effort was lost on the narrow-minded bigots of the Real Estate board.

In October 1908, Kahn, now chairman of the Metropolitan Opera Company, recognized the twenty-fifth anniversary of the theater with a letter to the Real Estate board. Reprising some of the complimentary language from his *Salome* letter, Kahn commended the board for its financial and moral support “in the face of many difficulties during the period when Grand Opera in New York meant loss and disappointment.” Obviously, Kahn was aligning his own faction with the larger project of helping the Met to become one of the finest opera venues of the
world: “It was the personal weight and standing in the community of the founders of the House, as well as their wisdom in insisting from the beginning upon the highest standard of operatic performance which has been most largely instrumental in establishing for the Metropolitan Opera Company its unique prestige and distinction amongst the Opera Houses of the world.”

Now officially independent of Conried in name and in fact, the Metropolitan Opera Company engaged a general manager, Giulio Gatti-Casazza, the first to function not as an independent impresario, but as an employee under contract to the Opera Company board itself. He was of towering artistic merit, and his first action was to hire Arturo Toscanini as his chief conductor, who shared the post with Gustav Mahler, who previously had been engaged by Conried. Gatti-Casazza would preside over the Metropolitan Opera until 1935, as it grew to become one of an undisputed handful of leading opera companies in the world.

Both behind the scenes and center stage, Kahn was the central figure in this transformation. By 1916, he was a majority shareholder in the Metropolitan Opera Company with 706 shares. William K. Vanderbilt was the next most powerful shareholder with 340, followed by Clarence Mackay with 300. Whitney now had 100 shares; Winthrop, 48; Robert Goelet, 4; and Griswold, 2. With grace and tact, Kahn had led a revolution. At least in the surviving record, the power shift occurred with little fanfare.

Leadership, however, came at a price. In his over two decades of chairing the board, Kahn would be seldom absent from the monthly meetings that often met without a quorum. Nevertheless, Kahn reveled in the task of monitoring and reinventing the Metropolitan Opera Company along standards of excellence, guaranteed by Kahn-funded loans. In the first announcement in the Times of the new management and directorship of the company, Kahn was
the spokesman who outlined ambitious plans to continue “all the best features of previous administrations” while instituting important reforms on both sides of the proscenium.

Most unusual, however, was a move into the Real Estate Company’s territory with a consideration of improvements to the house, including an additional exit, enhanced ventilation, and an elevator to the family circle, all to add to the comfort of “the upper galleries.” In uncommon recognition of the opera-going “other half,” the management acknowledged that “the success of its aim to make the Metropolitan Opera a broad National music institution is in no small part dependent upon the support and co-operation of that portion of our music-loving population which cannot afford to purchase expensive seats, and every effort will be made to secure their good will, not only by the excellence of the performances, but also by giving evidence of the management’s earnest desire to extend to them every courtesy and consideration.”

The Metropolitan Opera was becoming less of a social barometer and more of a cultural one.

The change in leadership was initiating a new way of thinking, framed along more populist principles. The opera company announced that all surplus profits from the opera season would be devoted to the establishment of an endowment and pension fund to further advance the Metropolitan Opera as an art institution. No longer merely a rich man’s pastime funded at the whim of a few New York families, opera was achieving a significance of a much broader context.

It still took money, though. According to the Metropolitan Opera’s official history, between 1898 and 1929, every season but one was profitable except for 1906-07, when the Met was faced with competition from Oscar Hammerstein’s Manhattan Opera Company. The minutes from the 1910s show a less robust situation, however, beginning with a motion in
February 1909 that the company might borrow from Otto Kahn and William Vanderbilt “such sums of money as they, or either of them, shall be willing to advance.” In May, the board authorized the chairman or treasurer to borrow for the corporation significant amounts (totaling $140,000) from three different banks, even while the Real Estate Company had agreed to spend only up to $20,000 of its own funds for a suitable rehearsal room and stage on the roof of the auditorium.

Operation in the black, in fact, depended upon Kahn’s largesse. The Metropolitan Opera Company was, in Gregory’s words, “cheerfully losing $10,000 a week” with Kahn unofficially covering losses that amounted to $200,000 in 1908-09 and $250,000 in 1909-10. By January 1910, the Opera Company had a plan to fundraise “for the proper carrying on of business,” and began with the stockholders of the Real Estate Company, to whom they intended to broach the question of a larger subsidy for Metropolitan Opera productions.

Contrary to the Real Estate Company’s belief, building the theater was only a small portion of the enterprise, and the Opera Company was seeking ways to assure the company’s survival as well as supremacy. Meanwhile, the Real Estate Company pragmatically minded its own investment in the theater. Writing to Kahn in 1914, its president, George G. Haven, privately assessed the relative value of some proposed changes to the theater. He stressed that improvements financed by the Real Estate Company would add nothing to the value of the Real Estate Company’s property, as the house, “except for the purpose for which it is used, is and will be of no value.” Where did responsibility lay for renovations, if they benefited only the opera company that performed there and not the entity that had built the theater?

Sustaining the Metropolitan Opera’s dominance was costly indeed. Oscar Hammerstein’s opera company had given the Met formidable competition from 1906-10 with innovative
repertory (including a production of *Salome*), quality stars (including the Met diva Nellie Melba), and an independently wealthy impresario (Hammerstein). To carry on its primacy, the Met formed two companies that performed 361 times in just over seven months in 1909-10. Squelching Hammerstein’s effort successfully required quality performances and sound financial management, not to mention serious legal expertise. Even then, Hammerstein did not go away quietly. In the end, in April 1910, Hammerstein signed a deal with Kahn and his board for $1.2 million to cease producing opera in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago for a decade.

Clearly financial issues were prompting new ways of thinking. While attending to the expense of competing with Hammerstein, the Opera Company had absorbed the *Salome* loss and was implementing expensive changes associated with the new post-Conried management philosophy. In 1910-11, for example, they restricted the numbers of free tickets given to various critics; replaced the grand tier boxes with seats; withdrew from some agencies that offered the public subscription tickets; and raised the price of orchestra seats by 20 percent. As early as 1901-03, the Met’s music librarian, Lionel Mapleson, was making live recordings of performances on his Edison cylinder machine. In January 1910, experimental broadcasts transmitted portions of *Tosca* and *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* from the roof of the opera house, reaching a few hundred listeners from as far away as Newark, New Jersey. It would be decades later before recording contracts and matinee broadcasts would prove lucrative for the Met, but this was an innovative start.

In August 1911, returning to New York after a European absence, Otto Kahn told the *New York Times* that the Metropolitan Opera now had no equal anywhere. “In Europe, the feeling has gradually grown that we possess the best opera company in the world here in New
York, and that some of the best performances are given here.” Every night was a “festival” performance. “I say this with all due modesty and with the full belief that it is the public as well as the management which has brought about this condition of affairs,” Kahn concluded.162

Kahn’s assessment was no mere boastfulness. The years from 1908 until April 1917 were important for the American opera company as well as the opera house, which hosted the legendary Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova in 1910. That same year, the Opera Company premiered Frederick Converse’s one-act The Pipe of Desire, the first American opera and first opera in English at the Met; Giacomo Puccini selected the Met for the world premiere of his new opera, La Fanciulla del West; and Engelbert Humperdinck, composer of Hänsel und Gretel, staged the world premiere of his work Königskinder.163 The year 1913 witnessed even more important premieres, with the first American performances of Modest Mussorgsky’s Boris Godunov and Richard Strauss’s Der Rosenkavalier.164

Paying Off Debts

On December 27, 1917, Kahn was the only director present at a special Metropolitan Opera Company meeting at his office at 52 William Street, to allow the issue and sale of additional shares in the Opera Company, in order to increase its authorized capital stock and permit payments of proceeds to relieve its indebtedness.165 Without a quorum, the meeting reconvened the following day with only the Metropolitan Opera employees Edward Ziegler and Earle R. Lewis present, and the remaining directors represented by proxy. Holding three and two shares respectively in the company (donated by Kahn), Ziegler and Lewis were empowered to take action to increase the Corporation’s capital from $150,000, or 1500 shares at $100 per share, to $515,000, or 5150 shares at $100 per share.166 Three days later, Kahn, in the chair, explained the
action to the other directors present.167 Essentially, he was calling for a few directors to step up to the plate and settle debts through a new subscription of 3636 additional shares. Of these shares, Kahn purchased 1826; William K. Vanderbilt, 1285; Clarence H. Mackay, 275; and Harry Payne Whitney, 150.168 Combined with the old shares, however, this left Kahn with a total of 2527 shares in the Metropolitan Opera Company and Vanderbilt the next most influential stockholder, with 1625.

Why did Kahn choose to own half the shares in the company? Perhaps it was not just out of his unceasing devotion to the Metropolitan Opera, but because of the Great War. With battles raging on the Western front, anti-German sentiment was widespread in the United States, and the Metropolitan Opera dropped all of its performances in German and canceled German singers’ contracts at the close of the season.169 Kahn may have been a cosmopolitan New York City aesthete and a British subject, but he was still German by blood. And he also was Jewish.

In the nineteenth century, sophisticated German Jews had been more easily assimilated into the social whirl of New York City. But the rising tide of immigration after 1890 swept new Russian Jewish stock into the mix in large numbers and with such force that social distinctions between German and Russian Jews blurred. A clear stereotype emerged by the 1890s. In American popular culture, the Jew was caricatured as a bearded, hook-nosed peddler or pawnbroker named “Cohen” or “Jake” or “Abie,” pushing a cart, wearing a black derby hat, and dressed in either old, worn clothes or something new and flashy.170 Pushcart peddler or Wall Street financier, the Jew’s métier was always money, from which he derived his strength and influence. Yet there was a tension between the impressive way in which Jewish citizens seized upon the bootstrapish, enterprising American energy of the Gilded Age and the negative stereotypes leveled at them for doing so. “Since this distrust clashed with the prevailing temper
of American culture, anti-Semitic attitudes were often covert and usually blurred by a lingering respect,” explains John Higham, historian of late nineteenth-century American anti-Semitism. “Many Americans were both pro- and anti-Jewish at the same time.”

By the 1890s, three different groups had emerged as particularly anti-Semitic: certain agrarian radicals of the Populist movement; members of the poor Gentile urban underclass; and patrician Protestants such as Henry and Brooks Adams, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Henry James. For this last group, the economic collapse and depression of the 1890s were causing a social catastrophe, and the Jew was “both the symbol of a materialistic society and an agent of its destruction.” In “a society of Jews and brokers,” Henry Adams wrote in 1893, “I have no place.” Or, in Robert Goelet’s words, “the old order changeth.” Goelet’s grandfather, his uncle, and father had been founders of the Metropolitan Opera House. But by late 1917, of the over five thousand total shares of Metropolitan Opera Company stock, Robert Goelet owned only four.

Meanwhile, the long-standing practice that no Jew could own a box at the Metropolitan Opera continued. J. P. Morgan was a “principal champion” of this unwritten law. Thus, Kahn had to witness performances from a rented parterre box or from the lowly vantage point of the orchestra stalls, where he often purchased several seats for each season, reserving one for his hat and coat. For Kahn, the invincible financier, urbane sophisticate, mastermind of railroad mergers and the New Theatre alike, and enthusiastic philanthropist, no social slight could diminish the intensity of his passion for opera.

On May 9, 1917, George Henry Warren chaired the first meeting in five months of the directors of the Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company. Thirteen men were elected as directors for the ensuing year, including A. D. Juilliard as President.
Juilliard took over the chair and the meeting continued as the secretary read a letter from Warren requesting the transfer of half of his interest in Box 14, or 150 shares, to one William Hall Walker, the 71-year-old retired Eastman Kodak executive.  

Historically, the transfer of shares or the sale of a box was a pro forma action in which the boxholder or boxholder’s estate would request in writing a transfer of interest either to a family member or to an appropriate acquaintance, and over the decades the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company approved such requests uneventfully. Why was this circumstance different? Warren was a member of the executive committee, and his family had owned a box at the Met from the theater’s very inception. Warren now was hoping to give up half of his interest in the box to Walker, who had a home in New York City but mostly lived lavishly on his estate in Great Barrington in the Berkshires. There were several members of the “Golden Horseshoe” who were at least as prosperous and socially acceptable.

Yet Juilliard proposed that Warren’s request vis à vis Walker be laid on the table, “because of the lack of acquaintance of the Directors present with the candidate for transfer.” Warren pushed the board to take action on his request in order for him either to close with Walker or to seek another purchaser. The transfer request was denied.

The following month, the Real Estate Board met again, and President Juilliard asked the Board’s permission to dispose with reading of the minutes of the previous meeting, “which were somewhat lengthy.” The meeting progressed with a noteworthy resolution. George Warren now proposed Otto Kahn for the box transfer. Warren, reduced to 150 shares, moved to Box 13, leaving all 300 shares in Box 14 for Kahn to purchase. A historic barrier to Jews holding boxes at the opera—with roots dating back to the days of the Academy of Music—came down
with nary an official mention. In fact, Kahn’s name had come out of nowhere, for there was no indication in the minutes of his desire or intention to join the boxholding set.

Without a record of the discussion or even a more than passing acknowledgment of the event in Kahn’s voluminous archives, one can only speculate about what happened. To the Kahn biographer Theresa Collins, the “standard notion” that Kahn decided to “crack” the anti-Semitic wall is fraught with contradictions, given his long-standing ambivalence as a Jew.\textsuperscript{183} Was the purchase the Real Estate Company’s choice or Kahn’s? It seems uncharacteristic for Kahn to have pushed for it purposefully, yet his growing generosity to sustain the opera was well known. Perhaps the box served as a token of appreciation for Kahn’s role in making the Metropolitan Opera one of the best in the world. Or perhaps the Real Estate Company recognized an embarrassing situation. After all, Jewish or not, Kahn had been on the Metropolitan Opera Company board for almost fifteen years, and other members of the Real Estate board had had dealings with him professionally on banking, finance, and railroad boards, as well as in other cultural ventures.\textsuperscript{184}

Possibly Juilliard, acting alone or with a small group, simply seized the opportunity and manipulated the discussion and its outcome. The sale of a parterre box had come up only about ten times in the long history of the Metropolitan Opera, and Juilliard, the president of the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company, may have seen fit to extend the privilege to Kahn, the president of the Metropolitan Opera Company.\textsuperscript{185} It is not that Walker, the Kodak executive, was an inappropriate choice to be a Met boxholder; it was just that Kahn, the monumental arts patron and financier, had been neglected for too long. George F. Baker, who proposed the Kahn resolution, was close to Juilliard and was a towering commercial financier.\textsuperscript{186} Considered the “dean of American bankers,” or “The Sphinx of Wall Street,” the taciturn banker always was
respected for wise judgment.\textsuperscript{187} And although Augustus D. Juilliard’s business was in drygoods and textiles, he had amassed an even greater fortune through his investments in the banking, railroad, and insurance industries. His passion, however, was for music.\textsuperscript{188} Presiding over the Real Estate Company at last was a man who understood that it was the music more than the theater that gave the Metropolitan Opera its greatness. It was time to set aside old prejudices to give credit where it was due to Otto Kahn.

Maybe it was this act of relative generosity that motivated Kahn to take even firmer control of the Opera Company later that year. Evidently it did not make much of a difference, for he funded the opera uncomplainingly and received little public credit for it in his lifetime. In any case, the social authority of the old Golden Horseshoe was fading with the century that had borne it, and slowly it was ceasing to have potent currency in the face of consistent financial clout.
As the new century progressed, the founding library, museum, and opera trustees aged and died as their institutions coped with social, economic, and political change. Inspired and sometimes even galvanized by a new humanistic spirit, a new type of leader steered the programs. As president of the library trustees, Lewis Cass Ledyard was the most conservative of the cohort. Even so, he supported a plan that recognized the cultural diversity of the city and the library’s users, and negotiated the labor demands of the largely female staff. But while he was reticent and almost aristocratic about fundraising, his brand of elitism also was incongruously unpretentious. Similarly, at the museum, the modern-leaning William Sloane Coffin succeeded the progressive Robert de Forest as president, and promoted a populist agenda that conserved money and resources even as the museum broke into innovative new territory. And as Otto Kahn advanced the idea of building a new opera house, the old guard resisted, unimpressed with his arguments either for a state-of-the-art stage or for a more egalitarian box system. After Kahn, the pragmatically detached lawyer Paul Cravath, helped by the passionately democratic Eleanor Belmont, led the insolvent Metropolitan Opera. But even as a new age beckoned, conservative forces still lingered. Much as the opera’s Real Estate Board guarded their archaic turf, the elderly George Blumenthal assumed the presidency of the museum after Coffin’s death with great financial efficiency but, like Ledyard, with firmly entrenched nineteenth-century tastes and attitudes.

As had been the case for over a half century, finances had the power to shape institutional agendas. But by the 1930s, this no longer meant philanthropists with unlimited funds rising to the occasion. Even the prodigiously wealthy Rockefeller family did not give indiscriminately,
but rather focused on directing their money specifically towards more concentrated projects. But as the spirit of the times and the technological revolution of radio offered the masses greater access to abstract ideas and high culture as well as popular entertainment, institutions, in turn, looked to smaller donations in greater numbers to carry on their programs. A public sort of privatism emerged by necessity with the modern era.

Part Three ends with the endurance of the three institutions through a precarious time, sustained with the funds and faithfulness of dedicated trustees, a persevering staff, and an appreciative public.
In the early years of the twentieth century, progressive library pioneers like John Shaw Billings, Melvil Dewey, and John Cotton Dana were committed to a new kind of democratic service. Previously, librarians had kept books safe in the stacks instead of in the hands of readers. The new attitude was that books were a stabilizing force in a changing and more fluid society, with the library functioning as a kind of people’s university. ¹ Billings was a follower of this movement. As a nineteenth-century gentleman of science and letters with a twentieth-century view of librarianship, in just under two decades as the first director of the New York Public Library, he carried out many tasks. ² By the time he died in 1913, the Central Building was complete; the consolidation of the Astor, Lenox, and Tilden holdings with the circulating libraries was thoroughly accomplished; the research collections had more than doubled to over one million volumes and the circulating collections had more than quadrupled; the total number of readers had tripled; there were forty-four branch libraries plus the Central Circulation and Central Children’s rooms; and the library circulated a record high of eight million books. ³

The library had adopted progressive notions not only in terms of institutional efficiency, but also where collecting was concerned. These extended into a modernist diversity of people, money, and ideas that for the most part the trustees embraced as the spirit of the times.

Billings’s death marked the end of a time focused on the unprecedented blending of several corporate entities as well as two sometimes-competing notions: combining a Circulation Department geared towards book lending and community service, with a Reference Department dedicated to reference and research. Not only were circulating libraries thriving, but the Reference Department had become the greatest scholarly resource in metropolitan New York,
with the university libraries at Columbia and Princeton ranking distantly behind. To those who carried on his legacy, Billings had been an extraordinary influence for librarianship with the broadest sense of purpose.

Billings’s successor was his protégé and assistant, Edwin H. Anderson, who continued his mentor’s wide-ranging programs. Harry M. Lydenberg assisted both men, and later himself became Director. As a “probationary cataloger” at the Lenox Library while still attending Harvard, Lydenberg witnessed how Billings had transformed a private, elite book repository into a more pertinent resource that addressed modern trends in History, Science, and Technology. While Billings welcomed rare books and manuscripts, he made no significant investment in such treasures, preferring instead to follow a maxim of “useful research” that set a benchmark for collecting with enormous range. Billings and his successors viewed reference works not as curiosities, but as precious holdings that recognized new forces and ideas while respecting the old.

During his tenure as Director, Lydenberg continued to embrace programmatic diversity and actively acquired unique special collections. The New York Public Library had a Library for the Blind from 1903, which stocked and produced Braille items, taught people how to read them, and circulated the materials postage-free. It had a picture collection starting in 1915 with eighteen thousand images, which quickly expanded to many millions. It enlarged Lenox’s music collection with a division created in 1919 with funds from Augustus D. Juilliard’s will. The library also was an innovator, as one of the first to install a Photostat machine in 1912, and to experiment with microfilm. For five months in 1923-24 Lydenberg visited postwar Europe to acquire materials with Avraham Yarmolinsky, and spent more than half of the time in Eastern Europe and Soviet Russia. Less than a handful of American libraries were interested in works
from that region at the time, leaving the field open for the New York Public Library’s Slavonic Division to become a foremost American resource in the subject area.\textsuperscript{10}

Consequently, by the 1920s, the New York Public Library was among the few American libraries in scale (over one million volumes) and variety. The collections were as diverse as the city itself. By 1935, there still were only thirteen such libraries in the United States, with the New York Public Library second only to the Library of Congress.

But this sort of radical and decidedly modern way of thinking could not have proceeded without an active board of trustees. The irony was that the broadly conceived endeavor stemmed from exclusive nineteenth-century entities that were consolidated into a private, nonprofit corporation, in turn governed by a self-perpetuating board. Nevertheless, the leaders had set out to create a grand public institution of world stature, and in no way fell short of their ambitions. No large personalities, with the exception of Carnegie, pushed a personal agenda that was not reflective of a broader purpose.

Nevertheless, within this gentlemanly context, John L. Cadwalader, George L. Rives, and Lewis Cass Ledyard dominated the board in the early decades, each eventually serving as President. Perhaps only by coincidence demonstrating the balance of commitment and leadership among the institution’s initial board of trustees, each had come from a different arm of the library’s consolidated entity: Cadwalader from Astor, Rives from Lenox, and Ledyard from Tilden.\textsuperscript{11} These men were born into the educated, cultivated class during the first half of the nineteenth century, and Ledyard’s cousin, Edith Wharton, recalled that along with fellow-trustee Stephen Olin, they were part of a cohort of nineteenth-century New Yorkers that possessed “a cultivated taste.” The larger group’s only weakness, Wharton lamented, was that most of them had wasted their abilities by not entering politics.
A few were distinguished lawyers or bankers, with busy professional careers, but too many . . . lived in dilettantish leisure. The best class of New Yorkers had shaken off the strange apathy following on the Civil War, and began to develop a municipal conscience, and . . . were active in administering the new museums, libraries and charities of New York; but the idea that gentlemen could stoop to meddle with politics had hardly begun to make its way, and none of my friends rendered the public services that a more enlightened social system would have exacted of them.”

At the same time, Wharton viewed them as part of a new generation which “had at last stirred the stagnant air of New York, and in their particular circle it was full of the dust of new ideas.” But they firmly ceded local politics to men of a different social class.

Yet many of the trustees in fact did have greater government and civic commitments. Cadwalader, who served as chairman of the library’s executive committee during the central building’s construction, was a lawyer who had served as Assistant Secretary of State under Ulysses S. Grant. Olin was active in the local anti-machine Citizens Union, which endorsed Samuel Greenbaum for the New York State Supreme Court, and who, in turn, served as the only Jewish trustee on the Public Library board from 1902-30. Rives, also Olin’s law partner, was Grover Cleveland’s Assistant Secretary of State; was corporation counsel during the mayoralty of Seth Low (and thus an ideal library board liaison); was president of the commission to revise the Charter of the City of New York in 1900; and often was put forward as a candidate for mayor, which he always declined. Other trustees included the statesman and Nobel laureate Elihu Root, who held the offices of U. S. Senator, Secretary of War, and Secretary of State; he later became the first president of Andrew Carnegie’s Endowment for International Peace.

A majority of the trustees had in common the advantages of wealth and social prominence, and a commitment to cultural, civic, and eleemosynary activities. Indeed, some of the richest and most powerful Americans of the time served on the New York Public Library board: apart from Carnegie and Morgan, there were Edward Harkness, Arthur Curtiss James,
John S. Kennedy, Edward King, Philip Schuyler, Payne Whitney, George F. Baker Jr., Vincent Astor, and several others. While no Rockefellers joined the board, the family was a major donor, and many trustees had ties to their interests.\textsuperscript{15}

Paradoxically, the New York Public Library trustees, who had the energy and imagination to galvanize the public and private support of Greater New York, were unrepresentative of the city’s diverse population. While this did not diminish the institution’s larger design, it did not acknowledge the library’s overarching public mission. Lawyers and bankers on the board corresponded with New York’s role as the financial capital, but no trustees professionally represented the city’s growing cultural influence or its manufacturing interests.\textsuperscript{16}

The organization’s reluctance to welcome city authorities into its leadership cadre had as much to do with social control as with any distaste for corrupt politics. These class issues also affected the board in other ways. In spite of the city’s large Jewish and Catholic populations, for decades there was only Judge Greenbaum and two Irish Americans, one of whom was the Archbishop, to represent them. The old Aguilar, St. Agnes, and Free Circulating libraries had done better in this regard, and also had included women in the ranks of trustee leadership, but the merger with the New York Public Library addressed funds and function, not broader management. It was not until the 1950s that women would join the board, and two decades later, the first African Americans.\textsuperscript{17}

Nevertheless, beginning in 1902, the trustees did include three ex officio members from the public sector: the mayor, the comptroller, and the president of the City Council. But the association always would be uneasy. In 1906, for example, Rives reprimanded City Comptroller Herman Metz for publicly accusing Carnegie for not handing over his money for the libraries more expeditiously. “If the City had been faster in furnishing the sites, Mr. Carnegie would have
paid up his money faster,” Rives admonished. “The subject you have touched upon is one that interests a great many people in all parts of the City, and I hope you will give it very careful consideration,” he warned, adding in a peevish postscript: “You are an *ex-officio* member of the Board of Trustees, and I wish you would attend its meetings—or some of them.”

In 1909, however, the trustees fought a bill requiring all corporations on City land to permit five mayoral appointees on the board. It “would be detrimental to the interests” that the trustees represented. In any case, ex-officio public servants rarely came to trustee meetings and never participated in decision-making.

Even so, Cadwalader, Ledyard, and Rives were steadfast in assembling the best board to realize the institution’s enormous goals. Cadwalader constantly protested about poorly attended meetings, which compared unfavorably to the Metropolitan Museum’s board, upon which he (and later Ledyard) also sat. He noted that the art museum’s executive committee was always well represented, there was always a quorum, and few people were ever absent. In Cadwalader’s estimation, the only “deadwood” on the Metropolitan’s board was Bigelow, the New York Public Library’s president.

A few days before the grand opening of the building in 1911, Cadwalader was focused on infusing the board with new blood. He complained to Ledyard that Carnegie and Morgan had not been to meetings for years “and really ought not to be on the Board,” and other notable trustees, namely the Archbishop, Judge Greenbaum, and even President Bigelow rarely attended. As the original rationale behind their election had long since passed away, their importance as trustees had “distinctly vanished.”

Yet at the opening, John Bigelow received the gold key to the building from Mayor William J. Gaynor, who extolled the 94-year-old former Tilden representative as living
affirmation that “mental and moral worth in mankind are things of slow growth.” In tortured prose, the politician commented, “We cannot do everything in one generation, much less in one day, as some of my good friends seem to think. But we can do our little part while we are here, and leave something to be done by those . . . who come after us.” Unfortunately, there were few committed trustees to pick up the baton. “To get a quorum we must make exertions, and I do not think there has been a quorum of that Board together more than twice since last May,” Cadwalader asserted in April 1911.

After Cadwalader’s death in 1914, Rives, Olin, and Ledyard expressed concern over the choices for second vice president, Cleveland Dodge and Judge Morgan J. O’Brien. Dodge, the mining heir and president of the YMCA, was “hardly desirable” because of his impulsive “habit of expressing opinions without full knowledge of the facts.” O’Brien, who recently had gained acquittal for Stanford White’s assassin and state hospital escapee Harry K. Thaw in his insanity trial, was to Rives and Ledyard an inappropriate choice for board leadership because his social standing and his “outlook on life” were “not quite what we should like to have or are accustomed to.” He also happened to be one of the two token Catholics on the board, with close ties to the Archbishop. Rives more enthusiastically favored either Payne Whitney or Elihu Root for first vice president, the latter in particular because of his connection to the Carnegie corporations. And heeding the objections of elite intellectuals like Wharton, Rives also mentioned that “it might be desirable in filling vacancies to see if we could get someone who is concerned in writing books, as well as reading them.” But he could not think of a single author whose reputation and standing would either justify election or who would possess the desirable qualities they sought. Ironically, perhaps the only American writer of the time who might have fit the trustee requirements was Wharton herself, were she not female.
Although such elitism was commonplace, membership on the Public Library board differed from the criteria for admittance to Mrs. Astor’s nineteenth-century ballroom. On balance, the Public Library trustees were men who viewed participation on nonprofit boards as an obligation.\textsuperscript{29} In many other cities, mayors or local officials led the libraries. New York’s private, non-profit leadership was more public-spirited. Unlike the clannish, self-appointed aristocrats of Wharton’s old New York, they satisfied their civic interests and reformist political tendencies by participating in cultural endeavors that benefitted the city as a whole.\textsuperscript{30} In turn, the trustees’ high status and financial independence actually helped give the New York Public Library an institutional autonomy that advanced its programs with a minimum of public intervention.\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{Public Library and Private Forces}

By the 1920s, it was evident to the library trustees that building an enormous physical monument was but one small part of a continuing process. Maintenance was a larger endeavor financially than they could manage single-handedly. From the moment the building opened, expenses far exceeded expectations.\textsuperscript{32} Without broader support it would falter just as the Astor and Lenox libraries had.

In 1911, Cadwalader outlined the complex public versus private nature of the library enterprise. There was an essential difference between the support of the Forty-second Street library’s reference department and the forty circulation branches’ operations. The central building was constructed by the City and leased to the Public Library, and the entire expense of its reference library operations was assumed by the trustees, without any significant yearly contribution by the City, as was usual with museums and other public institutions. Conversely,
the circulation arm was constructed at Carnegie’s expense, while the cost of its operations did belong to the municipal authority. No other city had created public institutions on this peculiar model as successfully.³³

From 1912 to 1922, the Library’s endowment rose nearly 50 percent to $15.5 million, and with the approximate U. S. per capita income still under $1,000 in 1920, this would seem an enormous sum.³⁴ But inflation and costs exceeded the endowment income: in ten years, the number of books consulted annually increased 100 percent, from 1.3 to 2.6 million; and the annual number of readers increased 200 percent, from around 400,000 to 1.2 million. Correspondingly, from 1911-22 the cost of operations increased 113 percent from $424,000 to $906,000, and the salary roll increased by 160 percent from $257,000 to $672,000. Hence, annual deficits became a regular occurrence as both use and operations rose through the 1920s.³⁵ Each year, the trustees and friends of the Library made up the budget shortfall, although the outside gifts of cash were relatively small.³⁶ In 1930, the Committee to Raise $50,000 fund raised $3000; the following year, it received only $700.³⁷

Ledyard remained the board president until his death in 1932. As a lawyer he was a master at finessing the details of large bequests, but as a gentleman from another century regarded purposeful fundraising as improper.³⁸ In fact, as a friend and legal advisor to Morgan, Payne Whitney, and George F. Baker, and the counsel for the New York Stock Exchange, Ledyard was probably right to be reluctant to use his influence to ask for funds for the Library. In his letters of acknowledgment, he often emphasized that any donations had been voluntary. He expressed genuine surprise when “out of a clear sky, unsought and unsolicited,” Baker, the banker, railroad magnate, and library trustee, sent him a check for $10,000 to help cover the 1921 library deficit. “I have never approached any Trustee with a suggestion of financial aid, and
I mean never to do so,” Ledyard wrote in appreciation. But given their enormous wealth and their responsibility as stewards of an ambitious enterprise of their own making, trustees’ seeming generosity, even on Baker’s scale, was somewhat tight-fisted.

Nevertheless, that year, with another deficit looming, in spite of his half-hearted fundraising, Ledyard did not discourage the overtures of John D. Rockefeller Jr., who confessed that he had never been inside the “new” library building. After looking over the Library’s financial records, the emerging philanthropist pledged $50,000, the amount the board anticipated needing at the end of the fiscal year. When Rockefeller paid it in January 1922, Ledyard groveled, “Of all the gifts we received none was more truly spontaneous and unsolicited than yours, and I cannot tell you how much it means to us to feel that the work itself has attracted such generous support.”

Ledyard’s words anticipated the spirit of the Library’s great windfall of that year, when the trustees Payne Whitney and Edward S. Harkness joined Rockefeller in pledging a total of $6 million to the Library’s endowment fund for the reference department. Even Fiorello LaGuardia, at the time the President of the Board of Aldermen, was impressed. “What wonders could be accomplished if we could manage our public affairs with the same degree of intelligence, efficiency and economy that private and semi-private institutions are conducted,” he wrote to Ledyard. As extraordinary as the gift was, however, the Library endowment still needed an additional $500,000 a year; while there were calls for the public to take responsibility for its library, Ledyard feared both the political interference and the legal entanglements. The Reference Department thus hobbled along until 1927, when Whitney died and left an endowment of $14 million, followed by Ledyard’s own $2 million bequest five years later. Even so, while 1928 was a watershed year for American philanthropic giving as a whole—with an estimated
$2.3 billion in donations, over $600 million more than in 1921—the New York Public Library still was desperate for funds.45

Indeed, there is no underestimating the value of the time the trustees spent with Library-related correspondence and in meetings, which were numerous and mind-numbingly tedious. It would stand to reason that governing an enormous library system—with its central administration building and dozens of branches—would be a complex undertaking. There were issues of building the Carnegie branches—with land purchase, dealing with architects and contractors, and weighing in on heating and ventilating, plumbing, plastering, and fixtures, among other things. There were visitor statistics for the reading rooms, the exhibition spaces, and the galleries to mull over. There were issues of the proper use of the Forty-second Street building’s steps as a stage for speakers or events, or the legality of whether a booth or newsstand could be erected alongside the front entrance.46 The men’s lavatory also was a lively subject, as it was a place “often monopolized by degenerate characters and park habitués,” and the facilities’ conditions, Anderson wrote, were “almost beyond belief, and could not be described in a letter.”47 The trustees spent the better part of 1924 on the issue of whether “nickel-in-the-slot” pay toilets could be installed in a public building to alleviate the problem; even Elihu Root received a handwritten complaint from an irritated citizen.

And then there was the staff. In the years before federal social security, the trustees often had to intervene personally in individual cases of employee disability, as when R. Fulton Cutting, a trustee of several cultural institutions, who also was the board president of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, asked Rives and Billings to look into the matter of a staff member who had lost his property in a fire.48 This was the down side to membership on a library board that demanded autonomy: large and small matters concerning
employees were the trustees’ concern, and not the City’s. Or were they? The delineations between private and public, and authority over reference and circulation buildings and operations were astoundingly complex.

In the nineteenth century, library employees with little or no formal training worked within an apprentice system. After 1887, when Melvil Dewey founded the first library school at Columbia University, the role of the librarian became professionalized. The New York Public Library had a large staff of small means, but the board never increased salaries. In 1911 Cadwalader felt that the trustees had “a sort of obligation” to do something for their moral and physical wellbeing. Financially, however, while he recognized the “difficulty of living decently” with a low salary in the city, he did not do more than hire a staff doctor to determine the health of the employees and potential hires.

But even as the branch librarians functioned as veritable social workers lobbying for the improved quality of life of their neighborhood clientele, they had their own lives and interests to look out for. Because they were poorly paid, some staff members formed a union, the first for a library in the United States, while a Staff Association formalized more direct employee relations with the trustees. The board listened to pleas for more remunerations and a pension system, but the branch libraries were the responsibility of the City, and the trustees did not intervene, carefully guarding the library’s autonomy even while not-too-stridently forcing the City to recognize its commitment. One faction of the library union backed by the American Federation of Labor demanded a civil service contract, denouncing the library administration for its lack of accountability and transparency.

The Staff Association was more conciliatory, and in 1922 reported to Ledyard on the defeat of a pension bill in Albany brought forward by the antagonistic union faction, which
publicly aired the tenuous nature of the Library trustees’ accountability to the public authority, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{52} Even so, the staff was roundly in favor of the substance, if not the style of those who argued for salary increases. Soon after, Robert Moses, secretary of the New York State Association, contacted the president of the Staff Association, and proposed including the Library employees in the State Employees Retirement System without being subject to Civil Service requirements.\textsuperscript{53} Ledyard, ever the lawyer, looked over the bill and demurred. Any member of the library staff, to comply with the law, would have to be considered an employee of a county or city. “Of course, none of them does come within this definition,” Ledyard concluded.\textsuperscript{54} The salaries of the sizeable Reference Department staff came under the purview of the Library, but under the Carnegie contract, the City still remained responsible for funding the circulation operations—and thus paid these considerable staff salaries. Yet as per the New York Public Library Act of 1901 governing the branch libraries, the Library trustees were charged with directing, appointing, and controlling employees. Nevertheless, Ledyard and the trustees ultimately came out “heartily in favor” of an amendment that would extend the benefits of the City Employees Retirement System to the Public Library staff.\textsuperscript{55} Unfortunately, the bill did not pass.\textsuperscript{56}

This policy had far-reaching implications. With no provision for retirement, older librarians refused to step down. Mayor John F. Hylan, notoriously unsympathetic to wealthy and powerful private interests, suggested that the staff might look to its “employers”—namely, the Public Library trustees—for a pension.\textsuperscript{57}

The subject of raises and pensions persisted throughout the 1920s. Under protest, the board finally distributed itemized salaries to the city, and after being threatened by utility cutoffs also agreed to municipal control over heat and water.\textsuperscript{58} Trustee Frank Polk commiserated with
Ledyard about the library’s situation, explaining how Brooklyn and Queens representatives were even more exercised about city interference potentially hurting the library, because the idea that private individuals might give money to be administered by a city-appointed board was still inconceivable.\textsuperscript{59}

The mayor, in turn, could be sharp in his dealings with the board. Anderson recalled protectively to Ledyard: “After being present at that hearing before the Board of Estimate when that fool Hylan tried to insult you, I have never felt that I wanted you ever again to have anything to do directly with City officials.”\textsuperscript{60} But to run the Library, the board could not avoid cooperating with the City.\textsuperscript{61} Meanwhile, the Staff Association remained understandably confused about where authority lay vis à vis a pension fund. Many believed the large Whitney bequest was intended to serve the whole library, including the Circulation Department, and thus could easily finance a pension fund as well.\textsuperscript{62} Ledyard reminded staff and potential donors alike that the Whitney money was earmarked for an endowment for the Reference Department, and was unavailable for the Circulation Department or for any sort of pension.\textsuperscript{63}

\textit{A New Era}

Mary Haugh, one of a succession of female Staff Association presidents, was an outspoken advocate for the largely female workforce. Women exclusively staffed the branch libraries from the outset; like the volunteers in the settlement houses, they believed in a larger mission to nurture and educate the masses.\textsuperscript{64} The time had long since passed that public libraries were not open to the public, and the librarians furthered the belief that the buildings were meant to be open and informal, with pleasant surroundings and helpful employees. By embracing the notion of the “cult of true womanhood,” women at the turn of the century paved the way for younger
females to shift their focus from inside the home to the outside world, where they could be a
guiding force in social reform and professional leadership in social work, education, and
librarianship.\textsuperscript{65}

As a boy, Yip Harburg, the librettist, lyricist, and author of the Great Depression anthem
“Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” preferred his “study” at the library on Tenth Street opposite
Tompkins Square Park to his family’s unheated Lower East Side apartment. “It was a fine,
warm, clean place, and there were lovely librarians, with blond hair and blue eyes and elegant
accents. The attraction was magnetic,” he recalled. What was equally compelling was the sense
of belonging and consideration the young boy received there. The librarians’ suggestions, which
included the stories of O. Henry, became a constant influence on Harburg’s future work.\textsuperscript{66}

This sensibility was the hallmark of Anne Carroll Moore’s leadership; beginning in 1936
and for the next thirty-five years she supervised children’s services in all of the branches. Her
unique vision respected children’s books as integral to the library, where young visitors could do
homework in a warm, safe environment, while being inspired with a love of reading.\textsuperscript{67} Moore
and her staff, akin to social workers, were cultural humanists who appreciated the tension
between immigrant parents and their children, and incorporated ethnic traditions and folklore
with storytelling, celebrations, and special events. The library enlivened the young readers’
world, and encouraged them to embrace their parents’ backgrounds while learning to read in
English.\textsuperscript{68}

Intellectuals like Randolph Bourne had championed the notion that America’s cultural
unity, derived from a blend of diverse peoples, was a way to liberate creative power and bestow
a more “spiritual citizenship” upon the nation.\textsuperscript{69} The Public Library’s collecting and programs
embraced this notion of multiplicity, with “culture” functioning as both an ethnographic and
aesthetic construction. Given the diversity of the metropolis, it would stand to reason that multiculturalism would prevail in the branch libraries. Ernestine Rose of the 135th Street branch from 1920-42, was another significant figure on the Library staff. Using the resources of the Harlem community and the prestige of the Public Library, her branch became a model for service to African Americans, and a significant force as a conduit between writers, artists, playwrights, performers, and their public. The library’s important book collection became the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. 70

In 1920, Congress recognized woman suffrage with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. That year, women’s clubs throughout the city wrote to the New York Public Library’s trustees calling for the election of female members, particularly given the institution’s large percentage of female employees. 71 (Once the undisputed founders of the nineteenth-century circulating library movement, women would not be invited into the consolidated leadership cadre of the New York Public Library until well into the twentieth century.) The General Federation of Women’s Clubs had long championed library initiatives, and were instrumental in organizing traveling libraries throughout the country. 72 More locally, the New York League of Women Voters pressed the City to raise the standard for trained library workers and establish a set entrance salary of $1,200. 73 The Association to Promote Proper Housing for Girls wrote to Ledyard to raise consciousness about the prohibitive cost of rent (eight to ten dollars a week) relative to employee salaries (less than twenty to twenty-five dollars a week). The group thus urged the board to adjust its salary line in the budget for the Board of Estimate. “We shall write to some of the prominent members of the Board of Estimate whose interest may be secured and we shall be very glad to further the effort in any way that you or any member of your Board of Trustees suggest,” the group’s president wrote. 74
Lydenberg suspected that the increased interest from such activists might have come as a direct result of the exertions of the Staff Association. Feeling underrepresented by the trustees to the Board of Estimate, the Staff Association decided to look elsewhere. As the modern era progressed, the staff felt emboldened to galvanize support from municipal offices and others directly, avoiding the paternalistic protocol of the trustees’ or director’s intervention.

Lewis Cass Ledyard’s death in 1932 marked the end of an era. With Cadwalader and Rives, he was the last of the great triumvirate of board presidents, and only the 87-year-old Elihu Root remained from the Library’s earliest times. The new president, Frank Polk, was a lawyer who had served as both acting U. S. Secretary of State and Under Secretary of State, and was involved in educational and municipal reform on New York City commissions. The Library trustees and director consistently had been engaged in progressive thinking beginning in the era of the Library’s consolidation, so its twentieth-century activities would become as much about maintaining the ambitious enterprise financially as about sustaining it both intellectually and philosophically.

During Polk’s presidency, which lasted until 1943, the Library was affected by the Depression and the disruption of World War II. But its relations with the City grew more cordial during Fiorello LaGuardia’s term, even as tight budgets and pleas for more money prevailed. In 1937, the staff finally received pension benefits, and as ex officio trustees began to attend more meetings, the board loosened its restrictions on appealing to the public for support for the branch libraries. By 1937, with increased demands came decreases in resources through reduced gifts, lower rates of return on investments, defaults in payment of bond interest, and mortgage obligations. The Library could no longer draw on tapped-out reserves, and future deficits were unavoidable without an increase in income or a decrease in growing expenditures.
In 1936, William Haygood, of the Library School of the University of Chicago, conducted a survey of the New York Public Library’s Circulation and Reference Departments. The Public Library covered over the three boroughs spanning 124 square miles, and served 3.25 million library patrons in all, a little less than half of New York City’s entire population. It was “a clientele as numerous as the population of Minnesota or of Lithuania, and racially as heterogeneous as Western Europe itself.” The largest category of Circulation users was students (38 percent), while the Reference users were mostly professionals (59 percent). By age, 65 percent of the patrons of the Circulation Department were under twenty years old, and almost 80 percent were under thirty. In the Reference Department, where overcrowding resulted in the exclusion of students from general use beginning in 1931, users were up to age fifty. A more startling demographic was how men outnumbered women as library customers: 55 percent of branch visitors and 80 percent of reference users were male.

Nevertheless, for almost fifty years Billings, Anderson, and Lydenberg had sustained a commitment to gathering library collections of extensive range and diversity, in keeping with not only their catholic instincts, but the spirit of the times, so it was hardly of passing interest in 1935 when the feminist activists and scholars Rosika Schwimmer and Mary Beard joined forces to create the World Center for Women’s Archives. Lydenberg immediately offered his support to Beard, the historian and collaborator with her husband Charles on the influential 1927 work, The Rise of American Civilization. The Archives’ credo was “No Documents; No History,” and it boasted an illustrious board and the sponsorship of such women as Eleanor Roosevelt, Irene Lewisohn, the congresswoman Caroline O’Day, Mrs. Vincent Astor, Pearl S. Buck, Carrie Chapman Catt, Ruth Harkness, Anne Morgan, Georgia O’Keeffe, Alice Paul, Frances Perkins, Margaret Sanger, Ida Tarbell, and Lillian Wald. Both sexes, the group contended, knew little
about women’s role in the past, and the purpose of the initiative was to encourage recognition of females as “co-makers” of history. Beard advocated rewriting history with a more complete consultation of established facts. “The impulse behind this movement,” Beard said, “is not a desire to ‘gang up’ on men, but to resist and prevent the formation or attempted formation of public opinion by historians and essayists who have in fact ‘ganged up’ on women by excluding the from the social picture, or presenting a false, because one-sided picture based on insufficient facts and inaccurate knowledge.”85 It was a radical departure for its time.

The World Center for Women’s Archives almost immediately evolved from Schwimmer’s idea of a collection focusing on women’s role in world peace, to more broad-based material about women’s activities in general and as an archival and educational center for women’s studies. Within weeks of the announcement of the project, Lydenberg compiled lists of manuscript materials by or about women for Beard and extended the facilities of the New York Public Library to the archive until it could find a permanent home.86 The correspondence was warm and friendly; Lydenberg delicately broached the subject of the possible deposit of the collection, and Beard obsequiously encouraged an association. “It is a truly inspiring relation that has developed for me in connection with the Public Library,” she wrote. “The potentialities of a definitely creative service there—another creative service I mean of course—perhaps begin to outweigh in my mind other proposals.”87

Yet as Schwimmer and others investigated a collaboration with the New York Public Library or the Library of Congress, Beard in fact was opposed to any such plan, which she feared would undermine the WCWA’s independence and “again take women off the record.”88 But even with the exclusively male board, the library did have a largely female staff and espoused varied and unorthodox collections. This was not enough for Mary Beard.
In a fundraising brochure, the organization referred to the National American Woman’s Suffrage Association papers at the Public Library, whose papers were “crammed in drawers crumbling to dust” and “in such condition that readers cannot use them without injuring them.” In addition, the records were impossible to find. State institutions were not much better, because to Beard, they were subject to male politicians’ control. “Women need to direct the collection, preservation, and guidance of readers in women’s materials to correct the balance—until such time at least as it acquires stability, through natural cultural discipline,” the Archives asserted, adding that it was also more efficient to keep the materials in one place—at the World Center for Women’s Archives. 89

In the end, the Archives gathered an impressive array of papers, but internal issues fractured the WCWA, and financial problems guaranteed its demise in 1940. 90 In 1936, dispirited by the Center’s administration and shifting goals, Schwimmer resigned from the board. 91 Schwimmer ultimately did establish a collection focusing on women’s role in world peace, which she donated to the New York Public Library. Beard, who even after her own resignation from the board in 1940 was still charged with determining the fate of the collection, chose to return some materials to their donors and disperse the rest to women’s college libraries, rather than keeping the archive intact by donating it to one repository. Beard feared that the collection might get lost in a large library operating under one system, as had been her experience in researching women’s role in urban history at the New York Public Library, where she could not find any such materials. 92 While the demise of the ambitious Women’s Archives project coincided with the outbreak of World War II, Beard had a lingering “guilty feeling” about hiding the real reason it failed: her board’s inefficiency. 93
And in spite of the New York Public Library’s constant acquisitions of distinguished women’s materials, including the second largest collection of Carrie Chapman Catt’s papers after the Library of Congress, Beard may have had a point about the Public Library’s cataloging, if not its general attitude towards women. Possibly still seeking the collection in the event that Beard’s plans fell through, or at least courting the principals’ goodwill, Lydenberg began a correspondence with Eva Hansl, the Archives’ director after Mary Beard, and in 1941 enthusiastically supported her idea for an exhibition at the Library on the history of the women’s movement. But C. F. McCombs, his exhibition director, was reluctant to shift his spring show on amateur periodicals and could find only two months in the summer for a small display drawn from the Public Library’s collections. He also objected to working with a group of the World Center’s leaders to help conceive the exhibition. “With the best of intentions committees of enthusiastic ladies may commit us to more than we can perform,” he wrote dismissively to Lydenberg.94

Attitudes towards the past, of course, could be indicative of a deeper attitude towards the evolution of culture itself.95 In spite of their endorsed populist, progressive, and humanist approach to programs, the trustees could not go so far as to extend that intellectual multiplicity to a gender diversity on the Public Library board. Certainly the men had forgotten the imaginative and forthright female founders of the long-since absorbed free circulating libraries. It would be not until the 1950s that women would rejoin the leadership cadre of library trustees. While that did not significantly affect the broader mission of the institution, it did diminish the board not only in terms of true diversity, but in terms of public perception.
Upon Harry Lydenberg’s retirement as director of the New York Public Library in 1941, it was among the largest such institutions in the world, with holdings of great distinction, some unique in certain fields. Without the advantages of the Library of Congress or university collections, it was noteworthy that an urban repository could achieve such merit. It now ranked with the British Museum and the Bibliothèque Nationale, and essentially served as the United States’ second national library. The fact that the numbers of readers at the New York Public Library surpassed both the Library of Congress and the British Museum was a point of pride for both the trustees and staff; in 1930, more than two million readers consulted nearly five million items in the research libraries alone. And in spite of its financial limitations, in 1936 the Library had ranked first among national and university libraries in all categories, except budget, which was the smallest.

Its liberalism was long in place before the library profession’s first official expression of intellectual freedom, the anti-censorship statement issued by the American Library Association in 1939. In fact, in a seminal 1949 publication, Oliver Garceau wrote that the success of the “modern library” as a public institution occurred in two “spheres”—in educating the immigrants and in developing reading as an activity for children. Both of these initiatives had been part of the New York Public Library’s program from beginning of the twentieth century.

The decades around the Second World War were considered the Public Library’s “golden age,” but so, too, was it a time of ascendance for New York City itself, and the point at which it rightfully became the cultural capital of the world. The metropolis was now a sophisticated international hub for those in the arts and letters as well as those in business and finance. Artists, musicians, writers, and intellectuals escaping war-torn Europe enhanced the cultural fabric of the
city with their presence, and their artistic production and the influence it had on home-grown talents were both immeasurable.

New York also remained a city of dreams for immigrants. The multiculturalism that long had been the hallmark of the Public Library’s collecting program mirrored and capitalized on the dynamism of the metropolis. The Library represented the diversity of democracy itself, “public” to the core. Late in his life, the Brooklyn-born intellectual Alfred Kazin recalled his experience of contemplating and writing about the modern world in the 1940s while ensconced in the nineteenth-century Forty-second Street library building.

My subject had to do with the “modern” as democracy; with America itself as the modern; with the end of the nineteenth century a the great preparation: in lonely small towns, prairie villages, isolated cottages, dusty law offices, national magazines, and provincial “academies” where no one suspected that the obedient-looking young reporters, law clerks, librarians, teachers would turn out to be Willa Cather, Robert Frost, Sinclair Lewis, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore. The new literature was being created inside an old century—proud, stormy, yet elegant. The elegance was still in those great halls of the Library; up those marble stairs; always surrounded by pictures of the mid-century reservoir that had been replaced by the Library, the old fire fighters in their red wagons, the traditional view from the Battery. These put me right back into the turn of the century that saw the building of the Library—and the intellectual insurgence and radical hope that bedrocked my book. Even the spacious twin reading rooms, each two blocks long, gave me a sense of the powerful amenity that I craved for my own life, a world of power in which my own people had moved about as strangers.101

For certain there was a modernist sensibility in the cultural explosion that began between the wars in New York City. But in many ways, imagining the city of the future as well as the useful purpose of a library had animated the leaders of the New York Public Library from the time of Andrew Haswell Green.
CHAPTER EIGHT
“A New Mental Attitude”: The Metropolitan Museum Broadens its Reach

At 10 o’clock pm on February 17, 1913, a trumpet sounded, and a hush came over some two thousand people gathered at the Sixty-ninth Regiment Armory, on Lexington Avenue between Twenty-fifth and Twenty-sixth streets, for an international exhibition of modern art sponsored by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors. “American artists—young American artists, that is—do not dread, and have no need to dread, the ideas or the culture of Europe,” said the collector of avant-garde art and lawyer John Quinn, the honorary vice-president of the event. “They believe that in the domain of art only the best should rule. This exhibition will be epoch-making in the history of American art,” he predicted hyperbolically. “To-night will be a red letter night in the history not only of American but of all modern art.”¹

He was right. The trumpet flourish heralded the advent of modernism in America and the growth of the avant-garde in New York. The exhibition consisted of the most representative collection of modern art held anywhere in the world. It introduced the United States to the French contemporary paintings of Picasso, Braque, Rouault, Dufy, and Léger, as well as Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Gauguin; it also caused a stir with Marcel Duchamp’s cubist work Nude Descending a Staircase. The artworks represented a new sort of cultural expression that deconstructed time and space.² While the Armory Show was a revolt against the conservative National Academy of Design and traditionalist art dealers, the radicalism in art was only echoing the current state of rebellion and upheaval in manners, morals, and politics in the 1910s. The Armory Show made it clear that a new era was dawning—or at least that one century was standing in direct opposition to another.³ In the decades to come, the Metropolitan Museum
would encounter this dialectic of progress, peering into the future, only later to retrench into the past.

As the Morgan era was on the wane at the museum, a new modern spirit was quietly taking over American life by 1913. While the museum curatorially would hold out against modern art for decades after the Armory Show, administratively, the semi-progressive initiatives put in place by Morgan continued to guide the operations of the museum.

Morgan’s organization man in that endeavor was Robert W. de Forest. He had been the “young turk” on the board during the Sunday opening and Cesnola firing controversies, and even though a position on the trustees was his veritable birthright as John Taylor Johnston’s son-in-law, de Forest approached the task with great seriousness and responsibility. Upon his election in February 1889, he wrote to Cesnola: “I accept the position not because it is an honor but because I am deeply interested in the prosperity and success of the Museum and stand ready to give it the full measure of service which I can consistently with other duties.”4 Under two weeks later, he wrote again, asking Cesnola for back numbers of the museum’s reports, to refresh his memory as to the growth of the institution; he also asked the director to request similar reports from the Boston Museum, something Cesnola would not do. The new trustee clearly was contemplating the institution’s past and future, and in his inimitable way trying to quantify them; in the same communication he also requested a list of donations that were contingent on the museum’s Sunday closing. “I should like to inform myself intelligently as to this side of the ‘Sunday’ question,” he wrote.5

A descendant of Jesse de Forest, a French Huguenot who arrived in New Amsterdam aboard the first ships in 1624, Robert de Forest lived his entire life in Greenwich Village, and maintained a strong connection to the neighborhood as well as to the growing city. He and Emily
Johnston announced their engagement in 1870, the year of his graduation from Yale and, as
legend would have it, on the very day the Metropolitan Museum was founded. The Johnston
house at Seven Washington Square North, built by Emily’s grandfather, was a wedding present,
and where they lived for the rest of their lives. In the 1920s, de Forest was asked why he did not
move to the “millionaire district” east of Central Park. He replied that with the gradual but steady
migration ever northward of families of means, the new fashionable area just did not feel
permanent to him, as Washington Square always would. It was a place with continuity and
history, with “the charm of old associations,” he said. “With all the bustle and unrest of our great
city it still retains in large degree the quiet of Old New York.”

On the Metropolitan board, de Forest had focused on the museum’s legal and financial
issues. He handled the intricate terms of large bequests, always with an eye towards precedent-
setting policies. And when he succeeded Morgan as president of the museum in 1913, de Forest
infused his work with his inherent love for the past and simultaneous respect for the future, along
with a healthy recognition of the changing times. Echoing the supposed mandate of the
Metropolitan’s past, he encouraged the study of the fine arts as it pertained to manufacture and
practical life. Under these principles, he advocated the museum’s cooperation with New York
City’s public schools, expanded the educational staff, and encouraged children to visit the
museum.

Immediately upon becoming president of the museum, de Forest launched a public
campaign for an endowment fund of $5 million. The museum had overdrawn its income by as
much as $30,000 a year, a deficit usually made up by the trustees. The fund drive was
discontinued when world war broke out, resuming in 1920. By then, the museum had over $16
million in income-producing investments, the proceeds of which were still insufficient to pay the
many salaries, which in fact were quite low. Rich as it seemed, the institution needed new sources of income to avoid drawing down its principal.

Furthermore, as new trustees assumed leadership, they codified and adapted the founders’ educational mission as it pertained to the times. Even as the museum’s initial purpose was to create and improve American taste through its collections, the Metropolitan also had the potential to inform a larger civic agenda. In fact, de Forest was considered to the world of public-spiritedness what J. Pierpont Morgan had been to the realm of finance, and he brought his same sensibilities to bear in his participation on either cultural or social welfare boards. “Morgan’s name suggests Wall Street, while irresistibly the mention of any philanthropic activity brings Robert W. de Forest to mind,” the Times wrote. Metropolitan Museum trustees from an earlier age might have had charitable, religious inclinations but by and large many failed to understand the urban underclass they were seeking to protect. De Forest was of a different mind altogether.

When de Forest helped form the Charity Organization Society in the 1880s, almshouses and orphan asylums were the primary sources of relief for the poor. As a young man with a growing law practice, de Forest sought to bring “order out of the chaos” in these public and private charities by encouraging the use of modern scientific methods and the professionalization of the field of social work. His charitable philanthropic activities focused on health, education, and welfare rather than the more paternalistic, albeit religious benevolences of an older time. Nevertheless, while hardly a radical, de Forest had a firm sense of noblesse oblige and parlayed his influence and elegance into social justice for the underclass. Believing that charity should not be “haphazard,” he made the School of Social Work a reality. His resolve to organize a national relief organization helped the American Red Cross rise to prominence during World War I, when he directed the organization of its war council. More locally, through his leadership
of the Charity Organization Society, de Forest became active in slum housing issues and was appointed chairman of the New York State Tenement House Commission, which drafted the pivotal 1901 Tenement House Act, the most important municipal housing legislation of its time. Subsequently, Theodore Roosevelt, governor of New York, appointed de Forest chairman of the New York State Tenement House Commission.

Decades later, de Forest found a way to serve the city through the 1929 Regional Plan of New York and its Environs, which united development schemes for the city and its suburbs, anticipating commercial and passenger traffic. Its corollary mandate was directed at advancing the region’s quality of life by providing for parks, playgrounds, and other recreational facilities. Recalling Andrew Haswell Green’s vision for a New York of the future, the Regional Plan spoke to de Forest’s interest in improving the lived experience as well as the built environment, which he also guided as president of the Municipal Art Commission.

Late in life, de Forest reminisced about a time in the city of his youth when he flew his kite in meadows that would become Madison Square, and rode on a “tall, stately bicycle” up the empty streets of Broadway. This was not mere nostalgia, but an indication of his romantic, albeit practical, humanistic spirit as a New Yorker—and different sort of booster—commenting upon expansion and change in his hometown. In this way, his focus as president of the Metropolitan contrasted with Morgan’s, with its heavy emphasis on building the museum’s collections. “The very fact that the word ‘humanism,’ once exclusively associated with classical scholarship, has had its definition extended to include the study of man as the proper study of mankind, more or less symbolizes the growth of a museum such as the Metropolitan,” Elisabeth Luther Cary wrote in the Times. De Forest embodied that shifting notion.
De Forest’s stamp, for example, was all over the museum’s participation in the 1911 Child Welfare Exhibit at the 71st Regiment Armory. In its first two weeks alone, over 130,000 New Yorkers visited it. The goal was to focus each individual exhibitor on the subject of the child. While there were “many foreign faces” among the visitors, the exhibit reached all classes, “regardless of their place in the life of New York.” To de Forest, the Metropolitan Museum, with its educational mandate, was hardly out of place in this setting. “It illuminates history. It inspires patriotism,” he said at the opening.

The museum now was being perceived more as a public and professional institution rather than a board-driven diversion or private repository. The director Robinson gradually relied less and less on the trustees who at one time had been charged with art buying, in favor of curators and other professionals. The Metropolitan’s secretary, Henry Kent, who trained under Melvil Dewey in library science at Columbia and who applied organizational methodology to administration, assisted him. It was Kent who instituted a system for recording and registering every work of art in the museum, who supervised the photography of the collections, and who assumed the responsibility of producing the new Bulletin to inform the public of the Museum’s activities. The “popular instruction” mandate of the museum’s founding mission became his singular focus. His programs for schoolteachers and new gallery talks both began to address the educational obligations the Museum previously had overlooked.

With the advent of radio in the 1920s, de Forest brought his vision of an accessible museum to the public through a series of fifteen-minute programs under the American Federation of the Arts. “The enjoyment of art,” he said on the air, “is open to everyone—poor and rich. That is one of its democratic features.” He continued:

Some years ago I went through the picture gallery of one of our millionaires with a clergyman friend. After going around he said to me: “I own these pictures quite
Radio addresses gave de Forest occasion to express his respect for national artistic achievement as neither products of a new “age of machinery” nor the crude handiwork of another age, but as a uniquely American form. “This discovery is no ‘antique craze’ but a sound and deep-rooted trend which has revolutionized many phases of industry and trade,” he said. “Business has been ‘discovering’ the museum; and to an extent not generally recognized, the museum has served business, while the latter—for reasons of self-interest and not in a spirit of altruism—has become a teacher of art.”

To that end, de Forest and his wife donated their collection of early American furniture as well as approximately $100,000 to build the American Wing in 1920, distinguishing the Metropolitan as the first museum to direct a large-scale focus to the field of American decorative arts. His interests were beyond broad—de Forest believed that every person had a right “to be able to see, at least occasionally, good works of art, for the same reason that every dweller in a crowded city should sometimes have the opportunity of seeing the green of the country.”

By 1920, the Metropolitan’s half-century mark, the museum was receiving gifts from all over the country, and indeed had become a national and no longer merely a local institution. Although there were also over twice as many fine arts museums in the United States as there had been only fifteen years before, all competing for funds, the Metropolitan Museum under de Forest still was a prestige-laden locus of support for New York businessmen. George F. Baker and John D. Rockefeller gave unrestricted gifts of $1 million each, increasing the endowment and erasing the annual deficit. Their largesse encouraged other donors; all were recognized on a
marble plaque in the great hall. Although a more democratic age was underway, some modicum of status still could be had for ambitious plutocrats desirous of being memorialized in a public place.27

Consequently, the Metropolitan Museum had become the largest and richest art museum of the Western hemisphere by the 1920s.28 But critics continued to complain that it remained the city’s most exclusive club. American artists protested that they were underrepresented. Still others attacked the soundness of the museum’s founding educational mission. What was the point of a museum? What did “instruction” mean? Under whose authority could “taste” be codified? Early in the twentieth century, these questions took on a new context.

John Cotton Dana of the Newark Free Public Library and the founder of the Newark Museum, for example, was uncompromisingly avant-garde compared to the Metropolitan in matters of museumship and education. Dana conceived of his museum as a kind of artistic lending library, where the public could literally take an object home to study it.29

The trend in American museums, however, was towards expansion. In a significant commentary in the Atlantic Monthly, Frank Jewett Mather Jr. argued that the act of visiting a repository like the Metropolitan Museum, with its myriad departments, was simply exhausting. “When an American art museum is founded, in order to survive it must literally be all things to all men; it must appeal on the broadest and most miscellaneous basis to everybody who may give it support,” he explained.30 Mather’s critique hoped to open a dialogue about what American “jumboism” meant, and whether the “overgrown art museums” might consider decentralizing in the interest of the public’s experience, much as Dana had suggested.31 De Forest conceded that the Metropolitan’s collections had become unwieldy and that the objects on display could be limited and new purchases more discriminately selected in the best interests of the visitor’s
experience. But he held firm on maintaining the rich departments of the museum; in aggregate, they were all necessary for a great museum with an educational purpose.\textsuperscript{32}

In actuality, the museum’s revived commitment to an education agenda, with its accompanying populist overtones, did help win the city’s investment in the institution during the Morgan period of physical expansion. Public funding was no longer optional in the face of insurmountable costs. De Forest parlayed his involvement on myriad municipal commissions to the museum’s advantage in this regard.\textsuperscript{33}

Scolding “the exclusiveness” of museum enthusiasts, and indeed, some of the more conservative forces on his board, de Forest once said, “We are now showing signs of understanding that to walk with beauty we need not necessarily limit ourselves to trooping through the galleries of our formal collection of art.” The museum, however, was on a path in line with a modern spirit, and de Forest had set it on that path. “In its lectures, its classes, its exhibitions of current art, it is taking on the aspect of a place that not only invites within but propels without. It says to those trooping through its galleries: ‘Why are you here if you cannot do something with what you take away?’”\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{A New Mental Attitude}

As 1929 came to a close, Robert de Forest consulted with the soon-to-be treasurer of the Metropolitan about the financial crisis. He learned that since only 1925 the staff had increased by 40 percent; that salaries had increased by 60 percent; that a new pension system was drawing down resources; that the publications program was increasingly active (and thus costly); and that more attendance required more light and heat. In short, the administrative budget was unsustainable, and had increased by over $400,000 in four years. On New Year’s Eve 1929, the situation was nothing short of a crisis. What to do?
“A new mental attitude is the first requisite,” the new treasurer, William Sloane Coffin advised. He proposed that locally supported branch museums in Greater New York at which less-important objects might be exhibited could increase exposure and halt the frequent demand for new wings. He recommended that the museum levy a “fair fee” for adult instruction in the self-supporting art schools. And he thought that a larger membership in the higher classes could participate in a united effort with all of the friends of the museum, who could help the public, as well as the trustees and staff, to realize that “we actually do need money and we need it badly.”

In imagination as well as in spirit, the young trustee was de Forest’s protégé. “I made up my mind at the time that you were one of the men whom I should like to associate with me in carrying out some of my dreams,” the older man reminisced to his disciple in 1928 about their earliest meetings. “And if, in my confidence in you and your judgment, I put too many burdens on you in the Museum you must speak out,” he cautioned, and then warned:

You will have many calls upon your public spirit, just as I have had. My advice to myself as well as those who like yourself have so great capacity for usefulness, can be given in two words—“Don’t scatter.” Hold fast to the things of greatest importance—ignore others. Not that others may not be worth while, but that others are not so much worth while and one’s power of accomplishment is limited.

Soon afterwards, de Forest appointed Coffin to a three-member committee empowered with representing the board in questions arising from the selection and installation of objects under the important Havemeyer bequest. But before long Coffin would be tested even further. In spring 1931, upon Elihu Root’s resignation, he assumed the position of first vice president while continuing to be treasurer. That year, in rapid succession, de Forest died, along with four other trustees and Edward Robinson, the museum’s director. Coffin became the acting president of the board, and until late 1931 functioned as the museum’s only officer, with the exception of the secretary. In December the trustees finally announced his election as president of the
Metropolitan’s trustees, putting to an end the months of conjecture during which virtually every board member had been mentioned as de Forest’s possible successor.38

William Sloane Coffin was Yale educated; a member of the old New York elite; Presbyterian, like most of the other Metropolitan Museum and cultural leaders before him; and the brother of Henry Sloane Coffin, the president of Union Theological Seminary. Professionally, Will Coffin directed his family’s real estate ventures as well as its furniture business, W. & J. Sloane. Aesthetically, his orientation was influenced by his opinion of New York as “the greatest industrial city” on the continent, and practically, his retail background informed his entire way of thinking about the museum experience.39 Fittingly and accordingly, his philanthropic activities echoed de Forest’s in their social consciousness, although Coffin, thirty years de Forest’s junior, had a more modern manner in carrying out a contemporary social agenda.

Coffin’s civic work began in 1906 with his organization of the Art-in- Trades Club to bring together art tradesmen to promote study in the field. His real estate ventures included developing the residential community Munsey Park on the North Shore of Long Island; modernizing old housing units in the older sections of the city; and as vice president of the City Housing Corporation, financing model tenements. As president of the City Mission Society, he supervised its work with the Spanish-speaking residents of upper Manhattan. As a leader of the Federal Council of Churches in America, he campaigned for the religious education of children. And as a humanitarian and aesthete he visited France and Belgium following the First World War to appeal for American aid for the restoration of devastated cathedrals.

Coffin had strong views of American culture, and of cultural stewardship. “What do we mean by ‘Culture’?” he asked. His answer was more personal than public: self-development,
“resulting in an abundant life guided by the noblest ideals.” Yet he qualified this abstract assessment with a dose of reality. “Individual self-expression is restricted in most cases to the pictures, books, and other furnishings we select for our homes. Only rarely do we create anything ourselves,” he said. “Marvelous machinery” was easing the pressure on labor to work long hours, causing many Americans to have unfamiliar leisure time. “Education for the proper use of leisure and individual self-expression is one of the greatest problems of today. This leads one directly into theories of progressive education for the training in self-expression of the individual child, as well as other interesting and controversial subjects,” he stated.\(^{40}\) Coffin embraced the once-embarrassing American aesthetic banality and recast it as a perfect expression of contextual change.

But how did the art museum fit into this vision? Coffin had observed the “average citizen” in his professional life, in his philanthropic work, and at the museum, and was convinced that the American public was eager for the best in art. Could it be that these people, once the great unwashed clamoring to visit the museum on Sunday afternoons, were now, by Coffin’s estimation, of the leisure class? For example, he declared that the concerts at the Metropolitan on Saturday evenings in January and March were attended by thousands of people, mostly in their twenties. Only one-third of the audience could be even seated. Such genuine thirst for classical music necessitated a change in the way trustees and professional staffs viewed museum visitors.

“Art museums as a rule began as rich men’s clubs for the proper display of their treasures and those of their friends,” Coffin bluntly stated. “These clubs were directed by hierarchies of scholars who satisfied their own professional pride in seeking praise from scholars in Europe, and satisfied their patrons by obtaining rarer and more costly objects than were found in other museums, particularly those in near-by cities.” The “average citizen” was nowhere in this
equation, Coffin suggested. “This early viewpoint has been largely but not entirely outgrown. Both Trustees and Staffs must be taught that at least one of their chief aims should be to give the average citizen an appreciative love of the beautiful which will make the study of art a delightful pursuit in his leisure hours.”

Furthermore, Coffin boldly claimed that “rich men” were becoming a rarity on boards of trustees. But museums needed not only money, but trained volunteers “to spread the love and knowledge of art among the new leisure classes.” This new class was a potentially large, untapped base of support. Coffin clearly wanted to continue to promote de Forest’s public agenda out of the nineteenth century and further into the twentieth. “His program is at once progressive and conservative,” the Herald Tribune concluded in an editorial. “In this the trustees may be relied upon to back him up, and so may the public.”

In the context of the economic depression, the displaced, disenfranchised, and unemployed individual played an important part in Coffin’s program. In 1933, this “forgotten man,” abandoned by his country after serving it in war, was memorialized in a song popularized in the film Gold Diggers of 1933. Coffin also wrote and recited a poem on this subject. He looked upon this man as the type of individual whose perfect self-expression might be manifested in his home, “free from the dictation of architect, interior designer, and artist.” The home was an American’s castle, reflective of his creativity and individuality. Of course in the early years of the Depression, with rising unemployment, “leisure hours” were a grim reality, and whether a home was well furnished or not was the least of most citizens’ concerns. As a landlord, Coffin, in fact, did not evict tenants who could not pay their rents. Predictably, his real estate ventures began to collapse.
But everyone was feeling the pinch in the 1930s. In New York, financial pressures and institutional competition here provoking museums to justify their importance and relevance to the public. The Metropolitan, once unique among art institutions in New York, now was being challenged by newer museums like the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art, both established by women with decidedly modern aesthetic tastes and perspectives. Furthermore, there were other cultural institutions struggling to survive and competing for shrinking funds. Coffin comprehended this competition with his tirelessly populist perspective. As he noted, “any one presiding over the destinies of that complicated cosmos which is called the Metropolitan must be responsive to myriad appeals. The museum is sometimes superficially considered a place solely for the embalmment of paintings, statuary and miscellaneous objects of art. As a matter of fact it is a hive of activities vitally touching many aspects of the city’s life.” Art, Coffin contended, was “a perfectly natural self-expression,” and understandable to every man, woman, and child. Simply put, art could serve the people, and Coffin broadcast that idea at every opportunity, and disabused the public of the notion that such a mission would lower the museum’s standards. To him, art was not something remote or esoteric that “should be kept safely at the top of the stairs and never brought down to street level.”

That meant pulling Emanuel Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* out of storage after it had been “banished” because of its questionable artistic value and lack of historical authenticity. Coffin justified his decision to exhibit the much-loved work by claiming that there would always be a popular sentiment for such pictures, “whatever their artistic defects.” It meant that as his first presidential act, Coffin would accept the towering $10 million bequest of Michael Friedsam—one hundred thirty-five paintings and two hundred other works—as a service to art students, the City of New York, and the art world in general, without letting the
details of Friedsam’s will’s directive to “maintain the collection’s identity as a whole” deter him. Immediately, Friedsam’s trustees showed “rare understanding” and agreed to offer the museum the paintings with the guarantee that the collection stay together under vaguer terms: “as far as humanly possible.” The notion of keeping the collection together, a throwback to the earlier times of Altman and Morgan, risked making the Metropolitan Museum look like “an art patron’s necropolis,” an impression thoroughly inconsistent with the new progressive agenda. The Friedsam gift held out the promise of being yet one more step in realizing de Forest’s hope: that “every child and every man and woman will come to know this museum as ‘their museum.’” Once, the art museum was a place primarily for the wealthy, or the self-styled nobility. Now it was for everybody.

Coffin saw the Metropolitan Museum’s “education” mission on an even broader level than de Forest had. In summer 1933, Coffin announced his old idea of establishing branch museums in Queens, the Bronx, and “two or three other places.” This program, he stated optimistically, would take on new relevance and importance in the face of additional leisure hours for the public as mandated by the New Deal and the National Industrial Recovery Act. Coffin, halfway through his second year of directing the destinies of the museum, now one of the largest art collections in the world, was preoccupied not only with dreams for the future, but also with the realities of its harsh financial outlook. In September 1933, Governor Herbert H. Lehman had to intervene to unblock an impasse between New York City officials and the bankers who were unwilling to extend a $72 million credit to the city. All budgets were being cut, and museums and cultural institutions were not immune. The Metropolitan Museum, in fact, was lucky that its $397,610 request was cut only to $355,000, although the budget director initially had designated only $300,000.
Coffin vacillated about commencing a public appeal for funds, but instead beseeched former contributing members to continue to pay $10 dues. “Even with a competent finance committee it is difficult to get all we had hoped for from our investments,” he noted sardonically to the Herald Tribune. In spite of this anxiety, the museum’s activities survived uncurtailed. Indeed, it was inconceivable that Coffin could be thinking of an expanded program in the face of financial retraction. His old idea of encouraging more members to join at lower levels for added revenue would have to wait. “We are trying to meet our cuts in income by economies in every possible channel in order not to impose on the public at a time when the demands for relief are so imperative,” he said. But the fact remained that unless the museum received support from the public, it would perish.56

As the museum’s president, Coffin never let go of the idea that art could be ennobling and comforting—“a true and happy science of the soul”—and the notion that the Metropolitan had a moral obligation to carry its influence as a service to the community.57 His perspective recalled the public taste agenda of earlier decades, but devoid of its previous paternalism, and proud of American artistic output, no matter how utilitarian. He honestly believed that training school children as well as the sales forces in department stores could more universally transform art appreciation and taste. Art had “crept into industry,” and retailers needed an understanding of what constituted beauty to help impart public refinement. On a no less practical level, Coffin pursued a course for the museum that elevated it beyond a “repository of the great art treasures bequeathed to it by art lovers.” The museum’s mission was larger: to present to the public inspiring and instructive examples of human creativity.58

At the Convention of the Association of American Museums in Chicago in June 1933, Coffin plainly stated the challenges of hard times for museums, particularly regarding the
diminished resources of their historic outlets of support, the government and the wealthy individual. “There must be a radical cut in the cost of government, and to the normal politician it is much more natural to reduce contributions to art rather than the salaries of henchmen,” he said. “The personal fortunes of the wealthy patrons of art have undergone such a shrinkage that many assert that one should no longer count on large bequests from multimillionaires, as the species is rapidly becoming extinct.”

Coffin lauded the fact that the most generous gifts to the museum during his presidency had been bequests from “simple folk scarcely known to the community or even to the Museum staff.” While annual contributors were personally economizing at the expense of philanthropy, Coffin looked to the challenge of regaining that membership and of cultivating “new friends” throughout the community. Unfortunately, the situation was dire: the total dues collected for annual, sustaining, and fellowship members fell from $108,785 in 1931 to $69,502 in 1933, and the income from the city fell from $467,914 to $368,635. Interestingly, a form for bequests began appearing prominently in the annual reports of the 1930s, an attempt at a more subtle form of fundraising.

The fact was, though, Coffin’s larger creative and populist approach also was cost-effective. He launched his revolutionary plan for branch museums around the city with a dinner at his home for six principals of New York City high schools and four officers of the Metropolitan Museum. Heeding the critics of the overgrown, multi-departmental institution, Coffin imagined the experiment enabling visitors, most particularly children, to view art in small groups “rather than herded through the galleries in droves à la Thomas Cook & Sons.” He had realistic expectations about the way young people behaved in museums, but blamed the museums and not the children. “It is perfectly impossible to keep a whole procession of children interested in specific objects located near the head of the line, for those in the rear are bound to
be distracted,” he observed. As part of the education plan, the museum also would sponsor a series of four slide lectures describing the past using objects in the collections.62

In November 1933, the first branch exhibition opened on the lower East Side at the University Settlement, the oldest settlement house in the United States, on Eldridge Street. The trial program focused on Chinese and Japanese art, and the scheme called for exhibitions of armor, European art, and ancient Egyptian art to follow at six week-intervals, making the circuit of neighborhoods served by the venerable program. The objects were to be of “high artistic value” as well as examples of practical material culture, with an added human appeal. In the Asian art exhibition, for example, porcelains, armor, and paintings on silk were on view along with a “pepper blower,” a Japanese weapon that discharged a blast of ordinary pepper into an enemy’s face at close range. The idea of neighborhood exhibitions had existed for years, Herbert Winlock, the museum director revealed. But with the support and enthusiasm of the settlement houses and their workers, the plan finally could be realized. The exhibitions were conceived along both general and diverse lines in consideration of public appeal.63

While Coffin’s notions were modern, the museum was slow to accept modernism in art. For now, it was enough that the Metropolitan was embracing bold ways of reconceiving its program in light of precarious financial times. It was revolutionary, for example, for the museum to stand firm about having the freedom to display a bequest as curators saw fit, as opposed to isolating a collection around a donor’s name alone. The Metropolitan Museum was rejecting its complicity in allowing benefactions to be grand, lasting representations of their benefactor. Rather, gifts of art were to be recognized on their own merits as works of art to be displayed for the public.
During this time, the Metropolitan also was engaged in a rather different “branch” location, the “cloister museum” on Fort Washington Avenue housing a collection of medieval works assembled by the sculptor George Grey Barnard, and purchased in 1925 through a gift from John D. Rockefeller Jr., a collector of medieval art. Rockefeller had declined election to the trustees in 1921, claiming he did not serve on philanthropic boards other than his own. But he did become deeply involved in the Cloisters project, supplementing it with additional pieces from his own collection, donating land and landscaping for a new museum in Fort Tryon Park when the neighborhood around the existing one began to change, and ultimately agreeing to finance the construction and maintenance of a new building in 1933.

In contrast, modern art was on the rise, and for the first time the Metropolitan was part of the movement. In May 1932 the Museum of Modern Art—spearheaded by Rockefeller’s wife, Abby Aldrich, with Lillie P. Bliss and Mary Quinn Sullivan—announced a move to its permanent home on Fifty-third Street. The election of its trustees Nelson Rockefeller and Cornelius N. Bliss to the Metropolitan Museum board signaled to art circles and the public alike that collaboration was now a definite possibility. “No other institution includes so wide a public as the Met and to it should go ultimately the finest works of the foremost modern artists,” Alfred H. Barr Jr., the new museum’s director, said. The Metropolitan Museum had lent paintings by Daumier and Winslow Homer to the MoMA, which in turn lent a Cezanne still life from the Bliss collection to the Met. Barr was quick to add that the new museum would not become “merely the feeder” to other museums. “To live, we need the bone and sinew of a permanent collection which has strength and vigor, which looks toward the future but retains the support of the recent past,” he said. Ultimately the corpus of that collection came from the
museum’s founders, Lillie Bliss, Cornelius’s sister, and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Nelson’s mother.68

“Aloofness is dissipated,” the critic Edward Alden Jewell proclaimed, heralding the unprecedented transparency and reciprocity now apparent at the Metropolitan Museum. “The entente wears all the earmarks of a new museum era,” he added, noting that in former times the Bliss and Rockefeller additions to the board might have been looked upon “in somewhat the light of hostages.”69 The Metropolitan Museum, in fact, was venturing into the future by daring to exhibit pictures by living artists. Coffin cannily suggested to Barr: “When the so-called ‘wild’ creations of today are regarded as the conservative standards of tomorrow, is it too much to hope that you will permit some of them to come to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, leaving space on our walls for the new creations of the new day?”70

In fact, Coffin, as no Metropolitan Museum president before, had a fresh and accepting view of contemporary art. To those who criticized its quality, he said, “Well, it must be remembered that a great deal of the worst art of the past has disappeared, and we are comparing all modern art with only the best of the past.” Furthermore, in earlier times, the only people who “indulged in artistic expression,” or even collected art objects, were the nobility and the very wealthy. “Today every home can afford pictures and even furniture and furnishing inspired by the masters of the past,” he happily observed. And classic art no doubt was inspiring the good design of the present. “I myself have pointed out color schemes in classical paintings that could be put to industrial use,” he said.71

But the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan were hardly the only museums breaking new ground in Manhattan in May 1932. The Whitney Museum was established in Greenwich Village the year before, and the Museum of the City of New York had opened its new
building that January. “Who says our depression hasn’t turned the corner?” the critic Jewell marveled.  

On Saturday, December 16, 1933, his oldest son’s twelfth birthday, Will Coffin went to his office at W. & J. Sloane in the morning; had lunch at the Metropolitan Museum; and upon leaving, fell on the pavement, as though he had slipped on the ice. He recovered and went home, striding past his doorman and his children without comment or his characteristic good cheer. His wife found him a short time later, lying on his bed with his hands clasped over his chest. He was dead, at age fifty-four, of a heart attack.  

Coffin had been one of the most important philanthropists in the city, and had raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the charities he supported. But his family business and real estate investments were hit hard by the Depression, and his own income in the early 1930s had come from selling his property in Oyster Bay. To pay one overdue bill, his wife parted with her favorite fur coat. Catherine Coffin worried about her husband’s “endless problems and pressures from people and organizations,” but respected the fact that although people had begged him to slow down, “that was not his way.”

A stunned city eulogized Coffin and how “all his brave ideas, all his sane liberalism” had changed the Metropolitan Museum from a forbidding to a popular presence in only two short years. “From the start he showed that he took the opportunities of his office to be those of a warm, humanizing influence. He was not content to preside over an institution. Rather he governed an agency for the enkindling of the citizens,” the Herald Tribune wrote in an editorial. “He would have nothing pedantic, nothing chilling, and as little as possible ‘official’ about the great building in Central Park. He would make it a welcoming and inspiring place, friendly, gracious, [and] a source of pleasure to which every one might resort with complete confidence in
its will to serve." Where the museum founders had sought an edifying existence for their museum in a developing nineteenth-century city, Coffin reinterpreted that purpose for the modern era.

Coffin had endeavored to make the Metropolitan Museum an effective force for culture in the city, state, and nation. One of his last public remarks bemoaned the fact that while there was plenty of leisure for culture, there was still little culture in leisure. 

*A Distinguished Amateur*

The Metropolitan Museum could not afford to lose any time in choosing a new leader. The late president’s first year in office had been one of “rigid economy and wise precautions against the uncertainties of the future,” and at the time of his death, Coffin had barely completed his second year. He had been energetic and enthusiastic, proud of the museum’s past accomplishments, eager for its continuing advancement, and imaginative about how to do so in light of the financial times. But by the end of 1933, the museum had lost around ten thousand of its over thirteen-thousand dues-paying members—in the higher as well as the lower categories. These membership fees usually funded administrative expenses. While attendance was still at a robust 1,184,665 in 1933, that number represented a falling off of 101,340 visitors from the main building, made up by the popularity and accessibility of the Cloisters, aided by a new bus line which stopped at its front door. Attendance was noticeably lower on days when admission was charged. With the 1933 budget already 13 percent below 1932’s, the museum suspended plans for a northward extension and for any new membership campaigns. The course struck a tentative balance between savings and essential activities without an obvious reduction in the museum’s operation. The total attendance in 1933 surpassed that of any year before the boom
began in 1926, with over 1.1 million visitors to the main building, with greater attendance on the free admission days. Indeed, only around $7,800 was received in admission fees, representing a tiny portion of the $2 million in receipts.\textsuperscript{80}

The trustee George Blumenthal received much official and unofficial recognition for the institution’s relative solvency. As chairman of the Executive and Finance Committees, the retired Wall Street financier had invested cautiously throughout the 1920s; William Sloane Coffin had credited him with the excellent condition of the museum’s finances at the close of the volatile decade.\textsuperscript{81} His financial genius was legendary; in 1896, he was one of five managers of a syndicate that included J. P. Morgan and Jacob H. Schiff which pledged $50 million to sell foreign exchange and prevent a gold export crisis.\textsuperscript{82} In the months following the 1929 stock market crash, Coffin wrote to fellow-trustee William Church Osborn explaining the Finance Committee’s actions, reassuring him that “the changes of investments are carefully watched by Mr. Blumenthal who carries a list of Museum securities wherever he goes—(both here and abroad) and continually checks up the standing of the various securities.”\textsuperscript{83} A major collector of important medieval through Rococo art, Blumenthal became a trustee in 1909; joined the executive committee a year later; and rose to chairman in 1932. He also had been a member of the finance committee from 1916. In November 1927, he initiated and drafted a significant resolution creating one general account out of all of the securities held in the different funds of the museum.\textsuperscript{84} More personally, in 1928, he and his wife Florence gave the museum $1 million, with the provision that the interest accumulate until after their deaths, at which point, combined with principal, it could be used to buy works of art.

In addition, the Blumenthals gave generously to other causes, in particular Mount Sinai Hospital, of which he would be a trustee for over four decades and board president for half of
that time. Sigismund S. Goldwater, president of the Associated Hospital Service of New York, noted that when Blumenthal joined a working group, “his qualities of leadership soon came to the surface” without any personal aggressiveness. “Men turned to him instinctively when they saw how quickly he grasped a situation, how just was his attitude, how sound his judgment, how inexhaustible his energy, how successful he was in getting things done.”

In manner, Blumenthal was decidedly Old World. He and his wife lived in an austere Italian Renaissance house on Seventieth Street and Park Avenue that they built in 1920 to showcase their art; its centerpiece was a two-story courtyard that had been part of a sixteenth-century Spanish castle. The interior, illuminated by hundreds of candles, was at once “eerie and intimate,” and seemingly “far from the material bustle of New York,” wrote the art dealer Germain Seligman. “It was a dreamlike oasis of beauty, complete with melodious sound from the running water of the patio fountain, often the only sound of greeting.” Beyond the works of art and objets that, as part of the décor, were there to be touched, every detail of the house was flawless. In the evenings, the stylish Mrs. Blumenthal often wore dark velvet Renaissance-style gowns as she presided over her home in a relaxed way. Her husband, less comfortable in the space, “had a disconcerting habit of ushering guests into the elevator on the ground floor and then dashing up the stairs to let them out when they reached the drawing room level.” After his retirement from business in 1925, Blumenthal spent half of the year at his homes in France, where he engaged in extensive art collecting and received the order of the Legion of Honor twice: in 1925 for his aid in stabilizing the franc, and again in 1929, with his wife, for their many benefactions. The rest of his time he lived in New York, attending to his philanthropic activities.
Although devoted to the Metropolitan Museum, Blumenthal was not a maverick like William Sloane Coffin; he instead was a reversion in style and substance back to J. P. Morgan, older and more Old World than the younger advocates of modernism. Just the same, the trustees quickly selected the 75-year-old to succeed Coffin. A draft announcement of his election written by H. W. Kent described Blumenthal as a “distinguished connoisseur, notable as a collector of judgment and as one foremost in the encouragement and promotion of the arts”; the final version, signed by the museum’s first vice president (and chairman of the board of U. S. Steel), Myron C. Taylor, replaced the word “connoisseur” with “amateur.” In fact, Blumenthal had begun collecting as a young man, and had an unusual, tactile sensibility that he used to understand the works he assembled. “Where the scholar labors to know about objects, the connoisseur trains himself through all his senses to know objects,” the curator W. M. Ivins wrote of his aesthetic awareness. Accepting the presidency with the promise that the museum would “continue to expand in usefulness,” Blumenthal claimed not to be planning “any new departures,” and acknowledged the museum’s progress in its growing availability to the public. In all respects, he was one of the most appropriate men to become the seventh president of the Metropolitan Museum. Except that George Blumenthal was Jewish.

Blumenthal was the first Jewish trustee of the museum, and at the time of his appointment as president was still the only one. “About a quarter of the people of the city are Jews and a large proportion of the art treasures of the city are in Jewish hands,” Osborn had observed to de Forest in 1928. Both men were sensitive to the museum’s need to recognize the significant Hebrew presence in cultural affairs, and Blumenthal’s election to the board in 1909 was largely due to de Forest’s efforts in this regard, with Morgan’s approval. Yet the trustees’ first choice to succeed Coffin in fact had been Osborn, whose social, professional, and Protestant
pedigree were in lockstep with the previous Metropolitan Museum presidents, and whose three-decades’-long involvement as the board president of the Children’s Aid Society recalled Coffin’s philanthropic outlook. But in 1934, Osborn was too preoccupied with political and civic affairs to consider taking on the museum’s presidency, and he probably influenced the decision to offer the presidency to Blumenthal.\(^\text{94}\) The new president accepted the office with “a considerable degree of reluctance,” as he was said to generally prefer to withdraw from the forefront. And yet the often-“irksome” position was suited to his insight and administrative skill.\(^\text{95}\)

Blumenthal was born in 1858 in Frankfurt am Main, where he became a banker for Nazard-Speyer-Ellissen. In 1882, he arrived in New York, where he worked for Speyer & Co. until 1893, when he began a successful career at Lazard Frères.\(^\text{96}\) Following his retirement from the investment firm as senior partner in 1925, he devoted the rest of his life to philanthropic work and art collecting, an activity he took up with his wife as a distraction following their only child’s death.

Blumenthal had an incisive mind and “an ebullient yet durable energy, an indomitable will, an unassailable integrity, great personal charm,” and a “warm heart,” according to his hospital colleague Goldwater, yet he also “was one of the most puzzled and in a sense one of the humblest of men.”\(^\text{97}\) Well into the twentieth century, letters among even the closest of friends rarely began with a first-name salutation; however, when Blumenthal corresponded with Herbert Winlock, the Metropolitan’s new director, it was always “George” to “Herbert.”\(^\text{98}\)

But to Katharine Graham, Florence Blumenthal’s niece and the future publisher of the Washington Post, he was “a difficult man, with a big ego and a quick temper,” whom her father, who worked under him briefly at Lazard, never liked.\(^\text{99}\) When Winlock retired as the Metropolitan Museum’s director in 1940, he retained the title, “Adviser to the President,” to
which a *New Yorker* writer cryptically commented: “Mr. Blumenthal is sometimes a difficult man to advise and this title is to a certain extent honorary.”\textsuperscript{100} Even Seligman, who from childhood had enjoyed a warm relationship with Blumenthal, recognized that as a “man of daring in business,” he was “difficult to argue with, and had little inclination to waste time listening to all sorts of stories.”\textsuperscript{101} The towering financier in fact was physically small, “delicately built,” and “froggy,” and together with a thick German-Jewish accent, his temperament and person was inconsistent with his reputation as a man of cool elegance and genteel refinement.\textsuperscript{102} And yet, unlike the trustees who for decades had spoken of the Metropolitan as “our museum,” and the staff as “their” employees, Blumenthal recognized the appropriate boundaries between the trustees and the personnel, even if by ceding authority to the curators, the board might allow its influence to slowly erode.\textsuperscript{103} But this possibly was Blumenthal’s only serious nod to the progressive agenda Coffin had set in motion.

Blumenthal’s artistic taste reflected his conservative approach in manner of all things, and his collection bore his mark as a connoisseur. It was “not a group of individual masterpieces purchased here and there with accidental prodigality, but the slow accumulation of years of patient and discriminating judgment,” wrote Francis Henry Taylor, the museum’s curator during Blumenthal’s tenure. “All the violent likes and dislikes of the man of taste have entered into its making,” he surmised. To Taylor, Blumenthal bore a similarity to his contemporary, Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner, who likewise was steeped in the European tradition of collecting, “fascinated by its glamour, by the romance and fury of the chase.”\textsuperscript{104} Blumenthal’s long progression of gifts to the museum of medieval and Old Master works began in 1905 and continued until his death.\textsuperscript{105} “Nowhere in this country, except at the Cloisters and in our own Morgan collection, is it possible to find a finer series of late Gothic sculptures or better examples
of early mediaeval ivories and enamels,” Taylor declared. So much of the important art collecting of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was focused on European works dating prior to the eighteenth century, and depicting Christian religious themes. As the works were appreciated as art as opposed to religious iconography, it was hardly unusual, even while ironic, for Jewish dealers and collectors to favor them.

During his extended stays in France, Blumenthal reported back to the museum about the art market with an all-consuming zeal. He rarely haggled, but simply passed up objects with prices he felt were unjustifiably high. In a July 1933 letter from Paris, he wrote to Winlock that there was “nothing of interest to report,” apart from a few bargains, but “no real improvement perceptible yet so I believe that a good many more things will come out there [in the] next 12 months from quarters not yet heard from.” He eagerly anticipated that it was “quite possible that many German museums belonging to the smaller principalities will try to part with good things just because their government need [sic] the cash,” and reported seeing a fine gold enamel cup selling for one-fifth of the 1928 price. Blumenthal neglected to mention a more serious international situation: on July 14, 1933, the German cabinet declared the National Socialist German Workers Party to be by law the only political party in Germany. On the same day, the Nazis also passed another law stripping Jewish immigrants from Poland of their German citizenship, and yet another for the “prevention of progeny with hereditary diseases,” mandating forced sterilization of Germans with genetic defects.

Undeniably, it was customary for important art collectors with an interest in the museum eventually to be asked to join the board, with the notable exception of those who were Jewish, so Blumenthal’s reluctance to draw attention to his background was understandable. He even sent Christmas Greetings to the trustees from Paris via Cablegram in December 1914, regretting his
“unavoidable absence.”109 Blumenthal had become a trustee under Morgan’s term along with men like George F. Baker and Henry Clay Frick, and in that company was classified as a wealthy financier and collector more than anything else. Yet in the same period, in 1913, the German-born merchant Benjamin Altman bequeathed a magnificent collection of old master paintings and objets d’art to the museum valued at $15 million. Exceptional highlights from the approximately eight-thousand-piece donation were on exhibit at the museum for several decades after the donation. Michael Friedsam, Altman’s closest associate, followed suit in 1931 with a bequest of 135 important Dutch, French, German, and Italian paintings and 200 other works valued at $10 million.110 Neither Altman nor Friedsam—both Jewish—were ever considered for Metropolitan Museum board membership.

Like many of Gotham’s important philanthropists, Friedsam had an abiding interest in New York City’s civic progress, as well as in state educational matters. He often had said that because he did not like the way the Metropolitan Museum was run that he “never would give it a nickel,” and indeed spread his generosity as far afield as the Louvre, to which he gave a rare Italian primitive painting, and to Monticello, Thomas Jefferson’s home in Virginia, to which Friedsam was the first New Yorker to pledge to the campaign to save it.111 Towards the end of Friedsam’s life, however, it became “stronger and stronger in his mind” that the Metropolitan Museum indeed might be the best place for the public to view his art collection, which he believed to be far superior to Altman’s and quite possibly the best in the world. Displayed together, he felt the works could help convey the history of art, and advance public knowledge.112 Coffin’s endorsement of a bonafide educational agenda for the museum no doubt convinced Friedsam’s executors of the museum’s earnestness in that pursuit, enabling them to come to an agreement regarding the complicated terms of the bequest.113
Apart from collecting, Friedsam, who had taken over the leadership of the B. Altman store after its founder’s death, was deeply involved in Jewish philanthropic endeavors, and he led the successful campaign in November 1925 to raise $4 million in four days for the Federation of the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies, pledging $25,000, the highest individual amount, himself. As chairman of the State Commission on School Finances and Administration appointed by Governor Al Smith in the 1920s, Friedsam recommended a municipal tax to subsidize public school costs, to be levied through increased taxes on either personal income, inheritance, corporations, or a gasoline tax; it was considered the most important educational measure enacted by the Legislature in many years. He was a director of the American Red Cross; a liberal supporter of Catholic Charities, the United Hospitals, the Boy Scouts, and the Playground and Recreation Association; a leader of the movement to complete the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on Morningside Heights; and as president of the Fifth Avenue Association of merchants, pushed for the City Administration to establish a bridge and tunnel authority and a city planning commission. His prescient suggestions in the realm of city planning raised consciousness about traffic, the condition and upkeep of the streets, and the removal of the Sixth Avenue elevated train; in addition, he promoted the construction of a midtown tunnel. When Friedsam died in 1931, Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt remembered his friend as “one of the most unselfish and useful citizens of his city and State.”

Friedsam, indeed, was close in spirit to the civic-minded de Forest, and even more similar to Coffin, both men being merchants dedicated to religious charities and to public education and welfare. Yet Friedsam always was associated with Jewish causes; even his $10 million bequest to the Metropolitan Museum headlined the Times article trumpeting “$56,200,870 Given By Jews” to Jewish charities and “causes of other sects” in the year ending August 1931.
Meanwhile, both William Church Osborn and his brother Henry Fairfield Osborn, the American Museum of Natural History’s president, had taken note of the growing importance of Jewish philanthropic leaders. The Metropolitan Museum trustee Osborn encouraged placing “at least one young Jew” on its board.119 Similarly, his sibling wrote to fellow natural history museum trustee Percy R. Pyne in January 1910: “It is very important I believe to select [as a trustee] the name of an agreeable Hebrew, because the Zoo, the Metrop., the Public Lib. have all done so, and our attitude is becoming conspicuous.”120

Blumenthal, however, remained circumspect about being Jewish. When Edward Robinson, the Metropolitan Museum director, died in 1931, Blumenthal was among the illustrious pallbearers at St. Bartholomew’s Church, who included both Osborns, Coffin, John D. Rockefeller Jr., the architect Chester Aldrich, the art connoisseur Grenville Winthrop, and only one other Jew, James Speyer, as the representative of the Museum of the City of New York.121 The New York City “power broker” Robert Moses, another assimilated German Jew, noted that the New York Zoological Society’s board chairman, Madison Grant, was a downright anti-Semite, and Osborn’s wish for an “agreeable Hebrew” on the Museum of Natural History’s board was only heeding “the course of geological evolution.” The considerable debate over whether that man should be Felix Warburg or Isaac Newton Seligman, another banker, was “reminiscent of club stuff.” Yet “even geologically, this was not as remarkable a feat as George Blumenthal’s swimming up Niagara to the presidency of the Met,” Moses wrote.122

Moses did not mince words about his opinion of “our wealthiest and most powerful institution,” the Metropolitan Museum, of which he was an ex officio board member as the city’s Parks Commissioner. In spite of the museum’s advances under Coffin, to Moses it was “still a club—exclusive, dignified, public-spirited, traditional, not fully aware of the significance of
modern trends, relatively unimpressed by public opinion, removed from local pride and pressure, but beginning to realize that even a matchless collection and a $45 million endowment require political backing, larger appropriations from the public treasury, and therefore a broader base and closer contacts with the lowest common denominator, otherwise known as Joe Doakes, the voter, man in the street, citizen, and taxpayer.”

Moses reserved his more blatant hostility for Blumenthal, who had insisted that an ex officio trustee could not be a member of the museum’s executive committee. Moses explained that he had wanted the park commissioner to be a member of the board group that acted upon the most important business “not because of the social distinction involved, since I did not have the time to attend personally, but because it was the only way in which the commissioner could be helpful in explaining the museum’s program to the Mayor and city financial authorities.” When the museum’s legal advisers finally agreed to “this sacrilege,” Blumenthal’s polite reception of Moses failed to impress. “Mr. Blumenthal invited me to his mansion to give me caviar and brandy with the glad tidings that a representative of the Park Department would be admitted to the holy of holies, in the hope that it would not be profaned by his presence,” Moses wrote.

To Moses, museum trusteeship was about power, not social acceptance. To Blumenthal, who had a surfeit of both—on Wall Street and in the European and American social elite worlds—the museum, its leadership, and its holdings represented the last bastion of a cherished other time. Two weeks after Blumenthal’s election in January 1934, certain members and friends received an engraved invitation to meet the new museum president at a 4 pm reception in the restaurant. Recalling the days when Morgan stood at the head of the stairs shaking members’ hands at functions, Blumenthal embraced the ceremonial aspects of his new position with his characteristic dignity. Often joined by Osborn and later by the new museum director Francis
Taylor, Blumenthal would receive guests in the middle of the museum’s great hall. “The sight of them—Blumenthal short and wiry, Osborn tall and patrician, and Taylor looking like a cross between François I and the actor Sidney Greenstreet—made an arresting tableau,” Calvin Tomkins wrote. Moses was contemptuous of the old moneyed founders, whom he found arrogant and conceited. “They really felt they were the lords of creation and that nobody had the right even to question what they did,” Moses said.

Blumenthal’s conservatism was also professional and financial. The autocratic Lazard partner ran the board with a businesslike efficiency, and continuing as chair of the finance committee even after becoming president, guarded the museum’s finances with great secrecy, and made a majority of the cautious investments himself. He “brooked no laxity in fellow-members of the boards he directed, unequivocally reminding latecomers that it was a business meeting and not a social gathering,” Seligman wrote. Moses was not the only official to run into problems with transparency in the board administration. Blumenthal even refused to allow his finance committee to do an audit of the endowment. “He would bring a single copy of the annual financial report to the board meeting, and announce that his colleagues were welcome to examine it if they so desired; the general impression was that he would be much happier if they did not,” Tomkins wrote. Of the “rather disturbed” trustees, Ogden Mills threatened to resign unless Blumenthal agreed to distribute copies of the statement to the board; the president reluctantly complied.

As a “sound money” advocate, Blumenthal opposed the New Deal and submitted an open letter, via Henry Morgenthau Jr., Acting Secretary of the Treasury, to President Roosevelt in November 1933. “I know you do not wish to put your country into bankruptcy,” he began, “but if that was your purpose you certainly could not adopt more efficient measures than those resorted
to for several months. By calling immediate halt in present policies and announcing intention reverting to sound money and accepting the working of the law of demand and supply, chaos and ruin can probably still be avoided.” He predicted that Roosevelt’s “faulty measures” would bring “untold misfortune” to the United States. Blumenthal’s message was picked up by the national press, and in some circles was roundly criticized. (The Pittsfield, Massachusetts *Eagle* even joked that the financier was an advocate of sound money, but apparently not sound grammar.)

But Blumenthal’s fiscal caution, along with curtailed operating expenses and limited purchasing as mandated by de Forest, kept the museum afloat during the Depression. Although some great art treasures went to other repositories during this period, in 1934 the museum also began building the Cloisters in Fort Tryon Park, funded by Rockefeller.  

The Cloisters project was thoroughly compatible with Blumenthal’s aesthetic orientation, and he chaired its special committee with passion. Indeed, Moses cheekily complained that Blumenthal’s “dictum” that “nothing significant had been painted, molded, or wrought since 1900” persisted and grew in authority even as the world moved well into the twentieth century. Modern art simply was too far a departure from his taste. He barely could tolerate being in the same room with Gertrude Stein, the American expatriate intellectual and storied modern art collector, who adapted Cubist philosophy to the written word. When Blumenthal heard her lecture at the Colony Club, James Rorimer, the young assistant curator of decorative arts, eventual curator of medieval art, and future Metropolitan Museum director, warned the museum president that he would make history if he left in the presence of so many distinguished guests. But he departed anyway, and Rorimer followed up with a telegram saying, “By leaving Stein lecture eleven minutes early you missed hearing ‘an oil painting is an oil painting is’ sixty
nine times.” Rorimer fondly remembered decades later that although Blumenthal refused to acknowledge receipt of the telegram, for months he “kept telling the story all over town.”

Even so, in 1934-35, Blumenthal did appoint a joint committee to consider “some form of relation” between the Metropolitan and the new Museum of Modern Art. Recognizing a broad common objective, the boards addressed the Modern Museum’s ability to “act more experimentally” while the Metropolitan acknowledged the limits of its obligation to purchase the work of living artists as mandated by the bequest of James A. Hearn. “It was felt that on such matters as these, mutual consideration and cooperation would be of great value,” a memo from the first meeting in November 1934 described. Although cooperation was animated by the formation of the committee and the proposed election of three trustees shared by both boards, ultimately nothing of programmatic substance immediately occurred to further a modernist agenda for the Metropolitan Museum under Blumenthal.

The selection process for a new director to replace the ailing Herbert Winlock tested Blumenthal’s conservatism, anti-modernism, and his Semitic ambivalence. Blumenthal may have feared exposure to criticism about bringing Jews to the Metropolitan Museum leadership or professional circle; even so, there was a definite divide between the notion of Jewish trustees and the reality of Jewish curators. In the professional sphere, particularly in the arts, the growing Jewish presence did not raise eyebrows in the way it did in the social arena of cultural boards or clubs. Two vital staff members were Jewish—Rorimer, who helped develop the Cloisters, and Harry Wehle, the curator of paintings and nephew of Justice Brandeis.

In June 1939, William Church Osborn, charged with the search for a director, surveyed some of the leading American art historians for ideas. Charles Rufus Morey, the head of the Department of Art History of Princeton University, felt that given the Metropolitan’s premier
position among art museums, the scholarship of the curators and the director should be paramount, and he was hardly alone in this assessment. The time had long passed for the museum to rest as a “mere collection of fine objects.” The best man for the directorship, he suggested, was Paul Sachs of Harvard, who stood out as a scholar, a collector, and an administrator. Morey told Osborn that Sachs’s relations with public officials as well as with the general public “was certain to be good,” and added that in the past, Sachs had expressed an interest in the museum directorship. Osborn immediately cabled Blumenthal at the Ritz in Paris for permission to make inquiries and schedule an interview.

At the time, Paul Sachs was in the midst of a long and illustrious career at Harvard as a professor of Art History, chairman of the Department of Fine Arts (Art History), and associate director of the Fogg Art Museum. Functioning with considerable skill and imagination without a board of trustees, the Fogg’s director, Edward Waldo Forbes, together with Sachs, extended the museum’s influence far beyond New England. Sachs, however, was best known as the professor of a graduate seminar on museum history, philosophy, and methods, the first of its kind in the United States, and consequently the most important training ground for future museum curators and professionals. Through his course, Sachs mentored two generations of museum professionals, including future directors of the Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the Art Institute of Chicago. He counted among his protégés James Rorimer and other Metropolitan Museum curators, although his most famous was Alfred H. Barr Jr., the Museum of Modern Art’s first director, hand-picked by Sachs at Abby Aldrich Rockefeller’s behest. But in his position at Harvard, Paul Sachs also was possibly the first American Jew to teach art history in the United States.
Osborn was taken aback when Blumenthal cabled back from Paris that he was unimpressed with his choice of Sachs: “CONSIDER SACHS HIGH CLASS CHARACTER AND VERY SCHOLARLY VERY GENTLEMANLY BUT UNATTRACTIVE PERSONALITY STOP UNDER PRESENT CONDITIONS AFRAID WOULD BE GREAT MISTAKE GIVING HIM POSITION AS WOULD SURELY BE VERY UNPOPULAR AND OPEN TO MUCH UNJUSTIFIED CRITICISM ADVISE ABSTAINING PRESENTLY PERSONAL INTERVIEW WILL WRITE BLUMENTHAL.”

Morey and Osborn communicated again, and the Princeton professor only pressed Sachs’s case further: “The more I think of the Metropolitan directorship, the more it seems to me a job considerably beyond the capacities of the museum directors that I know. . . . The place seems to me to be exactly comparable to that of the presidency of one of our most important universities, and the qualities to be sought seem to me to be those we seek in filling a university presidency.” Morey was ever more convinced that Paul Sachs was the man for the job. Furthermore, heeding Blumenthal’s apparent hesitation more explicitly, Morey added that Sachs “would be the least affected by prejudice as to his race of all the prominent Jews in the country, having for one thing the solid backing of the Harvard interests and of Princeton as well, so far as our department is concerned.”

He also was known to every member of the Metropolitan Museum’s staff, and Winlock and Osborn both anticipated that if chosen, Sachs would be favorably accepted by the public.

Sachs’s exposure to art did not come from Harvard alone. As the eldest son of Samuel Sachs and the nephew of Marcus Goldman, the investment bankers who founded Goldman, Sachs & Company, Paul Sachs was born to privilege. After studying at Harvard, where his talents in art history were recognized, he joined the family business in Boston and then New
York, where he frequented the museums and galleries, and came to know prominent art dealers and collectors, many of them family friends like Altman and Friedsam. He returned to Harvard and to art history, however, at age thirty-seven. At Shady Hill, his Cambridge home, Sachs led a lively salon that drew on not only Harvard’s luminaries and students, but also included national and international museum directors and art collectors. Professionally, Sachs was a trustee of Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts, the Institute of Contemporary Art, and the Cincinnati Art Museum; he also was a trustee of Radcliffe, Smith, and Wellesley, and received honorary degrees from Colby College, Princeton, Yale, as well as Harvard. New Yorker Grenville Winthrop donated his important four-thousand-piece art collection to the Fogg because of Sachs, transforming the museum from “a good study collection” to an “institution of global stature.” Finally, Sachs was one of seven founding trustees of the Museum of Modern Art, to which he gave works that initiated its department of graphic arts.

Sachs had wide-ranging charitable interests that included work for the Red Cross, board membership with the Urban League, and, during World War II, he helped rescue scholars, as well as works of art, from the Nazis. Like Blumenthal, he had little interest in Judaism, however, and identified even less with Jewish causes. Although proud of his family name, he felt that distinguishing himself intellectually and aesthetically counteracted any bigotry about his inherited ethnicity. But Sachs also was an elitist who valued cultivation and looked to the scholarly role of the art museum. His conviction was that “a museum worker must first and foremost be a broad, well-trained scholar, a linguist, and then in due course, a specialist, a scholar with wide bibliographical knowledge, a scholar with broad human sympathies including a belief in popular education, a curator and administrator taught to understand that in the twentieth century in America, a museum should be now only a treasure house but also an
educational institution, and last, but no means least, that he should be a competent speaker and
writer, as well as a man of the world with bowing acquaintance with other fields." In other
words, the archetypal “museum worker” was Paul Sachs himself.

Osborn wrote back to Blumenthal suggesting that on an eastward trip he might stop at the
Fogg to see, but not interview Sachs, and added that none of the people he had already
interviewed, Francis Henry Taylor of the Worcester Art Museum, Horace H. F. Jayne of the
University of Pennsylvania Museum, or William Milliken of the Cleveland Museum, were up to
the demands of the job.

In a letter following his telegram, Blumenthal more specifically voiced his concerns,
acknowledging again that Sachs was a “high-class man.” But Blumenthal also felt that the
towering figure in the field of art history did not measure up. “His personality is anything but
attractive + he has not sufficient courage to defend his opinions but rather bows down to that of
persons considered ‘authorities,’ who are also apt to make mistakes,” Blumenthal somewhat
outrageously stated. Then he acknowledged in couched terms that he was Jewish, and this was a
problem. “If everything else was satisfactory it might still be unwise to consider Sachs on
account of the positions held in the Museum by me, Wehle + Rorimer. This point, however, need
not be considered because of the other shortcomings, one of which is that he is about 58 years
old,” Blumenthal concluded.

As far as Blumenthal was concerned, under no circumstances would Paul Sachs ever get
the job.

Blumenthal was not averse to considering even Morey himself, even though he was older
and less distinguished than Sachs. Taylor and Jayne ultimately were the finalists, and a less-than-
enthusiastic Osborn offered the position to Jayne, mistakenly thinking that it was he and not
Taylor who was Blumenthal’s first choice. In the end, Taylor became the new director, and Jayne, his close friend and associate, the vice-director. Together, they would lead the museum to mid-century with a commitment to change that would not be met approvingly by everyone.

Nevertheless, the election of the irreverent, un-stuffy, thirty-seven-year-old Taylor was seen as a coup for younger trustees seeking a more progressive approach to the museum management. His art experience notwithstanding, the New Yorker described Taylor as “a nonconformist member of an old Philadelphia fox-hunting family” who weighed over two hundred pounds, and had “a passion for good cheeses.”

It is interesting to speculate about the direction the Metropolitan Museum might have taken had Sachs become its director in 1940. The period included discussions in the direction of an unprecedented artistic modernism: a proposed consolidation with the Whitney Museum in 1943-47, and a potential contract with the Museum of Modern Art to purchase its pioneering works no longer considered “modern.” Neither plan came to fruition. The decade also witnessed the launch of a large seventy-fifth anniversary fundraising and membership campaign; new public relations initiatives; and continual pressure from Robert Moses regarding the museum’s finances, the city’s responsibility for erecting additional buildings, and his persistent criticisms about the absence of women on its board. During the Sachs controversy, Winlock and Osborn commiserated about the unfortunate circumstances between the famed art historian and Blumenthal. “I am not sure that he is entirely persona grata with G.B.,” Winlock wrote. “They are of the same race, perhaps that is the trouble,” he concluded.

When Blumenthal died in 1941, he bequeathed to the museum all of his works of art dating before 1720 as well as his house itself. While he had considered leaving the building intact as a branch location, ultimately he directed that it be dismantled and sold to provide a
special fund for the museum. The celebrated Spanish Renaissance patio from the Vélez Blanco palace, where Blumenthal lay in state and where his nondenominational funeral took place, was then reinstalled in the museum. He was remembered as a man whose keen business sense was matched only by his connoisseur’s taste, which was evidenced not only in his collection, but also in the museum’s purchases during his term of office.

Adjacent to Blumenthal’s obituary in the museum Bulletin was a harbinger of the changing times: an announcement of the museum’s television initiative, a new arm of the institution’s educational activities. “The only reason that I can discover for the quality which I describe as a new life, when pictures are transmitted by television, is that the picture is repainted by millions of electronic particles,” Gilbert Seldes, the Director of Television Programs for CBS, wrote. Through modern technology, works of art now could be brought into thousands of homes simultaneously. This was in ironic juxtaposition to the publication’s remembrance of the late president, whose only visible commitment to modernity was a push-button device in his bedroom that opened and closed the window without his getting out of bed.
CHAPTER NINE
Brother, Can You Spare a Dime? The Opera Goes Begging

During the 1920s, consistent with the progressive impulses of the day, and like the library and the museum, the Metropolitan Opera Company embraced technological advances and created new professional standards, both of which presented fresh opportunities for additional revenue. The Company signed recording contracts with the Victor Talking Machine Company and with Brunswick-Balke Collender, and enforced the clause in contracts prohibiting artists from performing on any other American stage. No longer a scattershot assemblage of stars and musicians contracted from season to season, the Metropolitan Opera Company had become a renowned institution with a consistently high standard of artistic quality, consistency, and professionalism.

This evolution occurred independently of the theater in which the Company performed. In 1922, Kahn approached the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate board with a proposal from the city for the opera house to move to a planned City Art Centre, located at the blocks from Forty-eighth or Forty-ninth Street to Fifty-first or Fifty-second Street, running through from Seventh to Sixth Avenues. As an inducement, the City was offering title to the site upon which the Real Estate Company would erect the theater. The Metropolitan Opera Company would rent the new house, the two board entities and their relationship would remain the same, and the Real Estate Company would have the same right to determine box owners.

Even as many of the opera leaders joined Kahn in embracing the future, equally powerful others were retrenching into the past if only to hold onto their social status and authority, and not cede it to presumptuous newcomers. The tension tested the leadership group even while it unwittingly endangered the existence of the opera itself.
Essentially, Kahn’s proposal called for an up-to-date theater to be erected in an increasingly modern city, even while retaining the antiquated social standard that was the foundation of the initial enterprise. But clearly, new economic and social realities nevertheless were marginalizing the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company and its house. Even in the act of proposing the change, the city approached Kahn and the opera company, not the real estate board. With the boxes now controlled by the descendants of the original founders, the great funds and funders that built the opera house were now becoming a thing of the past. Significantly increased taxes and mounting expenses to maintain the building were considerable concerns of the Real Estate Company, which hoped to pass the costs on to the Opera Company in a renegotiated lease. World War I had reconfigured international society, depleting the ranks of real royalty in Europe and changing the quality of its ersatz counterparts in the United States. Individually, the Real Estate contingent still possessed significant inherited fortunes, but the group lacked initiative if not the disposable funds to build a new house. Furthermore, it was the old Metropolitan Opera House itself that was partly responsible for these men’s enduring, albeit waning, social power. Not surprisingly, J. P. Morgan Jr. moved that the City Art Centre proposal be rejected.⁴

Kahn was not so easily dissuaded, and again approached the Real Estate Company in late 1925 with another proposal, this time initiated by the Metropolitan Opera Company itself.⁵ While Kahn had discussed the matter privately over the years with George H. Haven, the late president of the Real Estate group who had agreed about the growing inadequacy of the old theater, he and Kahn both were deferential to the Real Estate board. But now the situation was becoming more urgent, and Haven was gone. Kahn acknowledged as always the “high standing in the community of the gentlemen composing your Board” which had “contributed greatly to
the success and prestige of Grand Opera.” Even though Kahn represented a board and company whose commitment to opera was more of an artistic rather than a social nature, he wished for the opera house’s traditions to endure in a new space.

Kahn himself, not the Real Estate Company, was making the necessary arrangements to finance a new house. In fact, to secure the desirable site at Fifty-seventh to Fifty-sixth Streets between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, Kahn purchased it at his own risk for $3 million, prior to obtaining the views of the Real Estate Company. The old Metropolitan Opera House and the board that managed it had become irrelevant. Yet Kahn graciously held out the hope that “the same group of gentlemen who control the present Opera House should take the lead in the erection and control of a new Opera House, acting either through their present organization or in their individual capacities.”

Meanwhile, Kahn held that the “overwhelming preponderance of opinion” was that the old Met physically no longer met “present conditions and requirements.” Everything behind the curtain—the narrow wings; the shallow stage; the facilities for scene storage, wardrobe, and stage effects; the dressing rooms; the ventilation—were all “sadly inadequate.” The traffic near the theater also had become an insoluble problem. And for the productions themselves, “the cost of giving opera in the style befitting the Metropolitan” was mounting even as “the limit of income which can be obtained within the capacity of the present House” had been reached.

Kahn’s main argument for improvement, however, was that the Real Estate Company had never considered the notion of bringing opera to the masses in addition to boxholders. The Metropolitan Opera Company’s operating board was “in constant touch” with the public and was unanimous in its conviction that a new building had become “an urgent necessity” for the Metropolitan to serve New Yorkers and to maintain its rank as the “foremost operatic institution.
in the world.” Furthermore, it was unjust to take money from the poor for unsatisfactory lower-priced seats. To Kahn, it was a “compelling obligation” for the company, “standing as it does in a kind of trust relationship to the opera-loving public of New York, to provide amply and generously for those of its patrons who are of small or modest means and in whose case the price of a ticket often means close economy and self-denial.”

The most radical departure in Kahn’s proposal concerned the box arrangement. Traditionally, box owners attended the operas they chose and then rented or gave their boxes away for any remaining performances, a system Kahn deemed “inconvenient, troublesome and expensive to the owners, and detrimental to the value of the boxes.” Therefore, he suggested that in a new scheme there be no owners and only lessees. With five subscription performances each week, and assuming thirty boxes, he suggested that one hundred fifty persons be invited to become box holders for one performance each week (or more than one evening if so desired by any of those so invited). The cost of renting such a box would be approximately $3,500.—or about $145. for each performance.”

Furthermore, Kahn envisioned the “new Metropolitan” architecturally to be “plain and dignified, on good but simple lines, seeking its distinction in being perfectly adapted to its purpose, both on the stage and in the accommodation to the public, rather than in outward impressiveness.” In keeping with current trends, the building did not need to be monumental, ornamental, or rival European theaters physically. Kahn was anticipating a Metropolitan Opera House cut along more egalitarian and modernist lines—a place that, unlike the old Met, was not an architectural manifestation of the grand, aristocratic aspirations of the plutocrats who had built it. Although Kahn had ascended to the boxholding privilege, it was clear that it was the opera that held his interest and not the box. The Real Estate Company board of the 1920s appeared less
certain of what drew them to the opera house. A new way of thinking was sidelining old elites. The financial and creative vitality of the Met now relied on new money and fresh habits of mind to assure its preeminence in the twentieth century.

Opera, of course, never had been a moneymaking endeavor. Kahn saw fit to remind the Real Estate Board that the stockholders of the Opera Company—primarily Kahn himself—“have never received or claimed any interest or dividends whatever on the capital which for 17 years they have furnished and kept invested in producing Grand Opera in a manner befitting the traditions, the dignity and the standards of the art enterprise which was called into being by the founders of the Metropolitan Opera House and which has come to rank, by universal assent, as the world’s foremost operatic institution.”

The Real Estate Board, no longer a small, powerful, purposeful entity with limitless means, answered by abdicating the question of a new theater to the individual stockholders. A passive tone of resignation permeated their public response. “The sentiment was expressed, that if the new Opera House project goes successfully forward in the hands of the Metropolitan Opera Company, this Company would doubtless retire from the field and leave the conduct of opera for the future wholly in the hands of the newer organization, under whose care and zeal great artistic success have been achieved.” It was up to the boxholders to either accept or reject the plan, for the board was removing itself from the debate. Board president R. Fulton Cutting replied to Kahn’s letter: “[I]t was decided that the Company would not undertake the erection of a new building for the production of opera. Moreover, it has no intention of continuing to produce opera if a new building such as your Committee proposes should be provided for that purpose.”

The Times stated it more plainly: “The present opera house holding company, controlling a site now worth many millions of dollars, is owned largely by estates of the original builders of
the opera house,” and the directors were hesitating to assume the responsibility for a new site for “the leading musical structure in America.” The new endeavor would require youthful energy in addition to money to direct it, and the newspaper questioned whether once that leadership was in place if Kahn would transfer to the new organization the site he had provisionally acquired. Kahn and his land purchase forced an uncomfortable issue, and the social protocol of a different time no longer determined who would take the lead in creating a new performance space. All that it seemed would be necessary for such a monumental move was money and initiative, and Kahn possessed both.

Nevertheless, Kahn proceeded in the two years of discussions that followed with utmost regard for the old governing board. The Real Estate group did not fade into irrelevance partly because of its ties to the old social order that both the board and the theater represented, and partly because the board still held some social power. With discussions for a new theater on the table, nominally entered into cooperatively by both Real Estate and Opera Company boards but actually spearheaded by one man, Kahn, it might have been logical to think about consolidating interests into one central group of directors. But the Real Estate Company was not going to capitulate so quickly.

In the days that followed the discussions in early January 1926, the battle lines that would endure until late 1928 were already clear. R. Fulton Cutting, the president of the Real Estate Company, was of the opinion, shared by many on his board, that the old opera house was sufficient, and he and Cornelius N. Bliss corresponded frequently about their distrust of Kahn, who clearly favored a move. Less than a week after the announcement, public opinion emerged strongly in favor of a new home, in spite of the reservations of some who held a sentimental attachment to the old space. Kahn expressed his dismay to Cutting at the “sensational turn” the
news item had taken, which insinuated that plans for the new house were not the result of a mutual agreement by the two boards.20 The thirty-five boxholders, as shareholders of the Metropolitan Opera House, were for the most part also in favor of replacing the theater.21 (Even Cornelius Bliss had to relent, because his older sister Lillie, with whom he shared a box, wished to sign up for the new plan.22) But the greater power of the boxholders’ control was social rather than financial. “It is conceded that it would not be difficult to raise the money required, but that it is essential that the project should have behind it the names and the prestige of the present boxholders,” wrote the Times, which observed that the Met served another function as “the only centralizing factor in New York society,” now broken into small groups and driven by disparate influences. “The Golden Horseshoe represents New York society’s last stand as a unit,” the newspaper stated.23

What would a new Metropolitan House look like, and how would it represent twentieth-century New York City? In a January 1926 editorial, the Times warned that Kahn’s plot of land was within “audible distance” of the elevated railroad, and on the less-desirable Upper West Side. But it also was affordable, convenient, on wide Fifty-seventh Street, and accessible on all four sides of the building. A new building also had the potential to be one of architectural integrity, with an opera house at its core and studios and offices “piled up in ‘cloud-capt [sic] towers,’” a contemporary skyscraper style considered by some to be “the finest contribution of America to architecture, in dignity and impressiveness.”24 The theater could be large enough to hold 500 to 1,000 more of the “opera-going masses,” opening up the “beneficent prospect of giving the pleasure and profit of hearing opera to a greater public” while increasing the company’s receipts. Modern acoustical engineering, no longer a “gamble” but a matter of “mathematics,” could be installed. Finally, the Times conjectured sarcastically, “it may be
assumed that, this time, New York’s opera house will be built by an architect who has seen the inside of a theatre and knows all the intricate requirements of a modern stage.”

For those who would mourn the passing of a hallowed arena, these remained practical issues. Moreover, unlike the government-subsidized opera houses of Paris or London, in New York no structure was off limits to the wrecker’s ball, its opera house included. “The wide plazas that make monuments of foreign opera house and give them permanency do not exist here, where land is so precious and business so progressive,” stated Paul Morris in the *Times*. Similarly, the foundations of the upper class social order were beginning to feel equally impermanent in New York City.

A new Metropolitan Opera House seemed inevitable, and it gave some New Yorkers with long enough memories pause to contemplate the “opera wars” of the 1880s. It would be dangerous to reduce the numbers of boxes of the new theater to thirty from thirty-five, as was suggested, even as it would be rash to pass judgment on what the *Times* called “the needs and rightful claims of New York society in opera boxes.” The Academy of Music lost the “opera war” to the Met in part because it was too small physically and too exclusive socially. The Met, in turn, was now expanding its physical and social boundaries further.

New Yorker George Hillard Benjamin, a prominent 74-year-old scientist, lawyer, and patent expert, reminisced about the Academy of Music, and what “The Opera” meant to New Yorkers in the nineteenth century. The building, he wrote, was essentially a social center—a place “where public and private balls, receptions, and the like could be given and which would be adequate for the proper presentation of opera.” There was a definite pecking order to the arrangement of the seats, which reflected New York’s developing class structure: the parquet was for the well-to-do; the boxes were for the “socially elect”; and the wall stalls were for the
socially unimportant “would-bes,” otherwise known as “the legion of the lost ones, the cohort of the damned.” Now, ownership of a box at the Metropolitan Opera held no social significance whatsoever, in his opinion. Box sublets were prevalent, and box owners were socially unknown, not because they were unworthy, but because organized society in New York had ceased to exist. There were no longer four hundred qualifying elites—there were thousands. Benjamin believed, and others concurred, that the old Met boxholders had lacked their own initiative for building a new opera house because the opera was “no longer a social necessity,” and the estates which held the boxes were no longer inclined to invest money in what would be “a purely business enterprise.” He thus suggested that a new opera house should be built and controlled by the people of the City of New York, and controlled by a board of governors, much as the Metropolitan Museum was. But that was an idea whose time had not yet come.

Other observers were wont to find the similarities between 1880 and 1926, although in fact the impulses that led to the building of the Met in the 1880s were social rather than artistic, and in the 1920s the priorities were artistic rather than social. Where the Met was concerned, Otto Kahn, too, recognized the limitations of the antique theatre not only technologically, but also socially. There were “opera going masses” to please in addition to thirty-five boxholders. Kahn simply loved the opera, and desired for it to be as well presented as it could be for the benefit of as many people as possible.

The Metropolitan Opera House had become a venue of world stature, of which New Yorkers of all classes had every reason to be proud. It was one of the first places that distinguished foreign visitors would visit upon arriving in New York, and it managed to maintain a strong local following. It was no overstatement for the *Times* to say, “In all of the history of
opera in this country no one theatre has been able to hold the fashionable world so long as has the Metropolitan.”  But was it the opera or the house that held their attention?

In a poignant coincidence, amidst all the discussions in early 1926 about the “new” Met, a short article announced the closing of the Academy of Music with a performance hosted by the building’s new owner, the Consolidated Gas Company of New York. “An unusual demonstration of sentiment will be witnessed this afternoon,” the Times anticipated, to which several musicians who had played at the Academy years before had been invited, along with only two descendants of families who had held seats there. The announcement neglected to mention what was to be performed, an appropriately fitting end for a theater which began less for art than for a now-outdated aristocratic ideal. The Academy of Music was demolished soon afterwards, and an office building was erected in its place.

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The 1926 Metropolitan Opera season began in the fall with a few notable changes in the boxes. August Belmont’s estate relinquished Box 4, which Belmont had purchased in 1895. Anticipating the impending move, William K. Vanderbilt II and Harold S. Vanderbilt, sons of Alva and William K. Vanderbilt, the largest initial stockholder in the Metropolitan Opera House, relinquished Box 6. Vincent Astor, grandson of nineteenth-century society’s queen Caroline, now shared Box 7 with several others. In fact, all boxes but the J. P. Morgan family’s were shared. In the modern “café society” of the Roaring Twenties, opera was but one entertainment among many, and it stood to reason that an opera box might not be constantly occupied. Box subletting also could prove lucrative: Georgine Iselin, who held three hundred shares of stock in the Met as represented by her box, leased it from the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company for $2000 a year but received $9525 in 1919-20 for subletting it for forty-seven performances. In
a case that went to the Supreme Court in 1926, she and similar stockholders were found to be exempt from a 50 percent tax imposed on comparable sales by scalpers.34

The opening night in October 1926 was filled with sentimental anticipation, as people crowded into the soon-to-be-extinct old auditorium. The house that once dominated Broadway, the Times wrote, “now is lost among twenty surrounding skyscrapers.”35 Subscriptions for the season’s four thousand seats were “near saturation,” and the wider public looked to get on the list for future consideration in the event of a move. The opera, indeed, now was going to be open to everyone. Opening night remained a social event, with “the delay of seeking out the old familiar quarters and exchanging a new season’s greetings with the neighbors of other years.” The house was “filled to its last chair or foot of standing room.” But the audience was a different one from the previous century’s, and represented, possibly as no other audience, the New York of the present.36

News accounts of who-was-who in the boxes were no longer limited to the parterre “golden horseshoe” of the first ring. The public now knew who would be in the Grand Tier and who would be in the Stall Boxes each season. These subscribers ranged from “lesser” society people, to John J. Raskob, the financial executive and builder of the Empire State Building, to Samuel Minskoff, the Jewish New York real estate developer. Exclusive preparatory and finishing schools and colleges also sat in certain boxes for the season.37 The “omnibus” box at the left side of the grand tier was filled, as it had been since 1893, with members of the Metropolitan Opera Club, a broadly mixed organization of approximately one hundred business and artistic men not of the social caliber of the house’s golden horseshoe elect, but whose standing in the professional world was of some note.38 By the 1920s, along with much less distinguished company were U. S. Senator Robert F. Wagner; a random earl or admiral; and
several Jewish bankers, art collectors, and philanthropists like Jules S. Bache and Ludwig Vogelstein.\textsuperscript{39}

Indeed, New York operagoers had grown extraordinarily diverse by the 1920s, ranging from the elites in the boxes, to the standees, to the immigrant couple who would share one ticket in the upper balcony by alternating acts with waiting on the sidewalk.\textsuperscript{40} Homosexuals found the opera to be artistically congenial and socially convivial. Gay activity in the early twentieth century was strongly policed, and the State Liquor Authority prohibited lesbians and gay men not only from working in most restaurants, bars, and other businesses that served liquor, but also from openly gathering in such establishments.\textsuperscript{41} Homosexual men thus met discreetly at places like the Astor and Plaza Hotel bars, showed up for performances of gay iconic entertainers, and enjoyed the opera and ballet. The Metropolitan Opera became a meeting place, since police never raided cultural events. George Chauncey’s study of gay New York quoted a man who recalled that at the opera, “all stops were pulled out as far as costume and grooming.” The opera house encompassed multiple audiences and cultural meanings, and to Chauncey, this subtlety was largely obscure to the leadership class.\textsuperscript{42}

Indicative of the tone of the new Metropolitan Opera House undertaking, the two board factions also were blending. Harry Payne Whitney had been on both boards for years, and there was one of two Robert Goelets—the first cousins Robert W. and Robert—on each board. Strongly in favor of the new opera house, William K. Vanderbilt II, along with Vincent Astor, joined the Metropolitan Opera Company board in 1926.\textsuperscript{43} His father, also William K., had been a leading force on both the Real Estate Company and the Conried Company boards from their earliest days, and, ironically, had brought up the subject of a new opera house to the Opera Company board as early as April 1913.\textsuperscript{44} Soon after the younger Vanderbilt joined the Opera
Company board, R. Fulton Cutting Jr., the son of the conservative president of the Real Estate board, also joined the opposing board. The extended Vanderbilt family that had founded the opera house was splintering and exhibiting divergent levels of interest; following the lead of their nephews William K. and Harold, the daughters of William H. Vanderbilt, Mrs. Henry White and Mrs. H. McK. Twombly, sold their family box in 1927.45

“New Opera House Uptown Assured,” proclaimed a New York Times headline in early 1927.46 All uncertainty was now ended with Kahn’s announcement that the directors of the Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, upon whose decision the move rested, had unanimously voted in favor of a new house. Now, after a year, the project was ready to proceed to the next stage, with plans for a new theater seating 5,000 (up from the current capacity of 3,600); a tower for studios and apartments atop the structure; and thirty-two instead of thirty-five parterre boxes to be leased instead of owned. Each purchaser was to pay $145,000 to acquire a 1/32 share in the real estate, opera house, and apartment house, as well as the use of a particular box on Mondays and a choice of Thursdays or Saturday matinees. For all other performances the boxes would be available for rent by application to the Real Estate Company, which now would profit from sublets.47 Every seat, however, was promised to have a full and unobstructed view of the stage (unlike at the old Met), and the increased capacity was planned “mainly for the purpose of providing more low-priced and medium-priced seats,” another deficiency of the old space.48

The reduction of the number of boxes in the new theater appeared to be driven less by design or necessity than by the fact that a few of the estates that still held boxes at the old Met had expressed a desire to dispose of them. While Kahn claimed that the choice of fewer boxes was governed “largely by architectural considerations,” in fact, no architect had yet been officially announced.49 Many people were still able and willing to buy a box in the heady days
leading up to the stock market crash in 1929; both Vanderbilt boxes were sold for a reported $200,000 each.\textsuperscript{50} Even so, the boxes were the last stronghold of the Met’s ancient social control, and were not so easily purchased, even in the altered context of a new, twentieth-century auditorium.

By spring 1927, Cutting, the chair of the Real Estate Company, was now speaking encouragingly about the venture to the press, even though he clearly had reservations about both the scheme and Kahn himself. All but three or four boxholders had deposited their stock with the committee in charge of the erection of the new opera house, and three or four unnamed others wished to “retire and liquidate for various reasons.”\textsuperscript{51} At a meeting attended by twenty-eight boxholders, attorneys, and committee members, no action was necessary, as the committee already was in possession of a majority of the boxholders’ stock.\textsuperscript{52} Cutting also stated plainly that regardless of any lingering regret over the loss of the old theater, “the principal disability of the house is its incapacity to earn sufficient income to meet the greatly increased cost of operation and its heavily mounting taxes.”\textsuperscript{53} Combined with the unanimous vote of the Real Estate Company board, the move to Fifty-seventh Street now appeared certain, and construction was anticipated to begin after Kahn’s return from Europe.

However, hints of some deviations from the plan were already beginning to surface. The Metropolitan Opera House directors wanted to wait for definite estimates of the cost of the building, which would be ready by the fall. Kahn’s preliminary estimate, which he sent much sooner in May, was a prohibitive $4.2 million. Cutting was enraged, and was suggesting privately to other board members that they reject the proposition. His venom was directed at Kahn. “This shows that we cannot evidently depend at all upon any of his statements,” Cutting wrote. “Of course, we may have some new proposition from Mr. Kahn, but it seems to me most
improbable that we can continue any negotiations with him,” he declared, adding that the Real Estate Company should make an announcement “in the near future” about withdrawing the old opera house from sale.54

Issues with the architects, Benjamin Wistar Morris and his associate, Joseph Urban, also were of concern.55 Nevertheless, Morris and Urban’s selection was delicately in keeping with the interests of the two governing entities: Morris had designed the Morgan Library, and thus was in Morgan and the Real Estate Company’s camp, while Urban, a well-known architect and designer of over forty Met productions, reflected the Opera Company’s interests.56

It seemed fair enough for the boxholders, who were largely funding the project, to question costs. As the old Met now was commonly perceived to be “the embodiment of the conservative forces of the town as nothing else is—not even the churches,” the move uptown was going to be not merely a local, but a national event. “It represents all over the country the stronghold of the social prestige that still clings to the metropolitan city of the New World,” wrote H. I. Brock of the Times.57 The social element still mattered to the structure’s funders. As an institution, the Metropolitan Opera remained a private as opposed to a state concern, “an alliance between wealth with a modicum of taste . . . and the public that is interested in the music-drama.”58 As a place, though, the Met, while historic, had become old, shabby, and inadequate, left behind in the northward march of the city’s development. To take its amorphous prestige along with it in a move uptown to modern quarters would be “a task of delicate diplomacy.”59 Kahn was once again playing the ambassador-negotiator. But now the circumstances were more complicated than they were years before with the New Theatre venture, in which Kahn’s role was to appease a temperamental director while leading an altogether new and supportive board of wealthy hand-picked insiders. Here he was wrestling
with the remnants of nineteenth-century social New York, indeed, a group that in the past had politely resisted him in every possible way.

In spite of the apparent public unanimity of the Real Estate Company action, reports leaked from late May through the summer that some stockholders were not comfortable with the Fifty-seventh Street site, and favored a more “conspicuous” location. Where the additional millions to obtain such a site would come from, nobody could say. Fifty Avenue and 110th Street, facing Central Park, emerged as a new possibility, although many were taken aback that a site so far uptown could be seriously entertained. But what the leaders Bliss and Cutting really were most uncomfortable about was Kahn. The Opera Company president responded with diplomatic practicality, appearing to be flexible about alternative sites while forthright about the appropriateness of his original choice, which was near the theater district and accessible to both the east and west sides.

Kahn’s response also betrayed his impatience with the financial obliviousness of the Real Estate group through a not-so-subtle reminder of his personal largesse in sustaining the enterprise: “The Metropolitan, in the fact of steadily mounting costs, is dependent on its own resources, aided—when needed—by a very few financial backers.” The Company managed to pay rent and taxes without non-profit immunities, any subsidy fund, or municipal help. While the topic of “revenue-producing features” in the new venture was still under debate, a low structure, Kahn reasoned, was “simply an invitation for skyscrapers to be built on either side in order to take advantage of the light.” Kahn was realistic about the aesthetic and commercial priorities of the twentieth-century city, in stark contrast to the nineteenth-century notions of some of the boxholding holdouts, who eschewed commercialism. Perhaps the Real Estate Company was just being gratuitously contrary: after all, the existing Met contained a bank, shops, and apartments,
which helped keep ticket costs down. “The dignity of the new Metropolitan Opera House will depend upon its architectural aspect, (to which a tower need not be a detriment),” Kahn added, reassuring that the commercial uses of the space would not sully its venerable social and cultural aspects.

Throwing down the gauntlet, he concluded, “if a way can be found, consistent with the budgetary requirements of the Metropolitan Opera, to confine its new home to operatic uses only, and if such be the preference of the stockholders of the Real Estate Company, I shall support that conclusion.” Still considering financial alternatives later that summer, Kahn proposed reselling the boxes for a reduced subscription price on the one day, as per the original scheme, that the boxholders opted not to use their boxes. This, of course, was a presumptuous suggestion. Given Kahn’s financial commitment to the Metropolitan Opera, he had behaved appropriately; given his lowly social position relative to the Real Estate Company old guard, he had completely overstepped his bounds by taking the lead inside the Real Estate group’s territory.

In October 1927, prior to the promised estimate presentation, Joseph Urban’s tentative plans for the new theater appeared in the magazine Musical America. At a casual meeting in Urban’s studio, the magazine’s editor, Deems Taylor, saw the unofficial designs and could not resist a “scoop,” which the local press immediately picked up. Urban’s sketch did not reference the nineteenth-century theaters of Europe, with their focus on the design and hierarchy of the boxes. Instead, the proposed theater was inventively utilitarian, an architectural expression of the atmosphere of the times. It was fan-shaped and without a horseshoe (although thirty-five boxes); a large stage consisting of two side stages extending from but relating to the proscenium; a capacity of 5,372; and an entrance in the center of the building on a side thoroughfare to
facilitate traffic. There would be three separate structures, as opposed to one tower, consisting of the stage and office building at one side; the lower auditorium in the center; and an apartment house tower at the other end. The overall effect was cathedral-like in shape while modernist in aesthetic, and nothing short of radical.⁶⁸

“The building as a whole is unmistakably the conception of a man who is not only an architectural designer of talent approaching genius, but an extraordinarily resourceful and experienced man of the theatre,” Taylor wrote. “If his plans are carried out, New York will have an opera house unsurpassed anywhere in the world, not only for beauty, but for completeness, modernity and ingenuity of equipment and design.”⁶⁹ Although the plans were exhilarating, their early and inadvertent revelation in the press conflicted with the diplomatic and measured approach Kahn had employed for almost two years. The plan creatively took into consideration the Real Estate group’s preference that the opera house building be low, although Benjamin Wistar Morris, their architect, did not appear to be directing the design process.⁷⁰

The Real Estate group reacted without delay, and the months and months of prevarication and polite capitulation ended with an eruption of questions about the suitability of the Kahn-selected site. Once a fait accompli, the erection of the new theater at Fifty-seventh Street was now publicly cast into doubt.

Behind the scenes, however, there always had been fissures in the negotiations. For one thing, while the Real Estate group’s opponents of the new opera house claimed in 1926 to be “wholly passive in their opposition” and without any intention of “starting an agitation,” this was never entirely the case.⁷¹ In fact, the “three or four” objecting boxholders, William Fahnestock, Robert Walton Goelet, his aunt, Mrs. Ogden Goelet, and Mrs. Goelet’s younger sister, Mrs. Cornelius (Grace) Vanderbilt III, were not as benign as Cutting had led the press to believe. At
the April 1927 Real Estate stockholders meeting, Robert W. Goelet spoke out against leaving the old Met and went so far as to suggest that the Real Estate Company go back to the old system of leasing the space to another opera company, “rather than building a new opera house for a lessee with whom perhaps relations might not be permanent.” This was the first hint that the Real Estate group might consider severing relations with the Opera Company that had built the Met’s unrivaled international reputation. Goelet questioned the necessity of the additional stories allotted for studios and apartments, specifications that had been determined by the current “lessee,” Kahn’s Metropolitan Opera Company, and not initiated by the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company itself.

Grace Vanderbilt, who by 1915 had inherited the mantle of “head of society” from a long line of formidable women beginning with Mrs. Astor, objected to the new opera plan with both a letter and a telegram for dissemination at the April 1927 meeting. And throughout 1927, the daunting grande dame was a vocal, vociferous, and omnipresent opponent to the plans to move the Metropolitan Opera House.

But in fact, Cutting, Bliss, and DeLancey Kountze of the Real Estate dominant inner circle, also were privately opposed both to the plan and to Kahn. While they constantly shared correspondence to each other voicing their resistance and distrust, throughout the process they were publicly circumspect.

Otto Kahn and the Metropolitan Opera Company had not been entirely forthcoming, either. In January 1926, soon after the Real Estate board met and discussed Kahn’s proposal, the Opera Company board increased its ranks from fifteen to twenty-five directors, and met to appoint a committee to make the necessary preliminary studies for a new Metropolitan Opera House. By February, the board had established three committees—Building, Ways and Means,
and a Committee of Boxholders—clearly anticipating a shift in Met leadership where the house and boxholding were concerned.\textsuperscript{77}

Consequently, these were no loose sketches that the \textit{Musical America} editor encountered at Joseph Urban’s studio in October 1927. In fact, by then the architect already had prepared nine elaborate schemes for the new Metropolitan Opera House at Kahn’s proposed 57th Street location, beginning almost immediately after the initial announcement, on February 22, 1926. By 1927, the designs were particularly far along.\textsuperscript{78} Urban, as a theatrical designer, was well aware of the restrictions that the old Met’s limited size was placing on new productions of new operas.

“The present opera houses were built for the four act grand opera,” reads an unsigned document in the Urban archive, noting that contemporary operas were proving more difficult to stage.\textsuperscript{79} This fourteen-page-long description of the parameters of the new theater also included a philosophical justification for a fresh architectural direction. Quoting from the June 1927 issue of the magazine \textit{Singing}, the document pointedly questioned:

\begin{quote}
Do they clearly understand that there must be a definite break with the past, especially the European past, when dynasties instead of democracies made up the only important part of the audience of an opera house?

Do they realize that the opera box was invented in the seventeenth century, in order to shield the feudal lords and ladies of that time from contact with the vulgar populace?

Do they not consider the twentieth century has outlived these ideas of segregation, and should not the private seclusion of any part of a public audience be made impossible in the opera house, as it has long been in all other theatres?\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

The Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company now was wavering, and for the Vanderbilt-Goelet camp, the answer to these questions was a resolute “no.” For them, the perfect solution would have been to find a site on otherwise residential Fifth Avenue, which had the convenience of the boxholders and not the opera-going public in mind. Never mind that even
if Fifth Avenue real estate was not prohibitively expensive, a theater would have been unwelcome there. The Real Estate Company’s biggest fear, it seemed, was of appearing “commercial.” A theater-cum-skyscraper on Fifty-seventh Street with rental units and shops, located between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, definitely smacked of commercialism. Urban protested that on the contrary, his skyscraper would be “a unit of architectural beauty” and that the opera house itself would be “a separate edifice of appropriate and fitting type for a great lyric theater.” As per an upper-class order that never was truly the case for most rich Americans, elites were not supposed to be “in trade.” It would stand to reason that Mrs. Vanderbilt could not possibly be a cofounder of such an enterprise, with its profit-making necessity so visibly betrayed in its architecture and location. To be a real estate investor in a club-like opera house, as per the old Met, might be fine; but to be a part-landlord as well would be downright improper.

Through the second half of 1927, the press mentioned several alternative locations for the new opera house. The site committee even contemplated taking over the Century Theatre, formerly known as the New Theatre, and the site of Kahn’s misadventure from two decades before. The grand playhouse would be razed—an incredible thought, since its primary fault was in its design, conceived more as an opera house than an intimate theatrical space.

Publicly, the Real Estate Company was exercising control which only months before it had all but abdicated. Before final action could be taken, it awaited the return from Europe of J. P. Morgan, who was one Real Estate committee member in favor of a new opera house. “Nothing has been decided in any way,” Kountze told the New York Times, adding that since his group was considering the public’s view on the matter, that “suggestions regarding a new site from the outside as well as from our stockholders” were welcomed. In actuality, Kahn’s site truly was ideal. It was located on the highest terrain in midtown Manhattan, on a wide block,
near Central Park, and adjacent to Columbus Circle, a hub poised to be “the civic centre of New York.” It was accessible by public transit, including new proposed IND subway extensions on Manhattan’s west side. Theater development also was inching northward and westward from Times Square, and a new Metropolitan Opera House would only anchor that progression. But the location also was surrounded by commercial buildings.

The freeze, it seemed, was directed at Otto Kahn. Now an even greater majority shareholder of the Metropolitan Opera Company after procuring all of William K. Vanderbilt’s stock in 1924, Kahn was a unique financier with an emotional and near-evangelistic connection to the arts. After a tour of the American West in the 1920s, for example, he was buoyed by what he perceived to be the artistic awakening of the citizens he observed there. “Municipal auditoriums are being built, museums and symphony orchestras established, traveling exhibitions of pictures arranged, concerts and lectures, frequently of great excellence, are taking place and—an especially significant sign of the times—community theatres are springing up in many cities, small and large,” he reported in 1927.

As the debate over the new opera house was brewing, Kahn was speaking out for national support of the arts. He publicly challenged Senator Reed Smoot, the Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, to repeal taxes instituted during wartime on drama and music, whose greater social and cultural value had barely been recognized. In the United States, support of the arts was left up to the initiative and “liberality of private persons,” and the institutions themselves were burdened by a tax. By contrast, European nations historically had received large sums from public revenues to support the performing and fine arts. From a banker’s point of view, art also was a good investment for European cities. Moreover, Kahn felt it was the duty of the wealthy to privately support the arts. Art was “the necessity of a properly lived life,” Kahn said in an
address to the Municipal Art Society in January 1928; the affluent were obliged to pay back some of that wealth to the public. “The contributions of rich men to art will no doubt be pleasing to St. Peter and enable them to get by with greater ease,” he said. Quoting Oscar Wilde, Kahn added, “God shows what he thinks of wealth by the people on whom he bestows it,” prompting laughter with his reference to “the chosen ones concerning whom ‘it is not for me to speak.’” It is probably a coincidence that Kahn invoked Salome author Oscar Wilde, for at least outwardly there was no lingering resentment over that past debacle, or that the Times’s suggestion of “the chosen ones” subtly alluded to Kahn’s Jewishness while invoking St. Peter.

The next month, on the eve of his sixty-first birthday, an exhausted Kahn announced that he was putting his property on Fifty-seventh Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues on the market. There was no alternative site on the table for a new Metropolitan Opera House, nor, ultimately, would there be a new house at all until 1966. Denying any controversy among the governing boards, Kahn tactfully cast blame on neither party, claiming instead that “the scheme as submitted and approved was considerably more costly than we had been led to believe on the basis of informal estimates, and was not feasible from the financial point of view without material modifications.” Kahn reiterated that in the “friendliest spirit of collaboration,” it was not the Metropolitan Opera Company’s purpose or function to undertake the erection of a new opera house itself, advocating the “continuance of the time-honored relationship, under which the stockholders of the real estate company own the house and lease it to an operating company.”

Cutting, Bliss, and Kountze finally had won, and their only regret was how the incident would play out in the press. In fact, they had rejected Kahn’s last proposal of February 1928, and in advance of informing Kahn, concurred about how best to phrase their statement. “I feel that
the letter you write should be written having in mind the possible publication of it, as
undoubtedly when this present plan is thrown down Mr. Kahn will probably try to put the entire blame on our shoulders,” Kountze pessimistically (and inaccurately) anticipated.96

A day after his announcement, Kahn left for Florida and a trip across the United States.97 “Pulling teeth is a delectable diversion as compared to getting anything out of these people,” wrote Kahn to his lawyer and fellow Met board member, Paul D. Cravath, when the episode was behind them.98

When Kahn returned, however, things were decidedly different with the Metropolitan Opera Company board. For one thing, no minutes, if any were recorded, survive from October 1927 until October 1929, when the group met without a quorum and thus passed no resolutions. There was no stockholders’ meeting in the spring of 1929 because of Kahn’s absence in Europe and Cravath’s assertion that meetings were not necessary every year unless there were changes to be made.99 Kahn, after all, controlled 4,202 shares out of a total 5,136 in Metropolitan Opera Company stock. One terse sentence in the October 16, 1929 minutes indicated that the topic of a new opera house was still in play: “The subject of discussion was chiefly the latest development in the matter of the new opera house.”100

In fact, in 1929 the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate group was negotiating for the erection of the opera house at what would become Rockefeller Center. Ironically, that development from the outset was decidedly commercial, described by its construction engineer, John R. Todd, as a “high-class retail section” for stores and offices.101 A bidder for the Metropolitan Opera House lease, a Seventh Avenue dress manufacturer and midtown skyscraper builder named Louis Adler, already was eyeing the property in order to erect a tower upon it.102 If there had been among the Metropolitan Real Estate board any upper-class aversions to
engaging in a commercial endeavor where Kahn’s proposal had been concerned, or even any sentimentality about preserving the old opera house, there were no objections now.

The old guard’s slap at Kahn for his presumptuousness, if debatable during the negotiations of 1926-28, now was obvious. For the remainder of his tenure on the Metropolitan Opera Company board, a humbled Kahn would remain uncharacteristically subdued.

It was not yet clear how times were changing. The Met’s forty-fifth season opened in 1929 paying tribute to general manager Gatti-Casazza’s twenty-second year with the company, exactly half of all of the Met’s seasons. “The same excited, upholstered and distracted crowd congested entrances as the hour of performance drew near, and stuffed the aisles with opera hats, ermines and noises obstructive alike to eye and ear. No one cared,” Olin Downes of the Times declared.

The box holders came late, as they should. They waited confidently for the turning up of the lights after the first act, knowing well that the eyes of the many-headed would be turned toward them at the first opportunity and not to the stage, where the artists bowed, smirked and flattered each other to the accompaniment of plaudits and floral tributes. Those of the Third Estate in the upper part of the house came early, in inverse ratio. They waited long and desperately to get in. It could have been an opening at the Academy of Music in Edith Wharton’s time. But it was Black Tuesday, October 29, 1929, the evening of the fourth and final day of the catastrophic stock market crash that precipitated the Great Depression, and it had passed at the Metropolitan Opera House without mention.

“The Metropolitan Opera Company has never asked for outside help”

By early 1930, however, financial troubles loomed large. As the Metropolitan Opera Company faced its first deficit in twenty years, the Real Estate Company reminded Kahn that the company’s lease on the theater was set to expire on May 1, 1933. Kahn resisted the Real
Estate board’s attempts to pressure him financially, adroitly cautioning that the Metropolitan Opera Company “would be glad to do what it can to facilitate the task of whoever may be its successor.” Kahn hadn’t really given up, however, and in a creative plan to keep the opera company in the black, proposed a private syndicate to support it:

In every city where Grand Opera has a permanent home, it is subsidized by the State or Municipality. The only exception is New York. The Metropolitan Opera Company has never asked for outside help. The fact is, however, that there are only three stock owners in the Metropolitan Opera Company, apart from a few merely nominal holdings, namely Mr. Kahn, Mr. Clarence H. Mackay, and the Estate of Harry Payne Whitney. Mr. Kahn owns 83% of the total stock. That is, manifestly, an undesirable situation. An organization like the Metropolitan Opera Company ought not to depend to any such extent upon one individual. ... It is respectfully suggested and urged, if a contractual relationship is to continue between the Real Estate Company and the Metropolitan Opera Company … that it be sought to be a joint action to create an underwriting syndicate aggregating, say, $250,000 annually, … the direction of the organization to be in the hands of the underwriters.

Evidently, in harder economic times, Kahn now was seemingly unwilling to continue to single-handedly fund the opera company he had nurtured and cultivated for almost two decades. Despite his forewarning, it came as a shock when, at a special meeting of the Metropolitan Opera Company board on October 26, 1931, Kahn resigned as its President and Chairman.

“In justice to my business, my associates, my family and my health, I have had to reach the decision to divest myself of outside activities as far as possible,” stated Kahn. Publicly, that was the explanation. Privately, however, he told the Times critic Olin Downes a different story. The Real Estate Company happily had allowed Kahn to unburden them of the responsibility for the practical operations and affairs of the Opera Company; indeed, it was well known that it was Kahn’s business sense as well as his own pocketbook that kept the Met financially sound. So long as Kahn maintained the status quo, everything was fine; when he attempted to exert some authority, as he had in the new theater plans, he met resistance. To
Downes, Kahn plainly confirmed the unmentionable: no matter how effectively he sustained the opera, the Real Estate Company board was “not wholly favorable” to having a Jew as the chairman of the opera company. There it was. Thus, in spite of his boundless enthusiasm and polite cooperation, Kahn had felt isolated and marginalized, working almost entirely alone and with little support from “any but one or two” of the Real Estate Company members, and always feeling reluctant to experiment with innovative repertory or staging. The course he had the company pursue, then, while hardly original, was not altogether a bad one: the Met offered high-quality artists and productions, which guaranteed popular support and consequently a balanced budget.108

Yet Kahn’s publicly stated reasons for his resignation also were genuine. Neither he nor his firm had turned a profit in 1930, and things only grew worse when in May 1931 the Rothschild-funded Austrian bank, the powerful Creditanstalt, failed, causing a run on all of the Central European currencies.109 Kuhn, Loeb & Co. suffered an even harder blow a few weeks later with the sudden death of its senior partner, Mortimer L. Schiff, on June 4, his fifty-fourth birthday.110 With what looked to be financial liquidation confronting the world, Schiff had written to Kahn in May that “the bears are having things their own way,” and the following month Kahn would have to face this fact and its repercussions alone.111 For the remainder of the year, Kahn worked in his office without interruption every business day, and the stress weighed on him both emotionally and physically.112

The year 1931 then, already had started out chaotically for Kahn. By fall, his professional role as a banker moved to the forefront, as he commented frequently in the press about strategies for ending the economic slump while defending the capitalistic system and criticizing anti-trust laws, prohibition, and corporate taxation. Recognizing the need to care first for those in
“unavoidable distress,” he encouraged “a psychological obligation” to keep a “stiff upper lip.”

In September, Kahn was hit with a $500,000 lawsuit for his alleged failure to give $160,000 to an opera singer, Lydia Lindgren, in exchange for her dropping a slander action against another singer. The suit was thrown out of court.

In November, Kahn also remained a visible presence in New York cultural news. Citing the same reasons for his Metropolitan Opera withdrawal, he resigned from the board of the Philharmonic-Symphony Society, on which he had sat as vice president for a decade. On the 17th he spoke at the opening of the Whitney Museum, along with former Governor Alfred E. Smith and Representative Robert L. Bacon from New York, who read a letter from President Hoover in a ceremony broadcast nationally on the radio. The museum, the first of its kind devoted to American art, was founded by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the wife of late Metropolitan Opera Company board member Harry Payne Whitney and an artistic maverick in her own right. Placing the arts and the financial times in a lofty and spiritual context, Kahn said:

> the severe and grievously prolonged depression which has come upon our country has shown all too vividly the hazards and fluctuations to which material possessions are subject. By the same token and by contrast, it has demonstrated the permanency and inviolability of spiritual possessions that which we have within us in faith, in appreciation and love of art and books and nature, in cultural interests and understanding, no man and no event can take away from us, no income tax can reduce and no stock exchange collapse can diminish.

Divested of the Met chairmanship, Kahn still sat on the Opera Company board as well as in his box at the opera, and Prince and Princess Vasili of the former Russian empire accompanied him and Mrs. Kahn to the November 2 opening. And showing his humor, humanity, and philanthropic spirit, he addressed a Metropolitan Opera audience at a late November performance of *La Bohème*, in an appeal for the Unemployment Emergency Relief Fund. “Mr. Kahn apologized for digressing from what is termed a serious to a light matter,” the
Times reported playfully, “that perhaps the Metropolitan had asked him to speak because he was, as far as it was concerned, among the unemployed.”

The 1931-32 opera season had begun with $2 million in subscriptions, “no sign of depression,” and with good reason for the Met to be optimistic about the future. The Metropolitan Opera Company board had lost not only Kahn, but two older board members, George Eastman, chairman of the Eastman Kodak Company, and Edward S. Harkness, the capitalist and philanthropist. Their replacements were stellar: Paul D. Cravath took over from Kahn as chairman, and Clarence Dillon of the banking firm Dillon, Read & Co. and Representative Robert L. Bacon filled the other two seats.

Cravath, the prestigious lawyer, was a pioneer in corporate financial reorganization, and his professional expertise was essential to the Opera Company. A member of the Philharmonic board and elected to the Met board in 1910, Cravath admitted that while he was not the musician Kahn was, he was more than familiar with the Met’s practical problems. “I judge opera as I judge other music, much more by its effect upon my emotions than by technical details of which I am largely ignorant,” he said. “The opera that is a great opera for me is the one which sends chills down my spine.” Lacking Kahn’s sense of poetry about the arts in general and opera in particular, Cravath nevertheless had some reasonable opinions. To him, grand opera was “perhaps the last of our Victorian expressions,” meaning that the best examples had been created in the past. “But I am certain that opera is going to take a new lease of life when the form is brought more closely in touch with the thought and the currents of the times,” he said, noting that masterpieces often emerged after periods of “operatic sterility.” A tension between the old and the new, and of sterile ideas and radical ones, were on his mind. Cravath may have lacked Kahn’s passion for the Metropolitan, but an altered financial outlook required different
organizational strategies, and Cravath was the man to implement them. Furthermore, all contentiousness with the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company ceased with the start of Cravath’s tenure. Perhaps this was because of the spirit of the times, perhaps this was because of Cravath himself, the sharp (Gentile) organization man, or perhaps it was a combination of both.

“The resignation of Mr. Kahn, whatever may have been the actual reasons behind it and whatever the attempts to minimize its significance, has created a new situation,” Downes surmised in the *Times*. Stating explicitly what had only been implied, Kahn’s resignation meant that he was relinquishing not only his leadership, but “a large measure of responsibility, financial and otherwise.”

In his column, Downes gave Kahn the valedictory that Kahn himself preempted with his cursory resignation. “With Mr. Kahn’s incumbency a cycle of Metropolitan history began and ended,” Downes wrote. When Kahn took over, the disorganized theater began to experience a new efficiency and financial solvency. Some of the Met’s safer artistic choices Downes attributed not to the antiquated ideas of the Real Estate Company, but rather to an enormous and undiscriminating public.

“Suppose a repertory that included every novelty of importance heard in Europe, as well as other works honored by time, had been offered, to the glory of the company and the loss of the box office. . . . Who would have furnished those handsome additional guarantees in the name of art—Mr. Kahn, playing a lone hand, or Mr. Kahn with the generous cooperation of his stanch opponents in the organization?”

Of course, Kahn had unsuccessfultly attempted, personally funded, and dramatically failed at just such innovations—with *Salome*, with the New Theatre, and with the idea for the new Met. Who would pick up his banner? “Among those who stood against Mr. Kahn there should now be individuals willing to put their hands in their pockets and fight, and substitute their resources for his in the present emergency.” This was a bold suggestion, except for the
fact that everyone’s resources were dwindling, and Kahn-like initiative and enthusiasm were rare in any economic climate. The Metropolitan Opera would never see the likes of the old Otto Kahn again.

Immediately upon Kahn’s retirement, the Opera Company’s executive committee was increased from three to five members, enlarging the power base and clearly indicating the level of authority Kahn previously had commanded. At Cravath’s first meeting as chairman, the company’s, and indeed, the country’s financial outlook was the topic of discussion for the first time ever. The Company had a cash fund of about $750,000 to start the season, and needed additional money to conclude it.

To that end, the board proposed that Gatti-Casazza, the manager of the Company, be authorized to seek “the cooperation of all artists, musicians and other employees of the Company who might volunteer to accept reductions in their respective salaries” to assure the completion of the season. Cravath’s pragmatic hand was already at work. Kahn, now merely a board member, was present at the meeting, and made only one suggestion: that the minutes also include a vote of appreciation of the Company and of the results achieved by the manager and his assistant, Edward Ziegler.

Four months later, at the March annual meeting of the Opera Company, another major proposal followed. Because of declining patronage, a new membership organization to be called the Metropolitan Opera Association was to take over production of the opera at less cost. Because the Association was being organized as a corporation for educational purposes, it also would not be subject to prohibitive federal taxes, and the Metropolitan Opera Company was poised to transfer several contracts and the ownership of scenery, costumes, and property in June. The Association also would take over all of the obligations of the Opera Company for the
production of grand opera as provided in the April 1908 lease by the Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company.\textsuperscript{128} The Metropolitan Opera Company for the time being would remain the stock corporation, while the Metropolitan Opera Association would become the operating company, with both entities governed by the same board of directors. The bold and brilliant fiscal move was heralded for its “democratization of the governing powers of the opera company.”\textsuperscript{129} It was no longer necessary to buy stock to become a member of the Metropolitan Opera Company. Anybody could contribute to the endowment or operating fund, and, at least in a small way, have a part in sustaining a grand cultural institution.

A few weeks later, however, as Cravath had anticipated, the situation grew even worse. Because of reduced receipts and in spite of the salary reductions, the season’s losses would wipe out the Metropolitan Opera Company’s $550,000.00 capital and most of its reserve. There would be insufficient funds to assure another season. “Manifestly a serious question is presented as to the future of the Metropolitan Opera,” the Company declared to the press. The board pledged to make an earnest effort to reduce expenses in order to continue the following winter.\textsuperscript{130} But they weren’t promising that they could succeed.

New radio broadcasts had done much to popularize the opera, though, and there was growing patronage from the general public.\textsuperscript{131} Thus, the notion of “saving” the opera by and for its fans had gained real traction. In a much larger sense, however, the national scene in 1932 was desperate, and money was tight. While Jack Benny was debuting on the radio, Amelia Earhart was flying solo for the first time, Lake Placid was hosting the Olympics, and Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig were leading the New York Yankees to victory, the country also was in turmoil. There were deadly riots at the Ford factory in Dearborn, Michigan. A “Bonus Army” of five thousand veterans marched on Washington to request an advance on their bonuses, and President Hoover
ordered the army to remove them. Aviation hero Charles Lindbergh’s baby was kidnapped and killed. A Federal gas tax was enacted. In July, the Dow Jones Industrial Average hit a Depression low of 41.22. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected to his first term as president that November. And fascism was on the rise in Italy and Germany.

For the time being, the Metropolitan Opera Association could only trust that a shortened season, a simpler operating organization, and a tighter budget might tide the company over. Cravath’s election as president of the new Association indicated an honest intention to carry on for at least another season. The public also had turned out to be an increasingly important aspect of the Metropolitan Opera’s financial equation. No longer a rich man’s hobby, the opera was returning to its nineteenth-century form as a more popular pastime. It would have been an absurd notion only four years earlier, but small donations collected in large numbers might actually stave off the Metropolitan Opera’s demise. In the post-Kahn, Depression-era climate, individual patronage from the so-called masses now was becoming the institution’s best hope for long-term survival.

Without solicitation, the public response was “warmer and more spontaneous” than expected, as no subscribers canceled for the next season, some desired to increase the number of performances they would attend, and sales for individual performances remained strong. The opera, therefore, had retained its attraction for the casual visitor. The broadcasting that had begun that season also had helped popularize the art, and new patronage accounted for the strong individual seat sales.

By November, the opera was set to open its fiftieth season with a sold-out house. Standing room seats were at pre-war rates, which, along with a shorter season of four instead of six months, marked “a return to the operatic ways of 1912 and earlier.” Also that month, Louis
Eckstein, the Chicago magazine publisher, confectioner, real estate owner, and operator of a chain of drug stores, joined the Metropolitan Opera Association board. At first blush hardly of a pedigree worthy of Metropolitan board membership, Eckstein nevertheless had functioned at Chicago’s Ravinia Grand Opera Company much as Kahn had at the Met, paying off around $1 million in deficits over twenty years and running the company almost single-handedly. The Met needed funds, not family background.

In spite of its financial desperation, the Met also was looking to the future while dealing with the deficiencies of the past, namely, the unsuitability of the old opera house. With the recent and growing popularity of opera, a move to a larger theater at Rockefeller Center was beginning to look favorable. In April, the plans for the new $4,500,000 auditorium that the Rockefeller group submitted to the Manhattan Bureau of Buildings indicated that the house was being designed to seat over 4,000—or 600-700 more than at the Met—with fewer boxes, more family circle seats, and the patronage of the more general public clearly in mind. It bore a resemblance to Kahn’s plan and Joseph Urban’s design for a new Met from five years earlier, except that the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company was silent in the new negotiations, as a theater was going to be built with or without the Met’s participation.

Although Cravath was willing to admit that the Metropolitan Opera was cooperating with the Rockefeller’s architects in the planning of the auditorium, no contract had been signed. If there was any division of opinion among the directors of the Metropolitan, Cravath was unable to say, abruptly telling the Times that not only had the board had taken no action, but “he was unable to read the minds of others.”

But the theater at Rockefeller Center was not going to be exclusively for the Metropolitan Opera, which was to be one of at least a few “entertainment features” of the development. The
Philharmonic was mentioned in the plans, as was a connected “sound motion-picture theatre” outfitted with the most modern equipment.\(^{138}\) S. L. Rothafel, also known as “Roxy,” was the impresario in charge of the movie palace, and declared that it would not interfere with the Metropolitan presentations. Nevertheless, he had the audacity to advise the Metropolitan Opera to make some changes in order to be successful, by examining “modern stage investiture and the temper of our times in regard to action.” His recommendation to stage operas more dramatically—for example with the tenor singing to the soprano as opposed to the audience—was geared towards mass appeal. “He was firmly convinced that not one note in any of the great operatic scores should be removed or tampered with, but he saw no reason why changes could not be made in other ways to make the operas more accessible to the modern audience’s understanding and background,” reported the *Times*. “Wagner and most of the other composers were showmen, Wagner the greatest of them all,” Roxy declared, “and were they writing today they would take into consideration the point of view of the present public.”\(^{139}\) Opera now was hardly the exclusive pastime of aristocrats and social aspirants.

In fact, San Francisco broke the historical tendency for opera houses to be privately funded and held when it opened the first municipally owned and maintained opera theater in American history in October 1932.\(^{140}\) The short length of the San Francisco opera season as well as the inexpensive seats underestimated the public demand for the opera, which proved to be strong. Indeed, opera and symphonic broadcasts, which reached, in Cravath’s words, “every nook and cranny of the country,” were creating more widespread appreciation for classical music.\(^{141}\) The Metropolitan Opera chairman hoped that small companies might follow suit throughout the United States. Other cities were already primed to welcome the Metropolitan Opera for its first tour in years that the spring. Baltimore, Washington, and Cleveland were in
line, and Richmond, Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Detroit also were bidding for a visit. Boston made the “first emphatic call for the stars,” the *Times* reported, partly because of its “considerable, faithful and eager public,” and partly because of the excitement and approval of the “august” Boston matrons “in whose hands rest social destinies.”¹⁴² If there was still a social composition to the opera, at least in the Met’s case, that aura now was imbedded in the company, and not in the theater or its governing group. In fact, the Metropolitan was the only American opera company from the past that had endured.

Nevertheless, by February 1933, the Met’s condition was deteriorating further, with an estimated deficit of about $350,000 for the season that was underway. “That the situation is grave for the future of grand opera in New York, its last citadel in the United States, none of its patrons would deny . . . but that it was hopeless few would concede,” pondered the *Times*.¹⁴³ At a dinner for a few of the box owners, three proposals emerged: to further reduce salaries and the season length; to seek financial support in Chicago in a joint effort; or to eliminate the Metropolitan Opera Association altogether in favor of a smaller American-focused company.¹⁴⁴

Without a company of the Met’s stature to perform in the auditorium, the Real Estate board would lose the leverage it had once enjoyed, and any deferential attitude towards the group now was not only outdated but unnecessary. The public finally was growing curious about what the Real Estate Company’s function really was. Still acting as president of the board, Cutting defended the group’s actions by pointing out that the building had been built in 1882 at a cost of $1,750,000 and then rebuilt after the fire a decade later. He reiterated that the Opera Company leased the building rent free, and that essentially the parterre box owners’ investment subsidized the rest of the auditorium. The various assessments Cutting estimated at $4,522,000 in aggregate (all consumed by tax payments, insurance, and administrative expenses) thus amounted to the
Real Estate Company’s (non-profit) contribution to the venture.\textsuperscript{145} Yet in fact the Metropolitan Opera Company had paid a fair share of maintenance costs for the building, a detail Cutting failed to express.

It hardly mattered any more which board was more responsible for the Metropolitan Opera, or which one was more to blame for its current woes. With the $350,000 deficit looming, both factions were in accord about one thing: the future looked gloomy. The Opera Company’s assets included subscriptions and revenues from income and the spring tour. While reduced overhead expenses and a shortened season cut the $2,880,000 budget in half, it still was not enough. And the city was noticeably mute on the subject of aid. Under the circumstances, a move to Rockefeller Center from a rent-free auditorium was impossible.

\textit{A Last Resort}

The front-page headline of the New York Times on February 10, 1933 stated it plainly: “Opera Asks Public for $300,000 Fund as a Last Resort.” The larger significance of the request was articulated in the story’s lede: “The ‘old guard’ that had built its social season around the Metropolitan Opera for half a century announced last night that it was looking to the public to help New York’s greatest musical institution weather the depression.”\textsuperscript{146} Times had changed, and the social prejudices of another time now seemed almost quaint in a new populist age facing economic catastrophe. Cravath was steadfast about saving the opera, and both his board and the Real Estate Company were in accord that this was no time to stand on ceremony. Social openness would have to prevail.

R. Fulton Cutting of the Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company made the announcement of the joint effort, which had been precipitated ten days earlier by the question of
whether or not the Opera Company intended to renew its lease. At that time, Cravath had revealed that the renewal would be impossible without the assurance of an additional $300,000 guarantee. With hard-nosed realism, the lawyer and chair of the Opera Association had made it clear that while his board was prepared to cooperate in “bringing a new era in American opera to successful reality,” he already had done his “full duty” to the Metropolitan. While Cravath was not as emotionally invested in the opera as Kahn had been, neither would duty call him to be as financially invested either. His letter to Cutting was accordingly devoid of reverence or romance:

> Frankly, as we will by May 31 have completed the period of our lease and provided New York with opera for twenty-five years, with our entire cash resources gone, we ourselves do not feel called upon to undertake the task of raising the necessary guarantee fund for next season. I may add that when I accepted the presidency of the Metropolitan Opera Company I only undertook to carry opera through the current season and until the end of our lease. That having been accomplished, I feel that my personal responsibility will have been discharged.

Nobody from any of the opera companies that had leased the Metropolitan Opera House had ever addressed the Real Estate Company with such bluntness. The lease had always been a significant source of the Real Estate Company’s power; now, faced with the prospect of an empty house, the tables were turned.

> Even as the directors of the Metropolitan Opera Association felt that interrupting the Metropolitan Opera would be “a national misfortune,” the responsibility was no longer theirs (or Kahn’s) alone. “We assure you of our willingness to cooperate in every reasonable way with your company in an effort to meet the situation,” Cravath wrote to the Real Estate board, expressing a clear expectation of mutual accountability, and a few proposals emerged. The prospect of a national operatic organization divided between San Francisco, Chicago, and New York did not gain support for a lack of financial response. A penny tax for operatic broadcast listeners was contemplated, but never seriously considered. The last resort for the Met, then, was
for the two boards together to form a Committee to Save Metropolitan Opera, to ask the legendary Spanish diva Lucrezia Bori to chair it, and to go to the people for their financial support.

One month later, between the third and fourth acts of *La Bohème*, the season’s last subscription performance, the Met’s gold curtains parted and Bori introduced Mrs. August Belmont Jr., clad all in white. “I’ve often asked audiences to do something for someone else,” Mrs. Belmont began. “Tonight I’m asking you to do something for yourselves. We must have music and poetry, and we cannot think of a future without their inspiration.” Before her marriage, she was known as Eleanor Robson, the renowned actress for whom George Bernard Shaw had written *Major Barbara*. As such, she was thoroughly comfortable on the formidable Metropolitan stage; as Mrs. Belmont she also was entirely welcome upon it. Not since the happier days of Otto Kahn’s involvement on the Met board were such stirring words uttered in defense of the arts, and they were what people most needed to hear now. Invoking history, she explained to the audience that her other reason in pleading for the Metropolitan was because long ago, her husband’s father had been an early founder of opera in New York and leader of the old Academy of Music. By the time she finished her speech, Eleanor Belmont had raised over $4000: $1000 each from Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt, Mrs. Charles B. Alexander, Mrs. Robert Goelet, and an unnamed donor, plus more money from individual collection boxes. Together with other similar pleas, in one month, Lucrezia Bori’s group gathered $140,000, or almost half of the goal, including over 2,000 letters of support from all parts of the United States and Canada, each containing contributions of $1 to $5 in response to her radio appeals.

Bori’s committee was a huge and unprecedented joint effort, consisting of the often-rivalling representatives from the Real Estate Company, the Opera Association, the Juilliard
School, and Chicago and Brooklyn opera board members. But with Bori and Belmont at the forefront making the pitch to the public, women were doing the serious fundraising. Where were the paternalistic nineteenth-century elites with their deep pockets now? A new culture of social openness was positioned to save the opera.

“Grand opera at the Metropolitan can no longer rely, as heretofore, upon a small group of rich men,” Paul Cravath declared on the radio. “We must now rely upon the support not only of the audience at the opera house, but also on the vast radio audience that listens to opera through the National Broadcasting Company.” Bori added that “opera has found a home in every American family, and opera in this country can progress only by preserving the Metropolitan. It is not a problem for the few in a big way, but a problem for the many in a moderate way.”

By mid-March, donations large and small were pouring in. Along with a commitment of $50,000 from the Juilliard foundation, $10,000 each from Louis Eckstein and Pierre du Pont of the du Pont Corporation and General Motors, and $5,000 from an emotionally removed Otto Kahn, a post-season benefit performance of Manon raised $13,000, presented for free by about half of the Metropolitan personnel of 770 artists and staff members, including Bori herself in the title role.

Smaller donations came from others, including the opera star Geraldine Farrar’s father, who sent $3 (one dollar from himself and each of his two dogs), as well as from an upstate New York farmer, who sent a crate of thirty dozen eggs to the opera house to be sold for 25 cents each. Backstage, quarters rained down on Bori in payment for the eggs. “So you see,” said the soprano to the audience, “even the dogs and the hens are contributing. And if any of you want to help us out right now, I am ready for business.” Almost a joyful atmosphere permeated the common endeavor, with many factions coming together to save the opera. There also was a certain pathos about the idea of a chastened elite cultural institution, which once had all but
belittled Otto Kahn because he was a Jew promoting a more democratic house, accepting eggs from an upstate farmer. Nevertheless, the campaign was unusual and effective, raising $213,000 by March 18.153

In her role as expert fundraiser, Bori praised the radio audience for its support, and declared that in only two seasons the weekly broadcasts had transformed New York’s opera “from a local social enterprise into an artistic institution of national interest and concern.”154 Not to be overlooked, however, the “old guard” made plans to help out also, by banking on the very social traditions that not only created the Met, but that ironically had ceased to sustain it. The “aristocratic auditorium,” Bori announced, was set to be the scene of the first Opera Ball on Friday, April 28, 1933, the proceeds of which would go to the fund. The type of zeal evinced over preparations for the event by members of society and the musical world alike approached the fervor of another time.155 The Met stage was to be transformed into a gala pageant representing a ball given for the Empress Eugénie at the Grand Opera in Paris in 1860. While the accounts of the anticipated costume extravaganza recalled the decadence of the Vanderbilt or Hazen Hyde balls of decades earlier, behind the proceedings was a far more self-conscious focus on the Metropolitan Opera’s desperate situation rather than on frivolous depictions of an unusable past.

For sure, the participants were aping European royalty much as Mrs. Astor’s Knickerbocker aristocracy had done. But unlike Mrs. Astor’s or even the less inbred Vanderbilt or Hyde balls, New York’s first Opera Ball enlisted many stars of the Metropolitan Opera, three ballet companies, guest stars of the concert hall and the stage, in addition to prominent members of society. By 1933, at the highest rungs were those with nineteenth-century social ancestry, along with others with twentieth-century financial and professional accomplishments. Jew and
Gentile, new money and old, entertainers and socialites now banded together to save the Met while attending a ball that was being touted as “one of the outstanding entertainments in the history of the city.”\textsuperscript{156} The Met now belonged to everyone. Boxes were not reserved exclusively for the Real Estate Company elite, but were available for sale upon application to a Mrs. Chester Burden at the New York Junior League Bureau of Entertainments located at the Saks Fifth Avenue department store. The price was hardly prohibitive: boxes sold for $50 and stall boxes for $30, not including the cost of admission, which was $10, including supper.\textsuperscript{157}

Historical accuracy and artistic authenticity were still important for the ball’s organizers, who thus engaged the team from the Society of Beaux Arts Architects responsible for their organization’s elegant and successful parties.\textsuperscript{158} Even so, the Opera Ball was acknowledged to be pure fantasy: a “fancifully conceived historical pageant” recalling the “glamour and romance” of Paris during Louis Napoleon’s reign, while temporarily suspending the grim reality of New York during what would come to be known as the Great Depression. Performers and socialites alike were set to impersonate nineteenth-century figures. Napoleon’s Zouaves (portrayed by a detachment from the Seventh Regiment) began the program with a drill, followed by performances by prominent artists playing historical roles.\textsuperscript{159}

But so long as historical accuracy was on the agenda, what the organizers failed to understand, much less to articulate, was the fact that New York in the Academy of Music era was socially and culturally a provincial place. The Metropolitan Opera, in a sense, was a reaction to the socially closed and artistically challenged Academy. In time, the Met, too, closed ranks around an old guard. The Save the Met costume ball of 1933 was thus the apotheosis of the ebb and flow of the institution’s original mission, flowering in the context of the twentieth century polyglot city.
Articles in the press recorded every aspect of the event, including its casting of around five hundred members of society as the actual European royalty of Empress Eugénie’s day. In the roles of members of the French, Austrian, British, and Russian aristocracy were representatives from New York wealth, society, business, and the arts—a group as diverse socially as ever could be imagined leading such a spectacle at the Metropolitan Opera House.\textsuperscript{160} Leading the pageant, as the Empress Eugénie, was Eleanor Belmont herself, escorted by her Napoleon, the flamboyant French fashion arbiter Boutet de Monvel.\textsuperscript{161}

Three thousand people came. Reprising the upper-class custom of the past, several society hostesses gave dinners beforehand. In fact, the attendees were conspicuously female, and most married women listed in the press accounts were present without their husbands, unlike the costume balls of Alva Vanderbilt’s time, at which men of leisure were as enthusiastic guests as were their wives. The pageant began at 11:30 pm, and upon its conclusion the orchestra floor was removed to provide space for dancing.\textsuperscript{162} It all must have seemed a bit ridiculous to the members of the true “old guard” who attended. In the end, though, the ball netted $25,000 for the Save the Opera fund, which put the $300,000 goal over the top, and thus truly saved the opera for another season. For now, Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt, Mrs. Cornelius N. Bliss, Mrs. W. Bayard Cutting, Mrs. Harry Harkness Flagler, Paul Cravath, and even Otto Kahn, sitting in their boxes, could only silently witness how a younger, more diverse group was making an effort to guarantee the continued existence of their old Metropolitan Opera House.

A few weeks later, Earle Lewis, the Metropolitan box office treasurer, announced a 20-
to-30 percent increase in the number of subscribers for the next season. Many of those who had allowed their subscriptions to lapse were returning, and were joined by a large number of
newcomers. All of the subscribers expressed their satisfaction with the proposed program, and some of the subscription price reductions also functioned as a good purchase incentive.163

There was no underestimating the impact of the new technology of radio on the rising popularity of opera. The National Broadcasting Company had not only borne the expense of the radio broadcasts, but had promoted the Metropolitan Opera financially—through direct contributions as well as by helping increase opera listenership. In the middle of a special opera program celebrating the opening of NBC’s new studios in Rockefeller Center, Cravath praised the inaugural radio broadcasts of the opera two years before as being of “great importance to the musical world.”164 Opening up the Metropolitan Opera to a larger audience not only saved it, but made it better, as radio listeners appreciated the quality of their world-class company while taking literal and figurative ownership of it. During the summer of 1933, Cravath had toured the operatic festivals of Europe, including Baireuth and Salzburg, and had returned convinced that “we have, all things considered, the best opera in the world, and we believe it will be better than ever this coming winter.”165 New York’s Metropolitan Opera Company had become the American opera company. It took over six decades, but August Belmont’s plea for New York City’s cultural preeminence via the opera was now a reality.

“If you want a thing done—go. If not—send.”

Eleanor Robson first experienced grand opera from the standing room. “It had never been possible to hear a Metropolitan performance because of my own theatrical engagements,” she explained in her memoirs.166 The fact was, however, that even though she was a famous actress, she had led a fairly humble existence prior to her marriage to the widower August Belmont Jr. in 1910, when her life was transformed from that of a working woman, living with her mother in a
small house on West Seventy-seventh Street, to that of Mrs. August Belmont, the lady of several mansions in New York, Newport, Saratoga, Long Island, Kentucky, and South Carolina.

Of the third generation of a theatrical family, Eleanor Robson was born in 1879 in Wigan, Lancashire, where her grandmother had been performing. Upon the death of her father, her mother, a well-known actress named Madge Carr Cook, moved to the United States with her seven-year-old daughter, whom she deposited at a Staten Island convent school. Upon graduating, the girl joined her mother, who was performing with a theatrical stock company, and also began acting in a few small roles. Reminiscent of a Victorian drama itself, Eleanor’s life took an extraordinary turn when the company’s ingénue fell ill and the bright blue-eyed teenager was catapulted to stardom as the replacement, eventually emerging as a top Broadway star. August Belmont became a persistent suitor, and although the actress seriously contemplated the benefits of a career over marriage, she accepted his proposal in 1910 and retired from the stage. The bride was 30, and her husband was 57.¹⁶⁷

Not exactly to the manner born, Eleanor Robson nevertheless played the role of Mrs. August Belmont with aplomb. In her life story and in her interests, she was the perfect composite of what a socially relevant twentieth-century elite might be: she had an unpretentious style, personal presence, and intelligence; she was cultured, yet from a humble, although not unsophisticated background; she had worked, so thus had an understanding of the working class; and she was raised in a convent school, which instilled in her a sensitivity and sense of commitment to the less fortunate. And as Mrs. Belmont, she had not only the personal gravitas, but the social connections and financial resources to support and draw attention to the causes that concerned her. While imposing in manner and appearance (but in fact she wore little or no makeup), she was approachable and not snobbish. The poorer acquaintances she and her mother
had known in her youth, for example, kept writing to her as Mrs. Belmont much as they did when she was Miss Robson; Eleanor, in turn, replied with kind and sympathetic letters. The life of a superficial social butterfly was clearly too insubstantial for her, and she stayed true to herself throughout her century-long life.

While the Belmont marriage appeared to be quite formal, there was an element of deep admiration and respect between the couple. “I was trained by my husband,” she said in her later years. “He said, ‘If you want a thing done—go. If not—send.’ I belong to that group of people who move the piano themselves.” Indeed, almost immediately after her marriage, Eleanor Belmont became consumed with public, cultural, and social activities, and had an obvious aptitude for leadership well beyond the role that would have been automatically accorded her simply for being Mrs. Belmont. She was an important fundraiser for the Red Cross during World War I, making forty-five speeches in thirty-eight cities in ten states from February to May 1917. When she sailed for France to report on her Red Cross field activities, she carried with her a letter of introduction to General John J. Pershing from Theodore Roosevelt. “Mrs. Belmont is one of the few really able people who are also gifted with the power of expression,” he wrote. “She has a man’s understanding, a woman’s sympathy, and a sense of honor and gift of expression such as are possessed by very, very few either among men or women.”

“I never go on a committee unless I really follow through,” she said. “To give your name—and then have nothing to do with the project—is wrong.” Indeed, Belmont had an activist’s zeal for the endeavors she chose. She was a leading member of the Woman’s Organization for National Prohibition Reform. For several years in the 1930s she was on the board of Survey Associates, a cooperative publishing society that advanced the cause of social welfare philanthropy through research and publications. She was involved with fundraising and
building the Stratford Theatre in England, helping to open it officially in the summer of 1932 with the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII. In 1933, she created and headed a campaign for the Adopt-a-Family Committee, which provided $300 per “adopted” family in emergency wages for five months, giving not only money to the unemployed, but appraising the benefactors of the specific medical and clothing needs for families; she addressed the Federation of Jewish Philanthropic Societies; and she planned an important luncheon to raise consciousness for unemployment insurance, and leaned on some important contacts, ranging from Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, to John Elliott, Adler’s successor in the Ethical Culture Society, to Marshall Field, to John Schiff, to Frances Perkins, to attend.172

In 1934, as the President and National Chairman of the Motion Picture Research Council, she spoke out against gangster films, asserting that men had the right to make money but “no right to rob moral fibre,” offering instead that theaters be granted the right to book films individually instead of in blocks.173 That year, with Alfred E. Smith and Felix M. Warburg, she became an honorary chairman of the Citizens Family Welfare Committee, in a campaign to raise $2 million for New York City family welfare activities.174 And she was honored with a gold medal from the National Institute of Social Sciences for her services for “the benefit of mankind.”

In her charity work, Mrs. August Belmont was a new kind of lady bountiful. For sure, she understood the power of money—not only her own, but more importantly, the small contributions of others. It was not enough to find a few wealthy benefactors to fund a philanthropic undertaking, as had been the accepted pattern. One had to gather the large and small commitments of others, financial and otherwise, to strengthen a cause. Anybody with a
sense of shared purpose could contribute. It was from this plain instinct that she derived her power.

August Belmont’s estate had sold his interest in Box 4 at the Metropolitan Opera upon his death in 1924, and while his wife’s cultural involvements were wide-ranging, she never ceased going to the opera. So when Eleanor Belmont took the stage with Lucrezia Bori in March 1933 and pleaded for money for the opera company, or donned a costume the following month to portray the Empress Eugénie at the Save the Opera ball, her participation was not unusual. As a Belmont, she had a keen sense of her place in history, and was willing to bank on it to preserve not only the Metropolitan Opera, but the opera itself in New York City, which her father-in-law, the proud New Yorker, Wall Street financier, and Jew who had become an Episcopalian, had for his own reasons sought to strengthen.

But Eleanor Belmont also was about to make history in a different way. On May 18, 1933, at the annual meeting of the Metropolitan Opera Company, she was named to the board of directors, making front-page headlines the following day. The story prominently mentioned that Belmont was “the first woman so honored.” It also listed the illustrious group of men she was joining: among others, there was Vincent Astor, Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney, Frank Gray Griswold, E. Roland Harriman, Frederic A. Juilliard, and Henry Rogers Winthrop from old guard families; Cravath, Marshall Field, Louis Eckstein, and Ivy Lee from the new professional class; and Otto Kahn and Rawlins Cottenet from the founding era of Conried’s Opera Company. But the unprecedented action of a woman’s election to such a board did not bear any further analysis—an indication, perhaps, of the times as well as of the qualifications of the woman in question.
Even though women like Frances Perkins now were holding important public offices, Belmont’s election was out of the ordinary. “My first meeting in May, 1933,” she wrote, “was almost as difficult as an opening night in the theatre. It is not possible to say who was more perturbed, I or these formal gentlemen, several of whom were friends or had been cordial dinner partners. But mixed company on boards was far from a familiar sight at that time, and when I slipped into a chair, several of the directors looked solemnly uncomfortable. Missouri might have been their home state. As for me, I felt like misplaced matter.”

The New York World Telegram praised the forward-thinking opera company for recognizing the “generalissima of the women’s forces” in unemployment relief. “Women have long predominated in the ‘Golden Horseshoe’ by virtue of the splendor of their gowns and jewels and the awe of their names,” the editorial noted. “A woman now takes her place with those who dominate the financial structure which makes the opera possible.”

While Cornelius Bliss was less than open about embracing Otto Kahn, he was impressed with Eleanor Belmont. He had known of her work with the emergency unemployment initiative, and as one of the rare members of both Metropolitan Opera board factions, suggested bringing her into the conservative opera circle. When Belmont accepted his invitation to join the board, however, it was more out of an impulse to help avert unemployment, with which she was “all too familiar,” rather than serve “any lofty idea of preserving an art.” The Metropolitan Opera Company, after all, was employer to over six hundred people, and Belmont recognized that in times of financial crisis, artists were usually the first affected. “At such times, like jewelry and furs, the arts are listed as luxuries and are not considered essential.” Thus it was not for the preservation of an outmoded social club, nor for the traditions of the past, nor for her own historic advancement, nor even for the weightier act of saving an important American cultural
institution that Belmont was moved to join the fray. It was for the employees of the Opera Company.

Yet the triumph of the Committee to Save Metropolitan Opera was unequivocally Lucrezia Bori’s. She had not only allowed the group to use her name, but also took command of the situation. Cravath publicly presented her with a set of “engrossed resolutions” [sic] when the $300,000 goal was met. “And now that the campaign is a success and that the people of New York and of this whole country are to be assured of opera next winter, the result can be largely attributed to the genius of this extraordinary woman,” he said. In San Francisco later in 1933, five thousand opera lovers, listening for free via an “elaborate remote-control electric reproduction,” crowded into a municipal auditorium to hear Bori in a live performance of La Bohème at the War Memorial Opera House a few blocks away, where she was performing for 3,000 others. At the end of the third act, Bori left the opera house to greet those at the auditorium, joined by the city’s mayor, Angelo Rossi, who presented her with a bouquet and read testimonials from her colleagues Gatti Casazza and Paul Cravath in New York. The honors bestowed upon her were for her art, but more particularly for her work in saving New York’s opera company for the rest of the country. Bori, who at age 46, was still drawing crowds to hear her sing, had the passion for opera and for the Metropolitan Opera Company that Belmont had for its employees. While Bori hung up her fundraising hat until called upon the following year for a repeat performance, it was left to Belmont to generate the same sort of enthusiasm and creativity for sustaining the opera in a more long-term way from inside the boardroom.

In December 1933, the Metropolitan Opera Association board appointed an executive committee to steer efforts to safeguard against future uncertainty, as had been the case for the previous two seasons, not coincidentally, in the time since Kahn’s resignation as chair. For while
there had always been talk of the Opera Company being self-supporting, or of a “reserve fund” that had been depleted with the onset of the depression, in reality it was always Kahn who had personally subsidized the endeavor, keeping it in the black. By now, Kahn was becoming increasingly resentful of the direction the Met was taking. He needed to remind the newcomers of all he had done, submitting to Cravath the terse suggestion, “would like committee and perhaps suitable others to know that my connection with the Metropolitan cost me three millions.”

Although others may have been on the committee with him, for several years, Kahn was the executive committee, as the majority shareholder of the Opera Company.

Bliss and Kahn’s mutual dislike for one another persisted following the thwarted plans for the new opera house in the 1920s. Cravath, however, recognized that Bliss and the Real Estate Company that he represented could be important to the survival of the Opera Company, and made him a director of the new Metropolitan Opera Association in May 1933, followed by his election as chairman of the executive committee later that year. Bliss consolidated his power by appointing to the committee anyone he wished. Kahn was not on his list.

Thus, on November 17, 1933, Kahn resigned from the board in anger, but Cravath intervened before the press and the Juilliard Foundation could get wind of it. Praised by Cravath as the “guiding genius of the Metropolitan Opera House for so many years,” Kahn withdrew his resignation. Thus, Kahn and Bliss took their places on the executive committee alongside Cravath, Robert S. Brewster, Frederic Potts Moore, Myron C. Taylor, Allen Wardwell, and, notably, Eleanor Belmont. Little did the press know of the behind-the-scenes drama. The Times considered it significant that the committee included those long connected with active direction of the Metropolitan, as well as “persons of more recent affiliation.” The lawyer Wardwell in particular was singled out as important because of his connection with the Juilliard Foundation,
on which he served as a trustee. In Otto Kahn’s day, the Met felt no need to draw on the goodwill and available funds of the foundation established by the old Real Estate Company chairman, and in fact had refused an offer of aid in 1924. Now it was begging.

The board also had to rely on creative strategies for survival. No suggestion was rejected as inappropriate, and a mix of ideas was as significant to success as was the mix of people that were making it happen. Buoyed by the triumph of the Eugénie ball, society ladies such as Mrs. Bliss, Mrs. Adrian Iselin, Mrs. Herbert Satterlee (J. P. Morgan’s Salome-objecting daughter), as well as Mrs. Frank Damrosch and Bori herself hosted a series of “opera teas” at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. In December 1933, the Metropolitan Opera Association and NBC negotiated with the American Tobacco Company to underwrite the radio season. The cigarette manufacturer was not new to radio broadcasts, having sponsored a program featuring a dance orchestra conducted by Jack Pearl, known on the air as “Baron Munchausen.” That month, with the cooperation of the management and board of the Metropolitan Opera Association, Mrs. Belmont announced that she was forming a Woman’s Metropolitan Opera Club, primarily for female music lovers. Limited to only one hundred members, the Club nevertheless was not as socially exclusive as it might have sounded. It was for those who could not afford the regular subscription but did not wish to attend alone.

The Christmas premiere of the Metropolitan Opera in 1933 opened with another testimonial to Lucrezia Bori, “the opera’s Joan of Arc,” who had saved the company from “the big, bad wolf of depression.” Among the four thousand present was Mayor-elect Fiorello LaGuardia. “In a music-hungry town the magic circle of great names was complete once more, with society at its gayest in mid-season holidays,” reported the Times music critic William B. Chase. Chase mused about the opera audience’s transformation:
Fifty years of supremacy, social, artistic, financial, never yet successfully nor often even seriously challenged hitherto, had shed the glow of confidence over a future faced with unknown elements of change. Would increasing radio tie-ups finally carry away the Temple of Song from Thirty-ninth Street and Broadway to the new direction of Forty-ninth Street and Fifth Avenue? Or would this overwhelming influence, joined with “new blood” in the crimson and gold parterre and with the unforeseen loyalty of popular sentiment for a lyric theatre of unmatched memories, continue clinging to the old site and to traditional ways? A permanent, hereditary audience asked these things and wondered.\textsuperscript{189}

Indeed, what of the new blood? In January, the executive committee elected yet another person “of more recent affiliation,” David Sarnoff, the broadcasting pioneer and president of the Radio Corporation of America, to the board of the Metropolitan Opera Association. Sarnoff, a Russian Jew who had immigrated to New York as a young child, began an illustrious career in the media by selling newspapers to support his family. As a young teenager, he worked as an office boy at the Commercial Cable Company and later at the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company, where he learned about the new technology of communications, and rose to the role of company commercial manager. When General Electric purchased the Marconi Company and turned it into RCA, Sarnoff was well positioned to eventually become president of the company.

Sarnoff’s election appeared to align the Metropolitan with Rockefeller Center, and the possibility of a move there had not been discarded.\textsuperscript{190} “If the new appointment does not mean that the Metropolitan is considering moving to Rockefeller Center,” the \textit{Times} speculated, “it is regarded as indicating a desire on the part of the directorate to bring into the executive committee representatives of all groups interested in the Metropolitan.” The committee now included members of the Real Estate Company, stockholders in the operating company, a trustee of the Juilliard foundation (Wardwell), and a representative of the Radio Corporation (Sarnoff).\textsuperscript{191} Also on the board since the 1920s was Ivy Lee, one of the founders of the field of public relations and counselor to the Rockefellers.\textsuperscript{192} While the Metropolitan Opera operating company board had
always consisted of a more vibrant mix of types, that mix no longer was just about Jew and Gentile, youth and maturity, or new money and old. It now had professionals and even a woman.

But the upcoming 1934-35 season still was in doubt, a fear somewhat dispelled by the news in late February that the Juilliard Foundation was to continue its support. While the Philharmonic was following the Met’s lead with a public campaign for $500,000, the Met announced that although it would need a guarantee fund, the opera company would make the appeal privately to patrons and not to the public. Cornelius Bliss once again asked Lucrezia Bori to head a committee to solicit the friends of the Metropolitan Opera, assisted by an even larger committee, consisting of Metropolitan Opera employees and singers; representatives from the Real Estate Company, including Bliss and Cutting; and Eleanor Belmont, Cravath, Kahn, Ivy Lee, and David Sarnoff, among others, from the Association.

*The Final Act?*

While there were still those who had managed to maintain a share of their wealth in the face of a declining market, for the Metropolitan Opera, the time of $200,000 boxes and cavalier offers of financial bailouts had long passed. That time also had passed for Otto Kahn, whose finances had plummeted for over three years along with his failing health. After his $10,000 pledge to the Met in 1932—the only five-figure donation from a board member—Kahn’s contributions to his usual causes remained few and only in the hundreds of dollars. Although his net worth was still in the several millions, it was time to protect his legacy for his family and not for cultural posterity.

Wednesday, March 29, 1934 began as a typical day for Kahn: he reported to his office at 52 William Street, tended to his work and correspondence, and adjourned for lunch. But at
around 1:45 pm, while sipping coffee at the end of the meal, he suddenly slumped over the table. Stricken with a heart attack, Kahn was dead. He was 67 years old.\(^{198}\)

Where the Metropolitan Opera was concerned, however, Otto Kahn already in effect had passed away, the minutes of meetings in the early 1930s indicating his presence but not his voluble participation in the considerable actions facing the company. In death, though, Otto Kahn’s real contributions to the company could be publicly revealed. “Nowadays, the mere ownership of wealth no longer confers honour,” he wrote in 1913, and for two decades afterwards, Kahn’s financial relationship with the Metropolitan Opera proved that point. At the time of his death, he still owned 84 percent of the stock in the Metropolitan Opera Company, now essentially worthless. He had financed the Met’s losses of around $350,000 from 1908-10, and bought out Hammerstein for $1,200,000 to assure the Met’s dominance. He risked his own funds on the new Metropolitan Opera House venture. He had subsidized the New Theatre debacle and spent $400,000 on the Russian ballet. He did all of this in what he must have perceived as a kind of service to his community, and he did so without exceptional recognition, publicly behaving as one of several board members instead of as the major contributor.\(^{199}\) The Metropolitan Opera might now be blaming the severe economic depression for its financial woes, but its leaders also never really understood or openly acknowledged that without Otto Kahn’s support, disaster could have struck a decade or more sooner.

Two days after Kahn’s death, at the Good Friday performance of *Parsifal*, Mayor LaGuardia appeared before the curtain to honor the memory of the former president and chairman of the company. The audience rose in silent tribute. “Now, my friends,” LaGuardia said, “in his memory, for all that he did many years single-handed [sic], for all that he gave to us, let us today realize that we must not permit this great institution of art in our city to remain
closed next year.” The condition of the fund for the next season, Gatti-Casazza had quipped, was about as good as the City Treasury, and while that made the mayor “feel quite at home,” it also gave his appeal a special urgency. “Do you realize, my friends, that only 10 percent of our grandparents were privileged to hear good music? And good music and good opera and art belong to all the people and not to a privileged few.” How times had changed. “Opera must be maintained by the music lovers in New York,” LaGuardia asserted, entreating the audience to take ownership of a community endeavor. “I appeal to you to send your contribution, no matter how small it is. And you, my friends, in the parterre, send your contribution, no matter how big it is.”

The next month, Bori announced that the 1934-35 opera season would proceed, for the necessary funds had been raised. In fact, with guaranteed funds from Juilliard and other foundations, from broadcasting rights, and from individuals, the drama of the previous effort did not need to be reprised. With the new season now assured, the intractable Real Estate Company quietly announced plans for the immediate modernization of the theater. The directors authorized $325,000 for improvements including exterior work and new lighting to begin at once; a total of $600,000 over two years, financed by mortgaging the building. Cravath, as president of the Opera Association, felt compelled to note that none of the money for the improvements would be taken from the funds raised to save the opera company. Over a half-century after the Met’s opening, there remained confusion as to whom the governing boards represented. And over that time, the only effort at the theater’s modernization had come not from the Real Estate board, the Met’s ostensible founders and the building’s owners, but from Otto Kahn and the performing company, whose efforts were scuttled and deemed inappropriate by a small group of entrenched society figures. And now the Real Estate Company was mortgaging
the building instead of getting out their checkbooks. It certainly never would have gone to the public to beg for help to finance the necessary improvements.

The Met’s current situation now seemed not only regrettable, but unimaginable—with a diva, Bori, having to make pleas on the radio for funds, or with even more serious talks underway with the Philharmonic, to discuss a merger of the two financially strapped musical institutions. As with the Met, the Philharmonic was facing a suffocating deficit. Olin Downes of the *Times* surmised that “in earlier days there were individuals who were able and willing to put their hands in their pockets and pay the difference between the income and expenses of orchestral concerts—which never have paid for themselves”: now there were very few who were able or willing to do so.\(^{205}\) In the end, the proposed merger was impractical, and the directors of both the Met and the Philharmonic heeded Arturo Toscanini’s advice that the combined companies would not be artistically advantageous to either organization.\(^{206}\)

The Met’s 1934-35 season started in December with an announcement that it would be Gatti Casazza’s twenty-seventh and last. Kahn was gone from the Golden Horseshoe, as was R. Fulton Cutting, his Real Estate Company counterpart and sometime nemesis, who died that September, as well as Ivy Lee, who died in November. The headlines asserted that older patrons dominated the opening, and the parterre was filled with aging representatives from already the third generation of the original founders. “The new opera season draws an impressive contrast to the bygone years, when comparatively few persons saw the opera in the effulgence it now projects upon the social season of New York,” reminisced the *Times*. In fact, some seven thousand names now were on the Metropolitan’s mailing list, “a compendium that reaches about 20,000 persons and results in an attendance of approximately 50,000 persons at the Opera House during the months of opera performances.”\(^{207}\) More impressive still was the astonishing
estimated size of the Metropolitan Opera radio audience: fifty million. It helped that in the financial capital of the United States, money would sustain and the latest technology would promote the city’s opera company in ways that bolstered its national preeminence—an advantage simply unavailable to Boston, or Philadelphia, or even Chicago. New York’s unique position thus helped the Metropolitan Opera in its quest for survival.

And yet, with deficits for over five seasons, the threats persisted.

After a meeting of the executive committee of the Metropolitan Opera Association on February 13, 1935, Cravath announced that it would not be realistic to count on presenting opera the next season. As a last-ditch effort, the eight-member committee, which now included Robert S. Brewster, the new president of the Real Estate Company, resolved to look into a way of reducing costs and increasing public support through subscriptions. Extensive cuts were unrealistic to contemplate if the quality of the opera was to be maintained; an anticipated increase in subscriptions was not feasible either, if the current high rates were to prevail. The only solution would be to cut salaries further, which would mean that European stars probably would not return. As for another public drive, the board was unenthusiastic, as were private guarantors, who were not forthcoming. “The opera cannot go along on its present basis without a subsidy,” the Times noted. But it also was clear that nothing could go forward vis à vis radio contracts or subscriptions until it was clear whether or not there would be an opera season at all.

At the same time, Bliss, Brewster, and Wardwell, directors of the Metropolitan Opera Association, met with Mayor LaGuardia about his proposal that the Metropolitan Opera House become the hub of a projected municipal art center for the performing arts under municipal direction. The Met hoped that in exchange for its cooperation, the city might waive the $150,000 tax that it levied on the Real Estate Company. In an interview soon after his election as
president of the Real Estate group, Brewster indicated that his board regarded itself as the “trustees for the benefit of the people of the city and nation,” although the grandiose notion that the opera house building itself held such intrinsic value was tempered with his acknowledgment that the first desire of the board was the “perpetuation of the Metropolitan Opera.”

Ultimately, the *deus ex machina* for the 1935-36 season came in the form of the Juilliard Foundation, which agreed to contribute $150,000 if the Met’s board of directors could raise $100,000 more. As part of the terms, the Met would adopt the Foundation’s proposal for a standard grand opera season followed by a popular-priced one featuring works in English and young American performers. The “supplementary” popular season, running through early spring and summer, was to fulfill an anticipated public demand. The action, to be a one-season experiment, was in accord with the spirit of Augustus Juilliard’s bequest. As a proviso for its support, the Juilliard camp also recommended Herbert Witherspoon for the job of general director of the company, replacing Gatti Casazza upon his planned retirement at the end of the current 1934-35 season.

“The director of an opera house has to keep one eye on the prompter’s box and the other on the box office,” Witherspoon believed. “He must know exactly what is taking place on both sides of the curtain, and he must see to it that what is taking place on one side will attract people to the other.” Witherspoon, a Yale graduate, physically resembled a successful businessman or lawyer, but as a professional opera singer (who sang at the Met for eight years), former director of the defunct (and populist) Chicago Civic Opera Company, head of the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, and chairman of music at the “Century of Progress” exposition, he was perfect for the Metropolitan Opera job as the Juilliard Foundation envisaged it.
“Democratization of the opera had begun!”

Still, uncertainty prevailed. To Mrs. Belmont, “the opera situation was more than serious; it was grim.” As she had learned from experience, it was important to cast a wide net of responsibility for the future. She also looked for a way “to share in some measure privileges that had hitherto belonged to a small group of directors and stockholders.” In hard times, what would be the small donor’s incentive for continued support? Belmont thought that closer association with glamorous opera singers, attendance at selected rehearsals, and a ticket-buying connection might be a good start, along with the larger aim of supporting the Opera Company. In early 1935, she put together “piece by piece, a mosaic of various ingredients” and presented a proposal to Bliss and the executive committee. Her plan called for a membership organization with “specified privileges and services,” in exchange for dues ranging from $10 to $100. A portion of each membership would go toward maintaining the opera. “Cathedrals are built with pennies of the faithful,” Eleanor Belmont wrote. “A great opera house also is a spiritual center, a temple of sorts, where many gather together for recreation, education, and inspiration—a blessed trinity worthy of public support.” From this belief, her new project took form.

Mrs. Belmont’s group was to be called the Metropolitan Opera Guild. “My spine was stiff with fright when in April the executive committee approved this plan for an opera guild, and authorized me to take such steps as might be necessary to put it into operation,” she wrote. “Democratization of the opera had begun!” she declared. The reality of the very possible demise of the opera demanded “speed and faith.”

Predictably, Robert Brewster, chairman of the Real Estate Board, inquired skeptically about how she anticipated getting members. Bliss came to her rescue: “Probably Mrs. Belmont doesn’t yet know exactly how, but if anyone can do it, she can,” he said. Having worked with her
in the Red Cross and in unemployment relief, Bliss knew the attempt might fail, but, in
Belmont’s words, “not for lack of effort by the newly appointed chairman of a Guild in embryo,”
armed with “a plan on a few sheets of paper, no more.”219 The Guild would offer privileges
worth more in cash value than the cost of membership. While dues money, increased
subscriptions, and gift money to the Metropolitan were part of the objective, so too was putting
forward the sense that opera was for everyone. “To create general public interest came first,”
Belmont wrote, “then to get people into the opera house was our aim.”220 Thus involved, the
public would become, in a very different and modern way, bona fide patrons of great art.221

Mrs. Belmont was thinking big. This was to be a national endeavor befitting America’s
greatest (and now, only) opera company. It was important to obtain increased notice “not from
just a few people in a few cities, but for a national art produced by a great national company.”222
Even Adolf Hitler demanded “music for all” in Germany in 1933, and thought that three opera
houses in Berlin by 1942 were not enough.223 Radio listeners would receive the opportunity,
through membership in the Guild, “to share in support of the opera on a wider and more popular
basis.”224 Indeed, Eleanor Belmont was part operatic evangelist, like Kahn, and part activist,
befitting the times. The New York Times understood her view implicitly, and wrote about the
significance of the organization in an editorial that fall:

The Metropolitan Opera Guild, in its effort to secure a sustaining membership
similar to that enjoyed by other great art and cultural institutions, started from the
conviction that if grand opera is to survive, the many must become interested in
its conduct and development rather than merely the few. The appeal is made to
three groups: first, those who themselves appreciate the opera and wish to have a
part in assuring its permanency; second, those who, belonging to this group, wish
also to preserve it for their children; and third, those who, even if they are not
operagoers, wish to maintain opera as a means of culture for this city and for the
country at large.225
This was to be a national citizens’ organization to promote opera in general, and the Metropolitan in particular. Every broadcast listener was a potential Guild member, offered a stake in the Metropolitan Opera.

The Association agreed to finance the initial undertaking with an appropriation of $5000. Belmont invited a founding group of national sponsors to signal the Met’s broad importance, before presenting the plan to the public. On her list were no ordinary citizens: at the top was President and Mrs. Roosevelt, along with governors from nine states, Mayor LaGuardia, Senator Robert F. Wagner, and two hundred distinguished citizens, taken from society and business, as well as the Metropolitan Opera “old guard” and their descendants. As never before, the names Speyer, Cutting, Frick, Iselin, Juilliard, Lewisohn, Morgenthau, Steinway, Vanderbilt, Warburg, Mackay, Cravath, and Bliss were united in the same Metropolitan Opera cause.

The Guild implemented Belmont’s strategy immediately. There was a flurry of activity, including several “at home” receptions for members with performers; luncheons with opera stars as guest speakers; an exhibition of costumes worn by opera stars; a dress rehearsal of Fidelio open only to members; and a special event at the theater that December, at which members mingled with the company and staff over an informal program and buffet supper. Within four months the Guild was 2,200 members strong, and the spring “subsidiary season” of opera was guaranteed. Edward Johnson, who replaced Witherspoon as general manager after his sudden death within weeks of his appointment, addressed the Guild with a call to arms: he was counting on the group “to give us the new element so necessary to the continuance of what is probably the outstanding international theatre in the world,” and was hoping for 5,000 and perhaps even 10,000 members.
The enthusiasm was warm, and the invitation welcoming, with 1,200 acceptances for the December reception at the theater. Paper festoons and balloons decorated the Met’s grand staircase for that occasion, and seventeen girls in costume from the Guild’s junior committee assisted the organizers. Lucrezia Bori took the stage with all of the heads of the technical staffs and sang a jingle in support of the Guild and Belmont:

I want you all to join us as we go to work and build
A bigger and better Metropolitan Opera Guild
And when you see what we will do I know you’ll all be thrilled.
The guild goes marching on.
Greater glory to the opera.
Brava, brava Mrs. Belmont,
The guild goes marching on . . . .

Mrs. Belmont championed the “new and young faces” that were now seen at the opera, and appealed to members of the committee to interest glee clubs, musical societies, and university clubs in the opera. Indeed, Belmont, at Felix M. Warburg’s suggestion, had begun a separate campaign to provide reduced-rate opera tickets to “impecunious music students and others” thereby assuring the permanency of opera by filling every seat for every performance. The idea soon was followed by Guild-sponsored student performance days for students from all over the city and surrounding suburbs; the Guild was broadening the Met’s support base further by educating future audiences. Here, in fact, was the perfect realization of the Metropolitan Association’s act of incorporation: it was founded as a corporation for educational purposes—in reality a legal construction of Cravath’s not really to advance culture, but to avoid prohibitive taxes.

Belmont’s imagination for fundraising was surpassed only by her zeal for consciousness raising. The Guild enlisted representatives from department stores and specialty shops, urging them to promote the Met through window displays or store advertising. Mayor LaGuardia
supported the effort further, by mandating the Merchants Association to advance the cause of the Metropolitan Opera, and by extension, that of culture as a whole in New York. Mrs. Belmont addressed the merchants at a luncheon at which LaGuardia’s words were read: “We should join together, it seems to me, in making our city the greatest civic centre of music—or art in any form—rather than to permit leadership in this respect to be claimed by the cities of Europe. Could [sic] the merchants of New York join in sponsoring this movement it would be of outstanding assistance to the city and I should be glad to give you my support in every practical manner in order that it might result in benefit to the general good of our citizens.”

By the close of 1935, Earle R. Lewis, the Met’s box office treasurer, announced that the efforts were paying off. The upcoming season had 28 percent more new subscriptions than the highest total ever recorded since 1919. In addition, it was an all-time record for a single year’s sales. The Metropolitan Opera Association was overcome: “Not only are the greatly improved financial results of the season directly traceable to the efforts of the Opera Guild, but the increased interest of the public resulting from their efforts has been a great inspiration to the management and the artists.” It was a tribute to Eleanor Belmont.

Threatened with extinction only a few months earlier, the Metropolitan Opera opened its 1935-36 season in December with newfound energy and purpose. It had a new, young director in Edward Johnson, a Canadian by birth but wholly American in manner. “The worlds of art and society, business and politics,” wrote H. Howard Taubman of the Times, had rallied around the new leadership, as had the company, energized with a new youthful spirit. One of the first orders of the new management was the banishment of the “claque,” a centuries-old practice of professional applauders. Historically, the “horny-handed gentlemen” prolonged an evening at the theater with their constant interruptions; without them, opening night in 1935 and performances
thereafter moved along more smoothly. The Real Estate Company’s renovation project was complete, and a refurbished auditorium included new chairs and carpets, a new lighting system, freshly painted corridors, and an air conditioning system that would enable seasons during the warm months. Johnson hoped to build on the American public’s enthusiasm for the opera by reaching out to a wider audience during the summer season; he also hoped to establish the Met’s leadership in influencing musical and operatic trends throughout the nation. In sum, the success of the 1935-36 season would be crucial for the new management’s long-term goals and aspirations. “If it could consolidate its position, establish its prestige, it would be ready to carry forward to a memorable period in American operatic history,” the Times wrote. Indeed, a new era in the history of the Metropolitan Opera House was just beginning.

Five years later, the Guild was still growing steadily, while in contrast, the Real Estate Company’s leadership was eroding. Whatever power or influence once associated with ownership of the opera house had long since evaporated, and it now hardly was worth keeping up the effort. Thus, in January 1940, the Real Estate Company gave the Metropolitan Opera Association the option to purchase the old theater at Broadway and Thirty-ninth Street for $1,970,000, the total of the existing mortgage ($470,000), second-mortgage bonds ($1,000,000), and $500,000 in cash. It was, as a Times editorial pronounced, “A New Day for Opera.” Established as a business enterprise while enduring as a social one, the Metropolitan Opera, with the help of the radio, now had a greater following than ever before, in spite of its historic exclusivity. To serve the broad public interest, the Association was set to mount an appeal for public support to buy the building. It would have to raise $1,000,000 by May 31: $500,000 as a down payment, and the rest for an improvements and reserve fund.
The appeals began immediately over the radio and at performances, and continued at a frenzied pace leading up to the May 31 deadline. With the impending dissolution of the Metropolitan Real Estate Company, it was up to the Association to “take up the option before the building is bought and torn down or converted to other uses before our very noses,” Johnson explained. The interruption or cessation of the theaterless Metropolitan would mean the end of weekly broadcasts, the end of educating audiences about the opera, the end of nurturing American talent, and the end of opportunities for musical students. “It would mean that Americans had fallen down on the job of preserving in this country those opportunities and values which abroad have been disturbed or extinguished because of war.” If the effort succeeded, however, it would mean that in the place of a broken-down elite, a populist, democratic group was rising, and it was strengthening the quality of the entire enterprise.

Over the ensuing four months, contributions at all levels were proudly announced to the press. On the first day came a $1,000 check from the diva Bidu Sayao, and a letter enclosed with a gift of $1 each from five young men who sold librettos at the Met. Many other Metropolitan Opera performers and employees—from its stars, to its chorus, to its ballet dancers, its stagehands, the truck drivers who handled the scenery, and its administrative staff—all followed suit with large collection drives. Professional groups, society women, even schoolchildren, organized other drives. Plus, there were an estimated 10 million radio listeners to be tapped. Lucrezia Bori once again seized the radio waves: “The operas have come to you for nine seasons—but tales of financial needs have not. The opera now faces a crisis that is by far the most serious in its entire history. It has come to the crossroads, and it is for its friends to say whether or not it shall go on to further glory and brilliant achievement,” she said.
In two days alone, popular response produced ten thousand letters with contributions ranging from $1 to much more. There were $1,000 checks from individuals in Colorado and Pennsylvania, another for $5,000 from Allen Wardwell, and one for $10,000 from Marshall Field. It was not hyperbolic to suggest that opera had become a “definite cultural force”—and an American one at that. The drive to buy New York’s opera house became a national public undertaking. In the first week of February, the fund received donations from a blind boy from North Carolina; from the grandson and great-grandchildren of the Metropolitan Opera House’s builder; and from four oil workers in Oklahoma, who wrote about listening to the opera on the radio at the drilling rig. “We heard a woman singing, which was something we know little about, but we got interested and took in the show and wondered at the beautiful music. . . . We are poor boys trying to find some oil. Getting along O.K. and think the show is worth something so we are sending you 25 cents each.” In two weeks, the drive had netted $216,000, including $70,000 from the Juilliard Musical Foundation. By the month’s end, the American Guild of Musical Artists, which included leading Met singers, voted to raise $100,000 towards the goal.

Affluent New York City patrons, who organized an “uptown committee” which met with team captains, all exclusively female, unanimously decided to raise $100,000 as well. Other local committees emerged in Gotham suburbs. So, too, did more groups across the nation, as committees sprung up in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Cleveland, Toledo, Washington, San Francisco, and other cities. “The opera is meat and drink to us in the Middle West,” wrote a contributor from Hiawatha, Kansas. The Guild was galvanized, sponsoring local and national committees. In early March, a national Industrial Committee was formed, including among its ranks the chairmen of Coca Cola, Procter & Gamble, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, H. J. Heinz, and the National Association of Cotton Manufacturers.
Days later, the fund passed its halfway mark, with 80,000 radio audience gifts already in hand, and thousands more coming in. The Retailers from Greater New York organized a group of their own. Even youngsters, whom the Met had not solicited, joined the effort. More than 10,000 schoolchildren from across the country had made contributions to the fund, sending in pennies and conducting campaigns in their classrooms.252

Believing that discontinuing New York’s Metropolitan Opera would be would be “an irreparable loss to the people of the nation,” New York’s Governor Herbert H. Lehman sent $500.253 He was joined by governors of nine other states, and 175 prominent men and women involved in civic, educational, and musical activities from twenty states and the District of Columbia, served on a sponsors’ committee.254 George A. Sloan, the fund campaign manager, told a group of corporate leaders that “to deprive this country of the best in grand opera would be to endanger the strength of our cultural life and thus weaken our community life and make business—as difficult as it may have seemed at times of late—even more difficult.”\(^\text{255}\) The group contributed $130,000 to the fund. Even Herbert Hoover made a modest contribution, with the statement, “The opera is no longer the exclusive privilege of a few. The millions of radio listeners of the country have made it a national institution, and all of us owe to it support that it may survive and grow.”\(^\text{256}\) With culture blackened out in Europe, it was an American obligation to preserve it for the world, the former president reasoned.

In April, with more than a month to go before the purchase deadline, the fund was within $160,000 of its $1 million goal. Philanthropic foundations had given $83,457; the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), $2,500; the Metropolitan Opera Club, $4,593; and the Guild, $385,871.\(^\text{257}\) With a gift of $50,000 from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, by May 10, the $1,000,000 goal was surpassed.\(^\text{258}\) In the end, the fund received
$1,300,000, including $327,000 from 152,000 radio listeners from all over the country, Canada, and South America. Of the donors, 74 percent from outside the New York City metropolitan area contributed 38 percent of the total money raised. Governor Lehman said that “one of the most heartening evidences of the triumph of democracy” was the cultural and artistic enterprises that existed on a broader scale in 1940 than ever before. The Times critic Olin Downes concurred, with a reflection on the changing economic order:

The whole transaction affords extremely significant comment upon the development of musical taste in this nation in the last quarter century, coincidentally with the profound social and economic changes which are going forward, peacefully or catastrophically, through the nation and through all modern society. The new opera deal was necessitated by the changing economic order. The rich, in plain words, could not or would not attempt, in view of decreasing incomes and greatly increased taxation, to carry the financial burden of one of the greatest opera houses of the world. In a rapidly shifting scheme of values the opera box had in any event lost a considerable measure of its social prestige and glamour.

If the Metropolitan Opera was to continue, it could do so only with the public’s support.

On June 28, 1940, the Metropolitan Opera Association, the successor entity to the Metropolitan Opera Company, took title to the opera house and became the owner of the building, which was still as antiquated as it was the day Otto Kahn first proposed building a new one. But it had a history. The seats in the parterre boxes, formerly a vantage point of social power but now but a quaint vestige from the past, now would be sold to the public at box office prices. Former owners of the thirty-five parterre boxes, of course, would be permitted to sit there under the same arrangement as was available to all other subscribers.

Lucrezia Bori and her appeals had ushered in a new way of funding the opera, and Eleanor Belmont capitalized on her name to make such money-grubbing for a cause socially acceptable. When Edward Ziegler, the Met’s assistant manager, arranged for the sale of the old theater’s gold curtain to a movie theater for $100, Belmont, always on the lookout for a
fundraising opportunity, snatched the “ten-ton antique” from his hands. The Guild cleaned it, cut it up, and sold it piecemeal as souvenirs, netting $11,000 and funding the launch of a discount ticket service for students and schoolteachers. “The following season,” recalled Belmont, “as the freshly made successor to the famous old curtain gracefully parted, a new era dawned for our Metropolitan Opera.”

The original $5,000 board underwriting for the proposed Metropolitan Opera Guild in 1935 had remained untouched, and by the time Belmont wrote her memoirs almost two decades later, the Guild had raised around $2 million for the Metropolitan Opera, and had spearheaded the beginning of an endowment to avoid an ongoing hand-to-mouth existence.

Over the course of almost a century, what had opera, once the aristocratic pastime of rich plutocrats, come to symbolize? The new manager Johnson surmised in 1935, “With the change of times there is a new perspective of what opera means to every one and what every one means to the opera. The Metropolitan remains unique in our national life.” With the advent of radio, and an entirely new way of thinking about the entitlements of class, the opera belonged to anyone who embraced it. Even pennies could purchase it. During the campaign in 1940, the great American baritone Lawrence Tibbett concluded, “If America has come of age in music, I say it is in no small part due to the Metropolitan.”
Selection as one of Caroline Astor’s four hundred party guests was an indication of social status in “old New York,” but it also presumed that one was not a member of the city’s intellectual or cultural elite. By 1905, the year of Mrs. Astor’s last big gathering, antiquated notions of exclusivity were on their way out. Knickerbocker manners and mores were becoming archaic, and Greenwich Village socialists, downtown union organizers, and the press itself were all citing the social elite as a prime example of “all that was parasitical and undemocratic in the American system.”\(^1\) Certainly, few from the old society circles were among those who had made a lasting contribution to the larger cultural life of the city by the end of Theodore Roosevelt’s first term.

By the 1920s, New York’s once-inbred aristocracy had become, like the city itself, more cosmopolitan. As British expatriate novelist and critic Ford Madox Ford surmised, “New York will achieve its position—it has achieved the position it has—rather by in- than by exclusiveness, and it is good that there should be a place where all sort \([sic]\) of foreignness—\textit{all sorts}—should be united as it were in a common frame.”\(^2\) What Ford found particularly invigorating about New York was its openness to not only non-natives, but to artists and intellectuals, whose work could be both appreciated as well as financed there. Whatever provincial attitudes other American cities might have harbored about difference, to Ford, New York was redeeming the country “far more by the cordiality it displays to cosmopolitan artists and thinkers than by the fact that it is the financial center of the Western Hemisphere.”\(^3\) New York was the place to make a mark socially, financially, and culturally.

Moreover, the city’s cultural institutions for the public had grown out of private funds and initiative. Outside the elite, some early twentieth century critics argued that the increasingly
privatized economy and culture was un-American. Yet early institution builders also had the freedom to experiment with creating cultural organizations for their cities, even as they tested the limits of their social control and leadership. All it took was money. In this sense, for better or for worse, New York’s library, museum, and opera constituted a uniquely American and democratic form.

The dominance of new habits of mind by the 1920s and 1930s continued to challenge the old social order in sweeping ways that were intensified by economic circumstances. While nineteenth-century elites determined the city’s aesthetic agenda simply on the basis of their wealth, their counterparts by the 1920s had to negotiate a different societal context. The development of a formal, public cultural infrastructure for New York City may have been the outcome of old-school privatism, but trustees could no longer retreat to their restricted boardrooms to confidentially consider their next moves. Rather, they had to be attentive to how institutional programs appeared in public forums, and the New York Public Library, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Metropolitan Opera all invited public relations professionals to join their boards. With limited funds and fewer rich funders, institutions were forced to add persuasive and imaginative fundraising approaches to an already-onerous list of board responsibilities in order to ensure institutional survival.

In 1940, around twelve thousand charitable, tax-exempt, non-religious corporations existed in the United States and, most typically, were guarded by old-line community leaders. Eventually, three factors would change this condition: the inclusion of ethnic minorities in economic leadership roles; the rise of a welfare state that funded private sector programs; and new regulations demanding accountability of private tax-exempt entities to government-set standards serving the public interest. Thus, the boards of community and cultural institutions,
formerly the exclusive territory of old Protestant elites, opened up to broader leadership and
diffusion of power, and with it different expectations, values, and professional abilities, in
addition to essential new wealth. But New York already had been navigating this negotiation for
years, and learning and benefiting from it.

Furthermore, the former private-public demarcations broke down in the context of
growing government intervention in the 1930s and 1940s. The Metropolitan Museum trustees
were stunned when Parks Commissioner Robert Moses argued with them in 1943-45 about his
authority over the museum expansion plan, and whether or not the city would fund it. Taking a
proactive role as an ex-officio board member, Moses also weighed in on ways to galvanize and
modernize the staid board, pushing for the inclusion of women, Jews, and businessmen. Old
assumptions and nineteenth-century obsequiousness no longer held.

In fact, no city cultural institution was immune from Moses’s blunt prescription for
continued change. As forward thinking as New York’s cultural institutions had been, Robert
Moses had always remained vigilant about the boards’ elitist tendencies. In 1941, he pronounced
the venerable old Historical Society, once New York’s only museum, as “musty,” “sacred,” and
in a word, “dead”—because of the self-perpetuating board’s lack of vision. In response,
Alexander Wall, the institution’s secretary, countered that it was privately endowed and received
no support from the city treasury, and did not charge admission. In that sense, it was none of
Moses’s business. Moreover, between 5,000 and 10,000 people visited yearly—“surely
indicating” to Wall that the Historical Society was not dead—although in reality such numbers
were closer to the daily attendance of the Metropolitan Museum on free admission days.

The American Museum of Natural History, the city’s progenitor of the private-public
institutional model, was faring only a bit better. By 1949, the plant was in need of “complete
reconstruction,” yet the jointly prepared plans, according to Moses, were subject to “endless argument and revision,” and progress was at an impasse. “The waste of funds in preparing detailed specifications and then abandoning them hardly needs emphasis,” the Parks Commissioner grumbled. “When the officers, trustees and curators of an institution of this kind completely change their minds on such basic matters, city officials lose interest and patience and it becomes more difficult to persuade them to appropriate public funds and give time and serious thought to new inspirations,” he wrote. Reliance on substantial private resources was no longer a foregone conclusion as an easy alternative.

Moses was a bit more generous towards the New York Public Library, albeit even with its own “self-perpetuating” board, which included city officials. While its endowment was “reasonably adequate,” it, too, required a large-scale renovation for additional stacks. “A very considerable question arises as to how fast city and library funds can be made available for this reconstruction,” he wrote. The prevailing financial division called for a contribution of one-third by the city, and two-thirds by the trustees.

But the issue was larger than simply one of financing. It had become one of leadership. Reviewing the case of the Metropolitan Opera in the late 1940s, Moses invoked Otto Kahn’s earlier failed attempts at cultural populism, while conveniently ignoring Eleanor Belmont’s current success in this regard, to make a larger point. “The aristocratic tradition dies hard,” he wrote, “and until the Metropolitan group abandons it entirely, concedes that the era of the Diamond Horseshoe is over, that patrons now come from the rank and file of people of average and small incomes, and that the location must be based upon mass transportation and proximity to subways and buses, there is little likelihood that the Metropolitan problem will be solved.” Patrons and trustees alike were coming from a different, more professional class. “The
exploitation of these relationships by our museums will provide constant stimulus to them, and recognition of their practical value will result in financial contributions from business as well as philanthropy and government,” Moses surmised.\textsuperscript{11}

Ideally, Moses hoped that the election of future trustees should be so based on such connections uniting the past with the present, thus leveling the barrier between the curator and the outside world. “Such changes,” Moses wrote in 1949, “together with a more representative composition of the boards of directors and the aid from the city administration to the institutions in their present difficulties … can go far toward curing the troubles that at present beset the museums,” he predicted.\textsuperscript{12}

Ironically, Mrs. Astor’s grandson was among the more forward-thinking cultural board trustees who understood the spirit of the times. Earlier family munificence to the Public Library notwithstanding, Vincent Astor was known as “a hitherto unknown phenomenon in America: an Astor with a highly developed social conscience.”\textsuperscript{13} He was committed to giving away his vast inherited fortune for the public good. After his death in 1959, his wife Brooke parlayed Astor wealth and her social skill into a new kind of leadership in the philanthropic world. Serving on the boards of the Metropolitan Museum, the Central Park Conservancy, and the New York Public Library, she had substantial influence over institutional programs, directives, and directors. Over the next five decades, she oversaw a changing social order “defined more by balance sheets than bloodline.”\textsuperscript{14} By the late twentieth century, New York society had long since welcomed entrepreneurs, celebrities, and Wall Street tycoons who had bought entrée with so many millions of dollars that Mrs. Astor regarded herself as “nouveau pauvre.”\textsuperscript{15} But unlike her ancient namesake, this Mrs. Astor recognized that it was broadness of purpose, not a culture of exclusion, from which social power now emanated.
Beginning in the 1960s, this new reality was apparent to anyone who bothered to look. Corporate interests now were seizing upon the old notion of leadership through cultural philanthropy. In the case of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, established from 1955 to 1970, the private and public collaboration—of individuals, corporations, nonprofit cultural organizations, and city, state, and federal governments—was participating in an ambitious urban renewal and redevelopment project encompassing “slum clearance,” the consolidation of cultural interests, and the regeneration of New York itself. The program’s lofty commitment to high culture overshadowed the displacement of poor and middle-class people from the west side neighborhood, all to the greater benefit of developers and politicians. Nevertheless, with Lincoln Center, what had been surmised for decades was now taken as fact: New York City was the cultural capital of the world. The perception was not really about the superiority of the Metropolitan Opera, the New York Philharmonic, or the New York City Ballet, all of which were getting new homes on a sprawling campus; rather, it was quantified by a series of large financial pledges that set an unmatched new standard for cultural philanthropy. President Eisenhower hailed Lincoln Center not merely as a remarkable local initiative, but as something of greater national importance: “a mighty influence for peace.” In the end, beyond a political, educational, or even aesthetic agenda, it opened up opportunities for thousands of performing artists and millions of patrons.

The leadership cycles of New York’s premier institutions have continuously reflected the influence of local wealth in defining the city’s and the nation’s cultural landscape. Amid the diversity of ideas, opinions, and people, inevitably the most successful institutions, often at critical moments, have recognized the advantages of breaking down old social barriers to outsiders with both new money and new notions of cultural stewardship. As New Yorkers, the
trustees, whether they have liked it or not, have been inevitably open to and experienced with this sort of pragmatism.

Yet by the mid-twentieth century, even the Metropolitan Museum of Art faced the hovering specter of institutional irrelevance and board entrenchment. In October 1966, its board of trustees summoned Thomas Hoving, the then-current New York City Parks Commissioner, to the Union Club to discuss the museum. An art historian and former curator, Hoving less-than-reticently observed, “The place is moribund. Gray. It’s dying. . . . The attitude of the Met is a problem—people think it’s inhospitable, elitist, and inactive.” The once-progressive board had allowed the renowned institution to come to a “standstill,” and it lacked a “crusading spirit,” something “all but mandated by the times.” Hoving felt that the Met needed to change “spiritually as well as financially,” in order to return to a position of leadership. An inclusive and forward-thinking museum with a modern mission might begin “to communicate the grandeur of the fifty centuries of art the Met possessed,” something it was currently failing to do. When he was offered the director’s job two days later, Thomas Hoving subsequently presided over a new and controversial era of curatorial redirection and trustee reorganization, in which structural expansion and “blockbuster” exhibitions became dominant programmatic undertakings.

It was not that simple for the New-York Historical Society. Because of its long-standing privatist autonomy and lack of wider trustee accountability, by the 1980s, it had lost its way. In 1988, as it faced bankruptcy because of board mismanagement that had eroded the institution’s endowment, the 184-year-old museum announced that it would auction off some of its holdings in order to avoid total collapse. Its president through this unsettling period was Robert Goelet, descended from a line of philanthropists all bearing the same familiar name. The patrician New Yorker had found it inappropriate to ask board members for funds to help defray the mounting
deficit, or to launch a fundraising campaign, or even to support the idea of a gala party. **19** “Sadly, the Historical Society’s former trustees, for whom a seat on the board was as much a given as an old name and old money, didn’t love it enough,” the *New York Times* accused. “They failed to insure its endowment or proclaim its treasures to the mass of New Yorkers—who might then have made keeping the institution alive a priority,” the editorial concluded. **20** The lesson of the Metropolitan Opera’s institutional crisis and impending demise—saved in the 1930s by the “pennies of the faithful”—was lost on a board cut along aristocratic lines. It was not that the Historical Society’s leaders did not love their institution—it was that they were functioning under obsolete, nineteenth-century notions of etiquette and cultural leadership.

It took more than the desperate measure of deaccessioning parts of its collection; or the appointment of a new board in addition to an advisory committee of influential businessmen, arts administrators, and educators; or a media outcry; or even the naming in 1993 of an energetic new director, Betsy Gotbaum—yet another New York City Parks Commissioner—to turn things around for the New-York Historical Society. **21** It took money, and an unflinching view of how to raise it. First, Gotbaum set the mandate to open up the museum and to popularize it. **22** Then city, state, as well as private financial intervention helped shore up the budget: the institution could no longer afford to turn away public support, and would have to open its books as well as its program to public scrutiny and opinion. A decade later, Richard Gilder, the New York financier, collector, and philanthropist, emerged as a board power broker committed to contributing funds and seeking the support of like-minded trustees of both sexes who also could afford six- and seven-figure donations. **23** He also recognized the value of trustee diversity, and opened the Historical Society board to other important scholarly, professional, political, and cultural types whose contributions were not necessarily financial, but of equal importance in broader areas. The
gulf between Goelet and Gilder could not have been greater. Thus, a more relevant programmatic directive, coupled with a decidedly aggressive fundraising approach, saved the institution.

It was a similar story across the street at the American Museum of Natural History when in 1993, the lawyer and former president of Barnard College, Ellen Futter, became the institution’s president. Her charge to curators and trustees alike was to think “strategically” about relevant exhibitions geared to a wider audience, as well as to ponder the city’s present and future, and what the museum’s role might be in that context. Antiquated notions of “dowdy respectability” and a steadfast adherence to tradition no longer could sustain any institution. Futter herself broke the mold of the Natural History leader, a position that historically had been shared by two men: a scientist and a gentleman. The New Yorker cheekily suggested that in an age of growing interest in biodiversity and extinction, the institution was wise to consider its relationship to the WASPs with whom it had aligned its fiscal destiny. Those Protestant trustees of an earlier time had financed expeditions, collections, and deficits, and made the museum a “formidable redoubt of ruling-class values.”24 But the world was now different. Arthur Gelb, the New York Times Company Foundation’s president, likened Ellen Futter to Vartan Gregorian, the New York Public Library’s visionary (Iranian-American) president through the 1980s, also an academic, and an iconoclastic and atypical cultural leader. Like Gregorian, Futter was poised to get “major figures in all classes of cultural life and business life” interested in her agenda. “I can see the Museum of Natural History on a Sunday having the same kind of crowd that the Met has,” Gelb presciently anticipated.25 In the end, Futter succeeded in looking meaningfully and purposefully to the future without thoroughly rejecting the underpinnings of the museum’s glorious past.
Admittedly, all cultural institutions at the turn of the twenty-first century were riding a wave of financial prosperity, making institutional development and advancement less difficult than it had been in decades past. A new generation of philanthropists in a new Gilded Age, like the Carnegies and Rockefellers before them, were becoming exposed to the power of money, if no longer to create institutions, then to revive existing ones. Even so, and even in the early 2000s, money could not automatically buy programmatic change. “If you’re going to get involved with a large, well-established organization, unless you want to go along in the way they’re going, forget it,” cautioned Gilder, himself known for shaking up his pet philanthropic causes. “If you think you can change Yale or Columbia or the Metropolitan Museum because you have a few million bucks, you’re kidding yourself,” he said.26

Perhaps not. As some fortunes grew ever larger, what would it take, paraphrasing New York’s Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, to help ensure that New York remained a cultural and intellectual capital of the world? In 2007-08, this tall order was aligned with the destiny of the New York Public Library’s $1 billion expansion project, and the question was posed to Wall Street financier Stephen A. Schwarzman. “We’d like you to be the lead gift and give us $100 million and we’d like to rename the main branch after you,” Schwarzman recalled representatives of the library saying. “That sounds pretty good,” he nonchalantly replied.27 Although the gift came without conditions, the library trustees proposed adding the Schwarzman name to those of Astor, Lenox, and Tilden on the Carrère and Hastings Forty-second Street building façade. The New York Landmarks Preservation Commission agreed unanimously with the plan.28 In all probability, with continued progress in the balance, the library’s early twentieth-century trustees would have as well.
Over time, other institutions and other cities were inclined to incorporate the example and lessons of New York City’s museums, library, and performing arts venues into their own trustee initiatives in order to survive. Money, followed closely by trustee diversity and an eye for public interests, trumps all else, especially the pretensions of a social pyramid. And in spite of the changing global order at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the New York Public Library, the Metropolitan Museum, and the Metropolitan Opera remain titanic in the world—and standard bearers for the nation and the city they call home.
NOTES

INTRODUCTION


5 See, for example, Catherine Hoover Voorsanger and John K. Howat, eds., _Art and the Empire City: New York, 1825-1861_ (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000).

6 See, for example, Harris, “Four Stages of Cultural Growth.”


8 See, for example, John Atlee Kouwenhoven, _The Arts in Modern American Civilization_ (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967).

9 See, notably, Harris, “Four Stages of Cultural Growth,” 24-49.


11 See Hammad, _Power and Society_.


William Church Osborn to John G. Saxe, 10 November 1944, Box 2, William Church Osborn Papers, History of the Museum 1944-46 File, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

J[ohn]. G. S[axe]., memo for President Osborn, the Director and Vice-Director, 17 November 1944, Box 2, William Church Osborn Papers, History of the Museum 1944-46 file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


In the early-to-mid twentieth century, both the popular and the elite newspapers, for their own different reasons, generally recognized rich or exceptional philanthropic leaders more for their money and public works rather than for their ethnicity or even their gender. Tabloids like the *New York American* and the *World* for the most part promoted a more generalized notion of those who had succeeded in attaining the “American Dream,” while the Jewish-owned *New York Times* cast Jewish and Gentile philanthropists on equal and theoretically impartial footing.

For a broad analysis of the “public” and public life in the American city, see Mary P. Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City During the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).


See, for example, Voorsanger and Howat, *Art and the Empire City*, 12.


Michael G. Kammen, *In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 146.


Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*.

For a study of a similar association in Chicago, see Horowitz, *Culture & the City*.

34 See, for example, Jeffrey Lee Trask, “‘American Things’: The Cultural Value of Decorative Arts in the Modern Museum, 1905-1931” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2006).


36 See Borus, *Twentieth-Century Multiplicity*, for a thorough examination of the topic.

37 See, for example, Hall, *Inventing the Nonprofit Sector*, 3.

PART ONE: In Pursuit of American Culture

1 “No title,” *Christian Register and Boston Observer* 17, no. 31 (August 4, 1838): 122.


PROLOGUE


4 The Boston Public library was the initial model for the free, public, tax-supported library with circulation privileges, in other words, the “public library” as it is thought of today. “The growth of the public library was limited almost completely to the North, and there was most vigorously developed in New England, Massachusetts leading by far, with 144. This concentration can be accounted for in large part by the fact that in 1850 the total taxable personal estate in New York and Pennsylvania was one hundred million dollars less than that of Massachusetts, and by the fact that Massachusetts had a concentrated urban population that inherited the habit of communal cultural activity.” See Ibid., 37-38.

5 The New York model was adopted by nine other states before 1850 and an additional ten states before 1876. Yet across the board, the libraries declined because of the mechanics of supervision and upkeep as public facilities serving relatively small districts. Inevitably, the maintenance of the library buildings, administration by school trustees, and management by elected librarians all were found wanting. See Ibid., 24.

6 The opera house and the library shared the same architect, Alexander Saeltzer.

“Editor’s Easy Chair.”

“Musical. Opening of the Academy of Music.” Hackett, a New Yorker and well-known actor in London as well as New York, also served as manager for the Astor Place Opera House, and engaged the famous English actor William Charles Macready in 1849, prompting the notorious riot in which at least twenty-five were killed and over 120 injured. After the lukewarm reception for the Academy’s initial season, Hackett ceased being a manager. See “Obituary, Mr. James H. Hackett,” New York Times, December 29, 1871.

“Editor’s Easy Chair,” Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, April 1854.


Ibid.

Ibid.

“Editor’s Easy Chair.” April 1854.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


“Editor’s Easy Chair.” July 1866.

During the Academy’s first twelve years, no fewer than seven opera managers and their companies had performed there. When opera was not in season, the auditorium was leased for balls and other entertainments. The notion of a resident troupe performing at a consistently high standard was alien to the Academy’s directorate.

See Gallati, Making American Taste; Voorsanger and Howat, Art and the Empire City.


“France. From Our Own Correspondent,” The Times (London), July 7, 1866.


Ibid., 100.


The committee included George P. Putnam, the book publisher; Samuel P. Avery, the art dealer and collector; and the American artists John F. Kensett, John Quincy Adams Ward, and Thomas Worthington Whittridge.


Howe, A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 106.

Ibid.


Ibid.

See Horowitz, Culture & the City, 3-4.
34 See Scobey, *Empire City*.

35 “A Great Art Enterprise.”

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.


39 In fact, Comfort said, by 1776, “the three millions of people who occupied the thirteen colonies exceeded in average wealth, intelligence, and enterprise the people of any other nation on earth,” he exclaimed. Thus, contrary to popular belief, he suggested, in terms of industrial prosperity the United States was not a young nation at all, and neither was it an upstart in terms of politics, society, morality, or scientific education.” Ibid.

40 Ibid.


42 Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*.

43 “Metropolitan Art Museum.”

44 “A Great Art Enterprise.”

45 Ibid.

46 The meeting adopted four resolutions: to officially initiate the endeavor; to appoint a committee to prepare a constitution and by-laws, to apply for a charter, and adopt appropriate measures to accomplish their task; to designate a committee of fifty men, satisfactory to “the whole community,” who could “take the objects of this meeting into their own hands, and to carry them to successful completion”; and to notify the selected fifty and call a meeting immediately. The committee included a representative mix of business and cultural leaders: the merchants William H. Aspinwall, Abiel Abbot Low, Marshall O. Roberts, and Alexander T. Stewart; the businessmen William T. Blodgett, William E. Dodge Jr., and John Taylor Johnston; the philanthropists James Lenox and James B. Colgate; the lawyer Joseph H. Choate; the politicos General John A. Dix, Henry G. Stebbins, and Andrew Haswell Green; the designers of Central Park, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux; the journalist William Cowper Prime, the artists Daniel Huntington and John LaFarge; and the architect Richard Morris Hunt. The painter Worthington Whittredge would later write that the members of the Union League Art Committee, its artists in particular, “modestly left our names out, and the matter quickly took such a worldly turn that it was a long time before we were mentioned as ever having had anything at all to do with the inception of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.” Although the painters Kensett, Daniel Huntington, Frederick Church, Eastman Johnson, and the sculptor John Quincy Adams Ward in fact became part of the museum’s cadre of trustees, the place of the artist in that leadership circle was to say the least complicated. See Howe, *A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 117; Worthington Whittredge, *The Autobiography of Worthington Whittredge, 1820-1910* (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, 1942), 62.


48 An unnamed “American East India merchant” had long before offered a collection of Old Masters as a “nucleus” for a public free gallery. Likewise, Thomas Jefferson Bryan had long “kept vigil” over his American and European paintings at the corner of Broadway and Thirteenth Street, “offering them, meantime, to any fire-proof institute building where they would be safe and open to the public.” Similarly, the art critic and collector James Jackson Jarves had offered to sell his collection of Italian art “on moderate terms, as the foundation of a national gallery.”

49 “A National Art Museum.”

50 Ibid.


Garceau, The Public Library in the Political Process, 4, 12, 19.

By 1780, fifty-one such social libraries existed in New England; by 1815, there were over five hundred more and by 1850, there were over one thousand such libraries in the northeast region of the United States alone. See Ibid., 16.

Two legal forms emerged: the proprietary library, in which members invested money in shares to support the building, staff salaries, and books; and the subscription library, a corporation which accepted as members those who paid a fee. While the latter type was marginally less restrictive than the former, both were available only to those who could afford to pay for the privilege.

A European critic feared: “New-York will not long be the only city in America inaugurating a museum: all the other great cities of the United States will want to have their galleries of art; and it is at the expense of our continent that they will furnish themselves.” “A Foreign View of Art Progress in America,” New-York Tribune, November 11, 1871. In Washington, DC, the Corcoran Gallery of Art building was deeded on May 10, 1869, and the museum was chartered in 1870. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston was founded in 1870. The November 1869 Union League Club meeting led the way for the founding of the Metropolitan Museum, whose constitution was drafted in January 1870.


With the later purchase of the two remaining works, the New-York Historical Society was the repository of all 435 of the extant preparatory watercolors for Birds of America.

“A National Art Museum.”


“A National Art Museum.”


Howe, A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 3.

Ibid., 3-4. Quoting a broadside issued June 1, 1791.
According to a 1791 broadside, the Tammany Society accepted everything, and “from whatever clime.” But its collection devolved into mainly Indian artifacts, “the relics of nature, art, beads, wampum, tomahawks, belts, earthen jugs and pots, and other Indian antiquities, with all that could be found of Indian literature in war songs, and hieroglyphical barks.” Located first in a room in the old City Hall, then in the upper part of a brick building also used as a market, the Tammany museum apparently was an unsophisticated cabinet of curiosities, and the members’ interest “speedily waned,” the collections ultimately becoming part of P. T. Barnum’s “museum of wonders.” John W. Francis, Old New York or, Reminiscences of the Past Sixty Years. Being an Enlarged and Revised Edition of the Anniversary Discourse Delivered Before the New York Historical Society, (November 17, 1857) (New York: C. Roe, 1858), 124; Howe, A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 3-5.


Furthermore, John Trumbull, the eminent artist and director of the art school, was inflexible about the school’s hours and manner of operation, causing conflict. To the artist and inventor Samuel F. B. Morse, the Academy’s failure was simpler than that: as a stockholding institution, its paying members regularly voted into leadership not artists, but “men highly respectable and intelligent in other professions, but whose professions must chiefly or entirely engross their minds,” casting doubt over entire endeavor on the part of artists. Howe, A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 27, 30.

See, for example, Voorsanger and Howat, Art and the Empire City; Alan Wallach, Exhibiting Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States (Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998); Gallati, Making American Taste: Narrative Art for a New Democracy.

Howe, A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 64.

Ibid., 72.

CHAPTER ONE
“For the Advancement of Useful Knowledge”: Private Libraries for the Public Good

2 Ibid., 258.
3 Ibid., 259.
9 Stevens, Recollections of James Lenox and the Formation of His Library, xxi.
11 New York Public Library, After One Hundred Years, an Account of the Partnership Which Has Built and Sustained the New York Public Library, 1848-1948, 8.


Ibid.

Library Meeting at The Union League Club, 20 January 1882, RG4, Box 14, NYFCL Ways and Means Committee Folder, Free Circulating Libraries Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL; Frederick W. Whitridge to the Trustees of the New York Free Circulating Library, nd., ca. February 1882, RG4, Box 14, NYFCL Ways and Means Committee Folder, Free Circulating Libraries Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.


Library Meeting at The Union League Club, 20 January 1882.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Library Meeting at The Union League Club, 20 January 1882.

Ibid.


Committee on Ways and Means, New York Free Circulating Library, Frederick W. Whitridge, Chair, to the City of New York, 1 February 1882, RG4, Box 14, NYFCL Ways and Means Committee Folder, Free Circulating Libraries Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

Ibid.

Potter later became the seventh bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New York; during his administration the cornerstone of the Church of St. John the Divine was laid.

“Library Meeting at The Union League Club, January 20, 1882.”

Ibid.

Ibid.


Library Meeting at The Union League Club, 20 January 1882.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

The donations were relatively small given the donors’ enormous wealth. For example, Robert and Ogden Goelet gave $50 each, “Mrs. and Miss” Whitney $100, W. C. Whitney and W. C. Schermerhorn $200 each, and George W. Vanderbilt $500. Catherine Lorillard Wolfe Collis P. Huntington, Andrew Carnegie, and Abraham Kuhn were a bit more generous with $1000 donations, and Jacob H. Schiff with $5000. Treasurer’s Reports, Box 14, 1880-88 folder, Free Circulating Libraries Records, New York Public Library Archives.
By 1890, the per capita income was $192 and the family income (for an average-size family of 4.9) was $941. Willford Isbell King, *The Wealth and Income of the People of the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), Table XXI, 129. See also Cities Census Committee, Inc., *Population of the City of New York, 1890-1930*. New York: The Committee, 1932.

The New York Times, however, claimed responsibility for exposing Tweed, and often bitterly maligned Tilden for seizing that claim.


The Aguilar Free Library began with two branches: one on the Lower East Side and the other at Lexington Avenue at Fifty-Eighth Street.


“Suggesting a Public Library,” *New York Times*, December 9, 1885.


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Ibid., 527.

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Flick, *Samuel Jones Tilden*, 521.

Ibid., 526.

Ibid., 524.

Ibid., 524-26.

Ibid., 500.

Ibid., 498.


Sources vary regarding the number of volumes in Tilden’s collection, estimated between fifteen and twenty thousand.


The Aguilar Free Library began with two branches: one on the Lower East Side and the other at Lexington Avenue at Fifty-Eighth Street.
CHAPTER TWO
Unabated Energy and Resolute Will: The Founding of the Metropolitan Museum of Art

1 Joseph Choate wrote the museum’s constitution.


3 Rosenzweig and Blackmar, *The Park and the People*, 351.


8 In 1872, Huntington ultimately did become one of the vice presidents of the Museum, and a member of its executive committee, serving for twenty-five years.


11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.


14 Johnston was actually a railroad executive and not a merchant.

15 The gallery was located behind his home at 8 Fifth Avenue, the first private New York City home to be built of marble.


17 Ibid.
19 Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 32.
20 John Taylor Johnston to the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 7 November 1870, John Taylor Johnston file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.
21 See Metropolitan Museum Archives, John Taylor Johnston—as President folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files.
22 Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 34.
23 Howe, A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 125.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Kouwenhoven, The Arts in Modern American Civilization.
29 Ibid.
30 The United States population in the 1870 census was 38,558,371; New York City was the largest urban place with a population of 942,292, followed by Philadelphia (674,022) and Brooklyn (396,099). U. S. Census Bureau, http://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1870_fast_facts.html.
32 Ibid.
33 Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 35.
34 Second Annual Report of the Executive Committee, 1880-81, MMAA. In Boston, however, trusteeship was also a long-standing social construction that also encompassed stewardship of community values and interests. See Peter Dobkin Hall, Inventing the Nonprofit Sector and Other Essays on Philanthropy, Voluntarism, and Nonprofit Organizations (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), 170-87.
35 While the Tribune reported that a merchant had offered to give $100,000 toward the founding of the institution, provided that either nine others subscribe an equal amount (or that twenty-five persons give $50,000), this windfall apparently did not materialize in the form of funds or funders. “The Metropolitan Museum of Art,” New-York Tribune, February 1, 1870.
36 The land was under the control and management of the Commissioners of Central Park.
37 Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 39-40.
38 Ibid., 41.
39 Howe, A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 133.
40 The following year, there was a change of site: the Museum of Natural History alone would occupy Manhattan Square, while the Metropolitan, in a building designed by Calvert Vaux and Jacob Wrey Mould, would be in the “deer park” from Seventy-ninth to Eighty-fourth streets, bounded by Fifth Avenue and the west park drive.
By now, only $106,000 in pledges were in hand (from 105 men and one woman, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe), ranging from $10,000 (Johnston’s) to $100. Of those whom the board had canvassed, in fact only a small percentage responded to the appeal. Howe, *A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 133.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Later, Blodgett also increased his wealth through New York real estate.


Kevin J. Avery, *Church's Great Picture: The Heart of the Andes* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), 34; “Church's 'Heart of the Andes',' *New-York Daily Tribune*, October 8, 1859. With this work, Church, who had visited South America to paint the landscape but not Europe to see the art, was hailed as the founder of a new school of landscape painting.


Secondary sources have varying reports of the final cost, ranging from $115,160 to $116,180.27, to the much higher (and apparently inaccurate) report of the *Times* of $150,000, plus $20,000 for an additional collection, making the total cost $170,000. See Beaufort and Welcher, “Some Views of Art Buying in New York in the 1870s and 1880s,” 51; Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces*, 37; Gross, *Rogues’ Gallery*, 38; and “After the Shysters.”

Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces*, 37.

Ibid. Johnston and Blodgett jointly borrowed $100,000 from the Bank of America to make the purchase.

Ibid.

Joseph Choate, “Address at the 40th Annual meeting of the members of the corporation.” In fact, as of 2007, only 64 of the original 174 paintings as of 2007 were still in the Metropolitan Museum collection because they were indeed copies, poorly preserved, or of mediocre quality. See Esmee Quodbach, *The Age of Rembrandt: Dutch Paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007).


Ibid.

In early records, the Rubens painting, “Return of the Holy Family from Egypt,” was thought to have been painted for the Church of the Jesuits at Antwerp, and until the twentieth century was considered to be a fine Rubens. The Hals painting, actually entitled, “Malle Babbe,” is now only attributed to the master’s style. See Catalogue of the Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.): Free Download & Streaming: Internet Archive, 1902, http://www.archive.org/details/cataloguepainti01nygoog.


Strong, Diary, 4:439.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Quodbach, The Age of Rembrandt, 8.


[Minute reporting the death of William Tilden Blodgett, November 4, 1875].


Ibid.

Beaufort and Welcher, “Some Views of Art Buying in New York in the 1870s and 1880s.”

Avery to Johnston, 31 July 1872.

See, for example, Gross, Rogues’ Gallery, 23-24; Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 51. Tomkins writes that Cesnola had received the rank of brigadier general in 1865, and the “General” was pictured in costume in a well-circulated Harper’s article. See Hiram Hitchcock, “The Explorations of Di Cesnola in Cyprus,” Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, July 1872, 188-208.

Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 52.

Ibid., 52-53.

Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 54-55; Gross, Rogues’ Gallery, 43.


Howe, A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 155.

Ibid.

According to the British Museum’s website, the museum purchased items from the Cesnola collection in 1871 and 1876. Interestingly, among others, the British consul in Cyprus, D. E. Colnaghi, also sold the museum some Cypriot artifacts in 1866. See: http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/departments/greek_and_roman_antiquities/history_of_the_collection/collection_history_continued.aspx


Hitchcock, “The Explorations of Di Cesnola in Cyprus.”

Gross, Rogues’ Gallery, 44.

Howe, A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 156.
The stone statues, Cesnola said, were discovered in the temple at Golgos, and “ranged on pedestals against the walls of in rows down the middle. The great majority of them represent either figures of the god Herakles (or Hercules) in one form or another, or else figures of priests of Aphrodite.

Clearly the British were displeased at the loss. “The shipment of these things to New York means simply, for the present at any rate, mystification to the New York gaper, and sea sickness for the European archaeologist,” the Pall Mall Gazette griped nastily. Without any available source of comparison, “the most intelligent New Yorker can get but moderate advantage out of the antiquities of this collection,” the publication added. See “Art Treasures from Cyprus--English Criticism on Their Destination,” Scientific American 28, no. 2 (January 11, 1873): 17.

Furious and defensive, the Scientific American protested that New Yorkers were in fact “educated to a far higher standard of art criticism,” and could appreciate the value of such relics “in a degree somewhat superior to the cockney visitors” to the South Kensington Museum. Even if this was only partially true, the New York museum’s greater aim was nobler: to display the artworks of ancient and more recent vintage to a wide audience. “It is about time that America and the Americans were better understood by the English public, who still persistently cling to the extravagant representations of the country supplied by Dickens and Mrs. Trollope.” Urban America did indeed appreciate art and science, and to the chagrin of Europeans, artistic treasures were steadily crossing the Atlantic with American connoisseurs. These artworks were sure to eventually wind up in new American art museums.
CHAPTER THREE
“Music Loving & Enthusiastic, but Not Yet of Sufficient Culture”: Opera in New York

1 August Belmont, Sr. to J. L. Mapleson, 17 June 1878, Box 2, unmarked folder, August Belmont Sr. Papers, NYPL.

2 Mapleson had been lately from London’s most important theaters: Her Majesty’s Theatre, the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and Covent Garden.


4 August Belmont, Sr. to Mr. [?] Dana, 14 September 1878, Box 2, unmarked folder, August Belmont Sr. Papers, NYPL.

5 Lawrence W. Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow, 94.


7 August Belmont, Sr. to Mr. [?] Morton, 7 May 1878, Box 2, unmarked folder, August Belmont Sr. Papers, NYPL.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Belmont to Mapleson, 17 June 1878.

11 Ibid.

12 “Max Maretzeck is Dead,” New York Times, May 15, 1897. With an accomplished musical reputation, Maretzeck produced the American premieres of enduring operas like Il Trovatore, Luisa Miller, and William Tell. He also was known for disagreeing with the Academy’s directors, thus having to alternate his stints at the Academy with periods in Boston, Philadelphia, and Havana. Maretzeck, who had been associated with the older Astor Place Opera House, managed the opera company—one with its own share of European stars—that performed at the Academy of Music intermittently for five seasons during the first several years of the theater’s existence. He later brought opera to Niblo’s Garden and to the Winter Garden—Manhattan houses with a more populist audience, if not more artistic tastes than the Academy—and ended his career as a conductor at the Academy for Strakosch’s company, which had
taken over production by the 1870s. Strakosch himself also had an illustrious career as an impresario, and served as manager to operatic superstars Christine Nilsson and Adelina Patti, his wife’s sister.

13 “Forty Years a Manager: Career of Maurice Strakosch,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1887.


15 Ibid., 25.

16 Ibid., 27.

17 Ibid. Although this is an often-repeated quotation attributed to Lewis Morris, there is evidently no primary source citation for it.

18 Ibid.


21 Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

22 See Mark Van Doren, introduction to Kouwenhoven, *The Arts in Modern American Civilization*.

23 Ibid.


25 See, for example, Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*; Scobey, *Empire City*; Kouwenhoven, *The Arts in Modern American Civilization*.


27 By 1890, the per capita income was $192 and the family income (for an average-size family of 4.9) was $941. Willford Isbell King, *The Wealth and Income of the People of the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), Table XXI, 129; and Cities Census Committee, Inc., *Population of the City of New York, 1890-1930*.

28 The cost was a minimum of one hundred shares at $100 per share.

29 Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Corporation Minute Books, 10 April 1880-September 1892, 1-5. Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH. Present at the meeting of the incorporators in the office of Roosevelt and Son, 32 Pine Street, was George Henry Warren, Robert Goelet, George G. Haven, William K. Vanderbilt, George Peabody Wetmore, and James A. Roosevelt. Roosevelt (1825-98) was President Theodore Roosevelt’s uncle, not to be confused with James Roosevelt (1828-1900), President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s father.

30 Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Corporation Minute Books, 10 April 1880-September 1892. The thirteen directors were Roosevelt, Warren, Wetmore, Haven, Goelet, E. P. Fabbri, George Fearing, J. H. A. Griswold, Vanderbilt, David King Jr., Johnston Livingston, Levi P. Morton, and Buchanan Winthrop.


32 Ibid.


34 “The Opera-House Assessment,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1884. The article did not specify which “Mr. Vanderbilt”—William K. or William H.—although it was most likely the former that was quoted.

35 Schuyler, “The Metropolitan Opera.”

36 “The Opera-House Assessment.”


“‘The Opera-House Assessment.’”


Schuyler, “The Metropolitan Opera.”

Kolodin, *The Metropolitan Opera, 1883-1966; a Candid History*.

Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Corporation Minute Books, Book 2, 23 May 1883-9 September 1892, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

Morton is better known for his political career, having served as a New York congressman (1879-81), U. S. vice president (1889-93), and governor of New York (1895-96).

Minutes, 8 March 1882, Metropolitan Opera House Real Estate Company Minute Books, 10 April 1880 - September 1892,” Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

Ibid. Vanderbilt moved and Goelet seconded a resolution to continue the project.

Ibid.

Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company, Book 2, 23 May 23, 1883-9 September 1892, 1, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.


Ibid.

“The Patriarchs' Ball,” *New York Times*, February 10, 1880. Assembled in 1873 to sponsor social entertainments of “undoubted tone and exclusiveness,” the so-called patriarchs were forty or fifty men from the city’s “higher social circles.”


“Society in Fancy Dress.”

Press, 1999), 182-90. Cady is best known for his design for the addition to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City (1892).


63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 51.

65 Ibid., 53.


67 Ibid.

68 The rivalry between the two impresarios was intense. The spring before the opening, Abbey’s agents surreptitiously followed Mapleson around the country while he was on tour, with the intent of stealing away some of his support staff. In fact, Abbey did land Mapleson’s assistant stage manager, among others. More significantly, both Abbey and Mapleson announced that the opera stars Louise Lablache and Giuseppe Del Puente were to be members of their companies, a situation ultimately settled by the courts. Abbey handled the opening season with bluster and aplomb. His arrival by steamship one month before opening night was heralded with a fanfare usually reserved for a head of state. Holding the simultaneous positions of impresario of the Metropolitan Opera House, the manager of the Lyceum Theatre in London, and the director of the British actor Sir Henry Irving’s American tour, Abbey was accustomed to working the press. He confidently dispelled all rumors that the new house would not open on time. “If any one wants to make a wager on that matter, I am ready,” he told the Times. “We shall open, as announced, on Oct. 22, and we shall open in a completed house. There need be no doubt on that point.” See “Methods of Rival Impresarios,” New-York Tribune, March 24, 1883; “Mr. Mapleson's Season,” New York Times, September 26, 1883; “Opera at its New Home,” New York Times, September 14, 1883.


71 Cone, First Rival of the Metropolitan Opera, 3.

72 Schuyler, “The Metropolitan Opera.”

73 Kolodin, The Metropolitan Opera, 1883-1966; a Candid History. 49.

74 The Times included a table of the dimensions of the most famous European houses, and how New York’s new one ranked comparatively. With the exception of depth in feet of the stage—where the Grand Imperial Opera House in St. Petersburg outranked the Met by around ten feet—the Met surpassed in both auditorium and stage dimensions both the old Imperial and the New Opera in Paris; the Grand Theatre in Bordeaux; the Covent Garden and Drury-Lane theaters in London; the Theatre Royal in Munich; the New Opera in Vienna; La Scala in Milan; San Carlo in Naples; and Carlo Felice in Genoa. “A Grand Temple of Music,” New York Times, October 14, 1883.

According to the Tribune, “True to a national tendency, this has a bigger audience-room than any other opera house in the world, exceeding in dimensions the famous structures of Milan, Naples, Paris, London and Vienna. It covers a little over a city block and a quarter, filling to the edge of the sidewalks the plot of ground bounded by Broadway, Seventh-ave, and Thirty-ninth and Fortieth-sts. About one-quarter of this vast surface area is occupied by the audience-room; another quarter is devoted to the stage; and barring a small portion of the upper stories in the Broadway end of the structure all the rest of the space from cellar to roof is given up to the accessories, to vestibules, corridors, staircases, assembly-rooms, parlors, foyer, rigging-loft, artists’ dressing rooms, scene-rooms, green-rooms, band-rooms, property-rooms, draper-rooms, rehearsal-rooms, carpenter-shop, and offices for the management.” See “Opening of the Italian Opera Season,” New-York Tribune, October 21, 1883.

75 Ibid.

76 American Queen 10, (November 3, 1883): 274. See also Cone, First Rival of the Metropolitan Opera, 30-31.

78 Ibid.
80 The World, October 28, 1883. See also Cone, First Rival of the Metropolitan Opera, 33.
82 New-York Herald, October 23, 1883. See also Cone, First Rival of the Metropolitan Opera, 26.
85 Ibid. Without the two set-piece arias punctuating the third act, one being the famous “Jewel Song,” the Times guessed that “the third act would have passed off almost as quietly.”
86 Cone, First Rival of the Metropolitan Opera, 30.
88 “Music,” The Critic, no. 88.
89 “Music,” The Independent.
91 “The Italian Opera Season.”
92 Ibid.
93 “The Italian Opera Season.” The Tribune reported on those in attendance: Lord Chief Justice Coleridge was the most distinguished guest of the evening, sitting in William H. Vanderbilt’s box, along with Mrs. Vanderbilt and Mr. and Mrs. Elliott F. Shepard. In Cornelius Vanderbilt’s box was his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Ogden Mills, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Cushing. Mr. and Mrs. William Kissam Vanderbilt were with Mr. and Mrs. Fernando Yznaga, Miss Mamie Smith, and Mrs. Holland. Stanford White, the architect, sat with Mr. and Mrs. Robert Goelet. Ward McAllister and his daughter were in an unspecified box. Also present were the Harrimans, Pierpont Morgan, H. G. Marquand, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph W. Drexel, Mr. and Mrs. Darius Ogden Mills, Mr. and Mrs. Whitelaw Reid, Mrs. William Kingsland, Mr. and Mrs. Cyrus W. Field, John Jacob Astor, Mr. and Mrs. Luther Kountze, Mr. and Mrs. William Rockefeller, Mr. and Mrs. Oscar R. Meyer, Russell Sage, Jay Gould, Mr. and Mrs. T. A. Havemeyer, James A. Roosevelt, Mr. and Mrs. Adrian Iselin, Mr. and Mrs. H. C. Fahnestock, George W. Drexel, Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Roosevelt, Mr. and Mrs. John G. Heckscher, General Daniel Sickles, and Isaac Bell Jr.
94 “Music,” The Independent.
95 New York Evening Telegram, October 23, 1883. See also Cone, First Rival of the Metropolitan Opera, 29.
96 American Queen, October 27, 1883. See also Cone, First Rival of the Metropolitan Opera, 29.
97 “The Metropolitan Opera House,” New-York Tribune, May 24, 1883. Earlier that spring, the stockholders and their wives were present to draw lots for who would sit where permanently. The results of the lottery were published then as well.
99 “A Crowd at the Academy.”
103 Ibid.
PART TWO:
Into the Twentieth Century


2 For a thorough analysis of Morgan’s program and that of his successor Robert de Forest, see Trask, “‘American Things’.”


CHAPTER FOUR
World Metropolis: The Consolidation of New York City and the Building of a Colossal Library System


2 Serious disputes had arisen between New York and New Jersey over territorial jurisdiction over their shared waterways.

3 “New-York of the Future.”


7 Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 186. Green served on New York’s Board of Education from 1855-61, for three years as its president; he was on the Central Park Board of Commissioners from 1857-71 as comptroller and later its president; and he was appointed New York City Comptroller in 1871 to sort out the morass caused by the recently exposed Tweed Ring. He had assumed leadership roles as a preservationist of the built environment (City Hall) and of the natural one (Niagara Falls). Although a reform Democrat, Green had worked with the Park board’s Republican commissioners to shape it into a new model public works administration.

In 1914, Woodrow Wilson appointed the progressive Howe the Commissioner of Immigration of the Port of New York.  


“Interview with Mr. Sanger, from the Commercial Advertiser, Feb. 3,” *Library Journal* 11 (February 1886): 49.  


“Act of Incorporation of the Tilden Trust,” passed 26 March 1887, RG 5, Box 1, General—Acts of Incorporation Folder, Board of Trustees General Files 1884-1993, NYPL Archives, NYPL.  


Ibid., 42.  


“A Mystery of Wealth,” *Sun*, April 6, 1895.  


Later, the Tilden trustees even considered joining with the Columbia College Library, although such a merger was dismissed as not in keeping with the free, public nature of Tilden's wishes.  


Library science generally encompassed collecting, classifying, cataloguing, and managing books, as well as envisioning the library space architecturally.  


Ibid.  


38 Kavaler, The Astors; a Family Chronicle of Pomp and Power, 181.


40 In fact, neither Astor would serve on the board of the newly consolidated New York Public Library.

41 “A Boon for Scientists.”


43 “Great Libraries Combine.” Initially the consolidation called for twelve trustees, expanding to twenty-one when proper legislation was passed. The final arrangement called for a twenty-one-member board—seven trustees from each of the three interests—having absolute control of all of the property and revenues from endowments and other sources, subject only to the conditions of particular bequests.


45 “Great Libraries Combine.” Other sources valued the aggregate capital at $6 million.

46 New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, Report of the Trustees, 1 January 1897, [typewritten carbon manuscript copy], RG5, Box 1,


49 “Make No Mistake!,” Mail and Express, March 20, 1895; “The ‘Acropolis’ for the Library,” Mail and Express, March 16, 1895.

50 “Site to be Chosen,” New York Herald, March 25, 1895.

51 Ibid.

52 “The Library Hocus Pocus,” New York Journal, April 11, 1895. Soon it emerged that part of the reason for the Lenox site preference was its founder’s restriction on it for “library uses.” Thus, the trustees potentially could lose title to the property, valued at over $1 million, if they sold it for other uses.

53 Minutes, 27 May 1895, New York Public Library Archives, NYPL.

54 Lenox’s surviving sister, Henrietta, had a right to release the restrictions on the family library’s site, but was unyielding about permitting alterations (although additions) to the building. Ironically, Miss Lenox’s decision paved the way for the demolition of the Lenox Library building entirely. Henry Clay Frick purchased the property, on which he erected a new building for his home and collection.

55 [Lewis Cass Ledyard], “Report of the Committee on Site, Laid before the Trustees,” 6 February 1896, RG5, NYPL Archives, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 President Bigelow was joined on the committee by John S. Kennedy, George L. Rives, John L. Cadwalader, and Lewis Cass Ledyard.


60 The twelve finalists received $400 each for their work in the first competition, and $800 for the second. See “Plans for the Library.” Drawings were sent to Rives’s office.

61 “Plans for the Library.”
The two other finalists in the competition were McKim Mead & White and Howard & Cauldwell, from a pool that also included George B. Post and Ernest Flagg. In New York, Carrère & Hastings were involved with many important commissions, that included the Century Theatre (1909), the approaches to the Manhattan Bridge (1909-16), the Henry Clay Frick house at the site of the Lenox Library (1913-14), and Grand Army Plaza (1916), among other projects in New York and elsewhere. See RG5, Box 3, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1897-1900, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Board of Trustees, Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.


“Limestone or Marble?,” New-York Tribune, November 21, 1897.

“Parks Board Approves Library Plans,” New-York Tribune, December 7, 1897. The new agreement, at a cost not to exceed $2.5 million, now included engineers to supervise issues including the heating, ventilating, and electrical work.


Ledyard, “Report of the Committee on Site.”

Many old social libraries became public ones with this incentive.

Oliver Garceau, The Public Library in the Political Process, 39.

John L. Cadwalader, [fragments from an apparent public address], ca. 17 March 1896, RG5, Box 1, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.


Facts on File and Inc, The World Almanac & Book of Facts (Newspaper Enterprise Association, 1901), 385. In a loose tabulation of the world’s largest cities circa 1898, London came in first (4,211,056); followed by Greater New York (3,437,202); Paris (2,536,834); Berlin (1,843,000); Chicago (1,698,575); Canton (1,600,000); Tokyo (1,452,564); Vienna (1,364,548); Philadelphia (1,293,69); and St. Petersburg (1,267,023). St. Louis and Boston were less than half as large, with populations of 575,238 and 560,892 respectively. See also Campbell Gibson, “Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 to 1990, Population Division Working Paper No. 27” (U. S. Bureau of the Census, Population Division, 1998), http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0027/twps0027.html#citypop. In the 1890 census, the largest American cities were New York (1,515,301); Chicago (1,099,850); Philadelphia (1,046,964); and Brooklyn (806,343).

Green’s decades-old ideas began to gain traction when he was named president of the Consolidation Inquiry Committee and drafted the Consolidation Law of 1895, which was enacted in 1897 and took effect on January 1, 1898.

Foord, Life and Public Services of Andrew Haswell Green, 254.


The Art Commission was set up to consist of ten pro-bono members: the mayor of New York City; the presidents of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the New York Public Library, and the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences; a painter; a sculptor; an architect; and three laymen. The first five Metropolitan Museum members were sitting presidents of the museum: Henry G. Marquand, Frederick W. Rhinelander, J. Pierpont Morgan, Robert W. DeForest, and William Church Osborn. The first five members from the New York Public library were John Bigelow, George L. Rives, Charles Howland Russell, I. N. Phelps Stokes, and Morgan J. O’Brien. Daniel Chester French was the first sculptor on the board, and John LaFarge was the first painter. See Website of the Public Design Commission of the City of New York, http://www.nyc.gov/html/artcom/html/about/members.shtml#met. Accessed 1/6/2011.

George Rives to Bird S. Coler, draft of letter, nd, ca. 1897-98, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, Board of Trustees Correspondence 1897-1900, NYPL Archives, NYPL.
Green plaintively wrote to Ledyard: “I wrote you some weeks since enquiring of the progress in the Library Consolidation. I suppose your numerous engagements have prevented your favoring me with the desired information.” Andrew Haswell Green to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 8 January 1900, February 1900, RG5, Box 3, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file Board of Trustees Correspondence, 1897-1900, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

Precise figures were impossible because most of the libraries also were receiving state aid. John L. Cadwalader, “Confidential: Unofficial Memorandum as to Circulating Libraries,” 20 July 1900, RG5, Box 1, 1903 folder, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

The closest estimate was a total of $151,369.30 for 1900.


“Central Library System,” New York Times, September 27, 1900; “For Better Libraries,” New-York Tribune, September 30, 1900. The fourteen institutions included the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen; Billings divided them into two groups. The first was devoted to circulating free reading matter alone, and included the New-York Free Circulating Library, the Aguilar, the St. Agnes, the Washington Heights and the Harlem Libraries, and the Free Circulating Library for the Blind. The second group contained those libraries which also incorporated objects in addition to the library. See also NYPL Archives, RG5, Box 1, 1903 folder, Correspondence from individual circulating libraries regarding consolidation, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.


Frederick W. Whittidge to Andrew Carnegie, 23 February 1899. NYPL Archives, Carnegie Corporation Correspondence, 1899-1943 file, Carnegie Corporation of New York file, NYPL.

John Shaw Billings to Andrew Carnegie, 9 March 1901, Box 1, Correspondence re. NYC Branch Libraries 1899-1943 Folder, Carnegie Corporation Papers, NYPL. Boston had a population of 560,892, with fifteen branch libraries and reading rooms and fourteen delivery stations, funded with $288,641 in appropriations, while Manhattan and the Bronx had a combined population of 2,050,600, with $183,935 allocated for libraries, which was about as much as it was willing or able to provide for the New York Public Library.


Mary B. Dierickx, The Architecture of Literacy, 20. See also Andrew Carnegie to John Shaw Billings, 12 March 1901, Correspondence, 1899-1943, bulk (1901-1912), Carnegie Corporation of New York, NYPL Archives, NYPL. Carnegie wrote at least three versions of his letter. In the archives folder, a first draft, dated March 11, 1901, shows Carnegie’s extensive edits, excising a first-person tone. The second draft does not include the handwritten addition, reproduced in Dierickx. The drafts betray a self-consciousness on Carnegie’s part at casting the donation in the most precise words possible to convey the subtleties of his intentions. According to Billings, the final letter was written in
haste as Carnegie prepared to depart for Europe, and dictated to him on the typewriter. See “City Will Accept Mr. Carnegie’s Libraries.”

95 Dain, *The New York Public Library*, 19-20. In the end the cost came to $9 million, over $2 million more than the Library of Congress. With exacting attention to detail, Carrère and Hastings also designed the furniture and fittings.

96 Sixty-five percent of the marble from the Vermont quarry was rejected, however, as the architects did not deem it good enough. The rejected stone wound up in other buildings like those of the Harvard Medical School. See Henry Hope Reed, *New York Public Library*, 16.


99 “Gift of $5,000,000,” *New York Times*, March 14, 1901.


107 The cofounder of Hull House, Vida Scudder, among others, took up the “tainted money” argument as well. See Ibid., 20.

108 Gladden, “Tainted Money.”

109 For a discussion of Carnegie’s belief in American progress, see Lears, *No Place of Grace*, 8-10.


111 Ibid., 663.

112 At the Gothic building’s entrance, the words, “Let There Be Light” are carved within a depiction of the sun.


116 Ibid.

117 John Shaw Billings to Andrew Carnegie, 19 March 1901, Box 1, Correspondence re. NYC Branch Libraries 1899-1943 Folder, Carnegie Corporation Papers, NYPL.
Mr. Carnegie Offers $5,200,000 to New York."

"City Will Accept Mr. Carnegie's Libraries."


Although an ailing Cadwalader wrote to Ledyard begging him to join the meetings, Ledyard was remarkably silent on the matter. See John L. Cadwalader to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 30 April 1901, RG5, Box 3, 1901-03 folder, Board of Trustees, Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

"City Will Accept Mr. Carnegie's Libraries."


Ultimately, no private land donors followed Hewitt’s lead. John Shaw Billings to Andrew Carnegie, 30 May 1901, Box 1, Correspondence re. NYC Branch Libraries 1899-1943 Folder, Carnegie Corporation Papers, NYPL.


Dierickx, The Architecture of Literacy, 27. Site costs amounted to under half of the cost of the buildings, over $1.6 million.

Andrew Carnegie to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 23 February 1902, RG5, Box 3, 1900-03 folder, Board of Trustees, Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

Andrew Carnegie to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 28 March 1902, RG5, Box 3, 1900-03 folder, Board of Trustees, Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

Van Slyck, Free to All, 2.

Dierickx, The Architecture of Literacy, 27. Carnegie and Bertram ultimately adopted the procedure for the other Carnegie libraries, as many cities had spent too much money on elaborate buildings without finishing them.

Ibid., 29. Each was charged with designing a library subject to committee approval, and was to be paid 5 percent of the total cost of their first building, 4 percent for the second, and 3.5 percent for the third.


Ibid. Andrew Carnegie to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 23 February 1902, RG5, Box 3, 1900-03 folder, Board of Trustees, Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

Ibid. Andrew Carnegie to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 28 March 1902, RG5, Box 3, 1900-03 folder, Board of Trustees, Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.


CHAPTER FIVE
“If we have committed errors, it has been at our own expense”: The Metropolitan Museum Builds


4 Howe, *A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 192, quoting the *New York World*, March 30, 1880. The paintings they selected, which included Meyer von Bremen's *What Has Mother Brought?*, Erskine Nicol's *Looking for a Safe Investment*, and Madou's *Flemish Cabaret* were an indicator of the relative banality of Vanderbilt's collection, however.

5 Strahan, “The Metropolitan Museum of Art.”


7 Ibid. See also Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 1081-83.

8 “The New Museum Opened,” *New York Times*, March 31, 1880; Howe, *A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 194. Newspaper accounts stated that 1,500 invitations were issued, while Howe claims the higher number of 3,500, "and many more requests had been received."

9 Special Dispatch to the Post, “Hayes in New York.”


14 Ibid.


21 Cesnola wrote: “Mr. Prime and I, have solemnly promised (and Mr. Marquand, and Mr. Hoe know it,) that on the day in which you cease to be the President of the Museum, except by death, that we both leave it forever, and we shall keep our word. – You have established the Museum, you have been its sponsor, its father, and have protected it when such protection was necessary; it is the grand monument of your life; and when you have passed away, your children + grand children will look upon its grown, + success with a just pride, and say: “but for our grandfather that monument now would not exist” and they will only say the truth – If you leave it, you will soon find how all the good work you have done, all the money, + time, you have given to it will be forgotten; and how everything will be changed!” Luigi Palma di Cesnola to John Taylor Johnston, 5 November 1881, John Taylor Johnston as President file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA. MMA.

22 Marquand was a trustee from 1871-1902, and assumed the leadership positions of Treasurer from 1882-89 and President from 1889-1902.

23 W. C. Prime to John Taylor Johnston, 18 February 1883, John Taylor Johnston as President file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

24 The letter continued: “The interests of the Museum do not require your retiring. So long as ill health prevents your active work, your Co-Trustees will most cheerfully exert themselves to supply, as well as possible, your vacant

25 Samuel P. Avery to John Taylor Johnston, 25 March 1879, S. P. Avery—Collection of Porcelains file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

26 Avery was indeed short on money. But he wanted to appear generous. “I hope you will do me the credit to think that I am more moved by the interests of the Museum than from selfish considerations, I am quite assured that in a pecuniary point I shall not be a loser even if the collection is not secured to the Museum.” In a letter to Thomas Bland in the summer of 1879, Avery apologized for not sending his check for $500, as “I am paying out so much for duties on recently arrived goods that I am particularly short as I will be for about two weeks or more,” and suggests that he be charged interest. Avery to Johnston, March 25, 1879, and Samuel P. Avery to Thomas Bland, 29 July 1879, S. P. Avery Collection of Porcelains file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


28 W. E. Dodge to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 1 January 1880, Misc. 1880-89 folder, Joseph W. Drexel file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

29 Jmail Y. Brusch Bey to Joseph W. Drexel, 16 Guibre [?], 1879, Collection of Coins 1879 folder, Joseph W. Drexel file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

30 Joseph W. Drexel to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 23 January 1880, Collection of Egyptian Antiquities 1880, 1886, 1889 folder, Joseph W. Drexel file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

31 Joseph W. Drexel to Samuel P. Avery, 1 March 1880, Misc. 1880-89 folder, Joseph W. Drexel file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

32 Drexel replaced Frederic W. Stevens on the board.

33 Joseph W. Drexel to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 6 February 1881, Misc. 1880-89 folder, Joseph W. Drexel file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


35 Mills had been a patron of the museum since 1876, and in November 1881, Cesnola asked if he might present his name for trustee “in case of vacancy,” to which Mills enthusiastically accepted, joining the board the following year. Darius Ogden Mills to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 3 November 1881, 1880-81, 1883, 1892, 1899, 1902, 1904-10, 1994 folder, Darius Ogden Mills file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

36 W. J. Arkell and Lucy W. Drexel to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 16 January 1891, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, Joseph W. Drexel file, Collection of Egyptian Casts 1880-81, 1891, 1888, 1889 folder. MMAA.

37 Daniel Huntington to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 17 December 1879, 1869-71, 1876-77, 1879-81, 1887, 1889-91, 1895, 1897-98 folder, Daniel Huntington file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

38 William C. Prime and William Loring Andrews apparently did most of the unpacking. One spring 1880 afternoon, Prime wrote to Cesnola from the Fourteenth Street space: “The empty boxes were ready in piles for Russell yesterday P.M. but he declined to take them back, saying you did not need them. … Have had a quiet morning here since 10 A.M. Good for reflection.” W.C. Prime to Luigi Palma di Cesnola. [Spring 1880], 1870-1950, 1876, 1878, 1880, 1887, 1889-93 folder, William C. Prime file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, MMAA.
412

39 W. C. Prime to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 13 September 1887, 1876, 1878, 1880, 1887, 1889-93 folder, William C. Prime file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

40 See Rutherfurd Stuyvesant file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA, MMA, and H. W. Kent to Robert de Forest, 23 November 1909, Bequest—1905, 1909-10 folder, Rutherfurd Stuyvesant file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

41 Ibid.

42 William Waldorf Astor to John Taylor Johnston, 14 March 1880, 1880, 1882, 1910 folder, William W. Astor file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


44 Joseph W. Drexel to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 1 March 1, 1884, Misc. 1880-89 folder, Joseph W. Drexel file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


46 W. C. Prime to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 13 September 1887, 1876, 1878, 1880, 1887, 1889-93 folder, William C. Prime file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


48 “The Obelisk.”

49 Montezuma, “My Note Book.”


51 Ibid.

52 “The Big Obelisk.” Feuardent claimed to have with him in New York a plan in bas-relief, found in the ruins, of the Temple of the Sun, with the stairs, the avenue of sphinxes, and the two obelisks. The British Museum apparently was intent on purchasing it.


54 Gaston L. Feuardent, “The Art Gallery: Tampering with Antiquities,” The Art Amateur; A Monthly Journal Devoted to Art in the Household 3, no. 3 (August 1880): 48. Feuardent’s statement began: “When the forms of objects of antiquity have been defaced, and the sharp lines obliterated, there may still be sufficient character left for us to decide on the identity of particular objects. But when we attempt to restore them, their whole physiognomy is apt to change, and a source of dangerous error is introduced. To guard against a danger of this character, the greatest care is taken in European museums that all restorations shall be indicated. Alterations are made under the direction of learned archaeologists, and we see on the pedestals of statues or figures, in the British Museum for instance, legends such as ‘the nose restored’ . . . or whatever part of the object it may be that is not in the original state in which it was found. It is, indeed, a fundamental principle that no matter how or where a restoration is made, it must be indicated without reserve on the antique object.”

55 Howe, A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 222.

56 Some time later, Feuardent informed “the gentleman who holds the official position second to that of director” of his discovery. As Cesnola worked with no curatorial or administrative staff until around 1886, it is difficult to ascertain who this may have been, although in all likelihood it was one of the trustees that Feuardent had known previously. He told Feuardent that he could not believe the charge, “but as his opinion was quite indifferent” to Feuardent, he “dismissed the whole affair” from his mind. See Gaston L. Feuardent, “The Art Gallery: Tampering with Antiquities.”

57 Ibid.
Frederick A. P. Barnard, the president of Columbia University, chaired the committee, and was joined by Charles P. Daly, the president of the American Geographical Society, and Roswell D. Hitchcock, president of Union Theological Seminary.


W. C. Prime to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 7 March [1890], 1876, 1878, 1880, 1887, 1889-93 folder, William C. Prime file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


Ibid.


Cook, *Transformations and Migrations*.


Ibid., 224.

Ibid.

Ibid., 232.

Luigi Palma di Cesnola to John Taylor Johnston, 22 March 1884, 1870, 1874, 1877, 1889, 1893, 1986, 1995, 2000, J650 file, John Taylor Johnston—as President folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


Ibid., 234, 236.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Joseph H. Choate to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 11 April 1880. Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy folder, 1880-83, Jan-May 1885 file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


Department of Public Parks, City of New York, to the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 21 April 1881, Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy folder, 1880-83, Jan-May 1885 file, MMAA.


Ibid.
This time, a joint committee of the two board presidents, Johnston and Morris K. Jesup, and a few important members of each trustee group, wasted no time in calling attention to both institutions’ leases with the Department of Public Parks forbidding their opening on Sunday. Thus, the members present “were all of one opinion namely that for many weighty reasons it was not deemed expedient to open the Museums on Sunday.” But the state Board of Estimate and Appropriations pressed the matter, and in October passed a resolution insisting on the Sunday public opening for both museums, or risk losing the annual stipend of $15,000 each. Jesup appeared before Mayor Grace on behalf of both museums. “The Museum of Natural Art [sic] was put there for the elevation of the people,” he said. “I do not believe that a single trustee would allow his own convictions or predilections to stand in the way of public good.” Even so, if the question of opening the museums on Sundays was “optional with the trustees,” as one park commissioner suggested, was it really appropriate for a museum run like a private club to be asking for public money? See City of New York, Department of Public Parks, to the Board of Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 23 April 23, 1885, 1880-83, Jan-May 1885 file, Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy folder, MMAA, MMA; [Luigi Palma di Cesnola], Minutes of a Meeting of the Conference Committee, 1 May 1885, 1880-83, Jan-May 1885 file, Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA. “Paring Down Estimates,” New York Tribune, October 31, 1885.

See “Sundays in Park Museums,” New York Times, October 31, 1885. “The question is not one of mere policy,” Prime contended, arguing that religion might set “thousands of good, accomplished, wealthy, influential, learned people” against an institution that opened on the Sabbath. The issue had the power to divide the trustees and the more conservative press. “That the Museum would survive the adoption of such a course is not to be doubted. But it would survive as a crippled institution, with the whole body of old orthodox religious people arrayed against it,” Prime concluded. “Shall we go on united, with the unanimous support of the community, or shall we divide ourselves, & throw off the support of a large part of the community?” Prime’s own religious views, he reasoned to Johnston, were immaterial. See W. C. Prime to Johnston, 4 May 1885, 1880-83, Jan-May 1885 file, Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

Samuel L. M. Barlow to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 20 June 1887, 1887-89 file, Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


Ibid.

Luigi Palma di Cesnola to Archbishop Michael Corrigan, 25 November 1885, October-December 1885 folder, Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

Ibid.

Rosenzweig and Blackmar, The Park and the People, 361.

C. E. McDonnell to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 9 December 1885, October-December 1885 folder, Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

Ibid. Notably, Cesnola highlighted in red only the second, more restrictive part of the letter. Jesup, who visited the Archbishop in person, reported to Cesnola that the prelate was “not nearly as guarded in his talk with me, but was flat footed against opening on Sunday.” See Morris K. Jesup to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 5 December 1885, October-December 1885 folder, Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

Samuel P. Putnam to John Taylor Johnston, 16 December 1885, October-December 1885 folder, Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.
During the last few years of the controversy alone, Cesnola had issued “Sunday cards” to the trustees Choate, Rhinelander, Ware (who often asked for “half a dozen”), Hoe, Richard Morris Hunt, Charles S. Smith, Salem H. Wales, and Robert de Forest, as well as to A. T. Dougherty, Secretary of the Dock Department, and the architect Stanford White, who once complained bitterly to Cesnola that since he had only one card, his guests were turned away. The press was irate.

Middle class and working class support for Cesnola dwindled as his position within the community grew more embattled. The town meeting of 1890, as described by the reporter, was not without its large presence of “art lovers” who went out of their way to meet Cesnola and be heard in defense of his case. The press was also an important mediator in this final period of the controversy. As Ghent remarks, “Through the pages of the press, Cesnola’s position was maintained, and his cause was strengthened.”116

Like the fundraising, the fund-raising for defense and prosecution was matched by an equally spirited effort on the part of the trustees and financiers to gather information about the controversy. The trustees set up a special committee to collect and issue Sunday cards and distributed them among like-minded individuals at the park. Cesnola’s letters during this time are filled with advice having to do with the daily activities of the park, from his correspondence with board members like Louis C. Tiffany, who was a generous supporter of Cesnola’s, to other less famous officials. Cesnola himself was an active participant in the controversy, and his role in the park and its financial stabilization was crucial to the long-term survival of the museum.

The various unions, a majority of which were in the needle trades, manufacturing, and “miscellaneous Jewish organizations,” intended to take May 1 off as a holiday and march on all of the main streets of the tenement-house district and convening at Union Square for a mass meeting. “Marshalling their Forces,” New-York Tribune, April 27, 1891.

Furthermore, the idea of taking advantage of the museum’s evening hours was equally unsuitable, for after a long day’s work the journey to Central Park was both arduous and time-consuming from downtown Manhattan.
“Sunday Opening of the Museum.”

Charles B. Stover later became Manhattan Parks commissioner, serving from 1910-13.


Daniel Huntington to Luigi Palma di Cesnola, 13 May 1891, 1876-77, 1879-81, 1887, 1889-91, 1895, 1897-98 file, Daniel Huntington folder 1869-71, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

Howe, *A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 243; “Victory is Won at Last,” *New York Times*, May 19, 1891. According to the Times account, the vote was twelve for; four against; and two abstentions. Attending the meeting were Huntington, Salem H. Wales, Joseph H. Choate, Robert Hoe, William E. Dodge, Theodore Weston, Hiram Hitchcock, Robert W. De Forest, John Q. A. Ward, Rutherfurd Stuyvesant, William R. Ware, Samuel P. Avery, William L. Andrews, Charles S. Smith, Richard Morris Hunt, Richard Butler, John Bigelow, and Cesnola.

Unsigned [draft] statement, 18 May 18, 1891, May 7-19, 1891 folder, MMAA Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy file, MMAA.

Ibid.

Ibid.

“I’ve Cornered a Man Last Sunday and Asked Me Point Blank, Be You Genl Sinola? I Felt Obliged to Confess That I Was Not.”

The amount requested for this free opening was $95,000 annually, to cover the $94,606 estimated for the expanding program. Robert Hoe et al., Resolution adopted at Executive Committee Meeting, 27 April 1891, January – April 1891 folder, Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy file, MMAA.

Robert Hoe to Robert W. de Forest, May 20, 1891, May 20-28, 1891 folder, Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

Ibid.

Robert W. de Forest to H. G. Marquand, 21 May 1891, May 20-28, 1891 folder, Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

Luigi Palma di Cesnola to Robert Hoe, 22 May 1891, May 20-28, 1891 folder, Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

“It Was a Grand Success,” *New York Times*, June 1, 1891.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid., 244.

Story continued: “A man cornered me last Sunday and asked me point blank, Be You Genl Sinola? I felt obliged to confess that I was not. “Waal stranger, see here! This is the first time I’ve ever bin here, and ile be darned if I aint
jest paralyzed! Paralyzed sir! I’ve red about it in the papers but good lord they haint half told it, and all of them picters inside there too.” George H. Story to H. G. Marquand, 13 July 1891, June-November 1891 folder, Admission—Sunday Opening Controversy file, MMAA.

145 See Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 23, 29; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, The Park and the People, 358.
146 Howe, A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 240.
149 Ibid., 144; Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 74.
151 Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 427.
152 The will was contested by Rogers’s heirs; after two years of litigation, they settled out of court and the Museum was awarded $5 million. See Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 91.
153 Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 74.
154 Marquand’s only request was that the paintings remain together “as much as practicable.” Ibid., 74-75.
155 Ibid., 74.
158 Ibid.
159 Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 81.
160 Ibid., 82.
161 Ibid.
162 Cesnola claimed to the Tribune that there were only seven votes against him.
164 Ibid.
168 Rosenzweig and Blackmar, The Park and the People, 363; Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 87.
171 Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 89-80.
172 Howe, A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, ix.
173 Morgan joined the board to fill the unexpired term of Joseph W. Drexel, his business partner.
When Morgan visited Luxor to see the operations, he “decided that men who worked that hard should have something better than a tent to come back to in the evening,” and built a large and comfortable base headquarters. It was called Morgan House until it became clear that he had only advanced the museum the money and then reimbursed himself out of museum funds. The base was subsequently called Metropolitan House.

Before the Duke could change his mind, Stuyvesant wrote out a check for $240,000, funds he did not have in his bank account. When his cable describing the transaction reached Morgan at three o’clock in the morning, he immediately called a meeting of the trustees in his library. They could not let down a fellow trustee, Morgan said, and proceeded to go around the table announcing how much each board member would contribute. The full amount arrived in Stuyvesant’s bank account in time to cover his check.

Among the changes was the provision that the president, vice president, and treasurer be elected from among the trustees instead of the corporate life members; that trustees should meet five times annually instead of four; a change in requirement for the benefactor, fellow in perpetuity, and fellow for life categories; and that constitutional amendments be passed by a majority, instead of two-thirds, of the trustees.

In time the museum’s Egyptian collection would rank among the finest outside of Cairo; more functionally it came to be a favorite with the New York public. Satterlee, J. Pierpont Morgan; an Intimate Portrait, 533.

Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 175.


199 Ibid.


201 “‘Interlocking Directors’ in Charities and Good Works.”

202 Ochs also was married to the daughter of one of the leading Reform rabbis in the United States.

203 Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces,* 169.

204 Strouse, *Morgan,* 672.

205 Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces,* 174; Strouse, *Morgan,* 672.

206 Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces,* 176. Tomkins attributes the quote to Bishop Lawrence.

207 Satterlee, *J. Pierpont Morgan; an Intimate Portrait,* 537; Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces,* 176.

208 Edward Robinson to J. P. Morgan, 28 March 1911, 1901, 1905-11 file, J. P. Morgan 1st General Correspondence 1887 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

209 Robert W. de Forest to J. P. Morgan, 29 March 29, 1911, 1901, 1905-11 file, J. P. Morgan 1st General Correspondence 1887 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

210 Ibid.

211 C. W. King to Robert W. de Forest, 17 April 1911, 1901, 1905-11 file, J. P. Morgan 1st General Correspondence 1887 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

212 Edward Robinson to J. P. Morgan, 19 April 1911, 1901, 1905-11 file, J. P. Morgan 1st General Correspondence 1887 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

213 Office of the Secretary [to the trustees, Metropolitan Museum of Art], 24 April 1911, 1901, 1905-11 file, J. P. Morgan 1st General Correspondence 1887 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

214 Draft of cable from Edward Robinson to J. P. Morgan, 29 May [1911], 1901, 1905-11 file, J. P. Morgan 1st General Correspondence 1887 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

215 J. P. Morgan to Edward Robinson, 30 May 30, 1911, 1901, 1905-11 file, J. P. Morgan 1st General Correspondence 1887 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

216 Draft of cable from Edward Robinson to J. P. Morgan, 31 May 1911, 1901, 1905-11 file, J. P. Morgan 1st General Correspondence 1887 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

217 J. P. Morgan to Hon. William Loeb Jr., 14 November 1911, 1901, 1905-11 file, J. P. Morgan 1st General Correspondence 1887 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

218 Franklin MacVeagh to J. P. Morgan, 17 November 17, 1911, 1901, 1905-11 file, J. P. Morgan 1st General Correspondence 1887 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

219 William Loeb to Edward Robinson, 19 February 1912, and C. W. King to Edward Robinson, 19 February 1912, 1912-13, 1916 M822 file, J. P. Morgan 1st General Correspondence 1887 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

220 Satterlee, *J. Pierpont Morgan; an Intimate Portrait,* 551.

221 Ibid., 537.

222 Ibid., 551.
Interestingly, the *New York American* wrongfully anticipated both the appropriation and the expected Morgan donation on November 27, with a message from members of the Board of Estimate who apparently had conveyed their intention to grant the $750,000 appropriation on January 1, 1913. Morgan, according to the *American* via a friend, was "greatly pleased at the newly awakened spirit of co-operation" and, echoing Carnegie's benefactions, was unwilling to provide funds for the wing housing his collections because he believed New York's citizens would take a "deeper and more personal interest in the treasures if they are allowed to contribute the building." See "Morgan Art Works Saved to the City," *New York American*, November 27, 1912.

The memo continued: "His understanding was that this money was asked for in accordance with the Enabling Act which Mayor McClellan had secured from the Legislature at Albany, and was for the general purposes of the Museum. At the time when the application was made, he added, he had not agreed to send his collections to this country, and it could have been upon no such understanding that the money was asked for." Edward Robinson memorandum, ca. 29 November 1912, 1912-13, 1916 M822 file, J. P. Morgan 1st General Correspondence 1887 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

Satterlee, *J. Pierpont Morgan; an Intimate Portrait*, 537.

"Morgan's Art Treasures; City Must Act in 6 Weeks Else Will Lose the Collection," *New York American*, November 26, 1912.

Satterlee, *J. Pierpont Morgan; an Intimate Portrait*, 537.


Edward Robinson memorandum, ca. 23 December 1912, 1912-13, 1916 M822 file J. P. Morgan 1st General Correspondence 1887 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

J. P. Morgan to the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum, 4 January 1913, 1912-13, 1916 M822 file J. P. Morgan 1st General Correspondence 1887 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces*, 179-80.

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CHAPTER SIX

"The Spirit of the Parvenu": Enter Otto Kahn


2 Rugoff, *America's Gilded Age*, 92. The quote is attributed to Mrs. Winthrop Chanler, a member of Mrs. Astor's set.


4 Ibid., 36.

5 Ibid., 43.


8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 12, 116.

The firm commanded fees and commissions ranging from 2.5 to 10 percent.


Kolodin, *The Metropolitan Opera, 1883-1966; a Candid History*, 10. See also Minutes, March 13, 1905, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.


Ibid. See also Moses, *The Life of Heinrich Conried*, 170-74.

“Conried to Retain Grau's Opera Singers.”

Schiff did, however, become a shareholder in March 1905, although he never became a director. See Minutes of Conried Metropolitan Opera Company, 13 March 1905, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

Minutes of Conried Metropolitan Opera Company, 5 March 5, 1903, 38-42, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.


Minutes of Conried Metropolitan Opera Company Executive Committee, 2 April 1903, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH. Marrying Kahn’s artistic and business interests for the first of many similar times to come, a loan funded by Kuhn, Loeb had enabled the Met to obtain Caruso’s contract in April 1903.

“Conried to Retain Grau'Opera Singers."


Ibid., 101-102.
42 Morgenthau, All in a Life-Time, 101-102.
44 Ibid.
46 “‘Parisfal,’ a Triumph.”
47 Minutes of Conried Metropolitan Opera Company Executive Committee, 21 September 1904, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH. See also Collins, Otto Kahn: Art, Money, 70.
50 Hyde’s niece, Annah Ripley, who is hardly mentioned in the news accounts of the Hyde party, had attended the Brearley School in New York, an academic private school for girls, and went on to marry Count Pierre de Vielcastel in 1910. Legend has it that during WWII, when German officers occupied her castle in Normandy, relegating the Countess to the servants’ quarters, she spied on her unwanted guests, hiding notes about their goings-on among the baskets of eggs she brought into the town market to sell daily. See Beard, After the Ball, 345.
51 Ibid. Warren, in partnership with Charles Wetmore, was the architect of several clubs, private estates, and hotels. The firm’s most famous commission was New York’s Grand Central Terminal, completed in 1913.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid. See also Beard, After the Ball, 175.
55 Beard, After the Ball, 178.
57 Beard, After the Ball, 189-90.
58 “Public coaches, special trains, elaborate banquets, costly and ostentatious entertainment, accompanied, as they are, by continuous notoriety of a flippant, trivial, cheap description, are not only damaging to the influence of Mr. Hyde as an officer of the Society but are directly hurtful to the Society. They suggest a lack of serious attitude and feeling towards his duties,” said Alexander. Ibid., 190.
60 Otto H. Kahn to James Hazen Hyde, 11 June 1929, James Hazen Hyde Papers, N-YHS.
61 O. H. Kahn, Reflections of a Financier: A Study of Economic and Other Problems (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1921), 381. See also Collins, Otto Kahn: Art, Money, 143.
62 Collins, Otto Kahn: Art, Money, 146.
63 Ibid., 73.
65 Eliot Gregory to James Hazen Hyde, 17 January 1906, James Hazen Hyde Papers, NYPL.
66 Collins, Otto Kahn: Art, Money, 74. Twenty years later, however, Mackay was less open-minded when his daughter eloped with Irving Berlin, the one-time newsboy and Jewish Bowery composer and “singer of songs.” See “Ellin Mackay Wed to Irving Berlin; Surprises Father,” New York Times, January 5, 1926.
67 Gregory to Hyde, 17 January 1906.
68 Eliot Gregory to James Hazen Hyde, 9 February 1906, James Hazen Hyde Papers, NYPL.
69 Gregory to Hyde, 17 January 1906.
72 Eliot Gregory to James Hazen Hyde, 9 February 1906, James Hazen Hyde Papers, NYPL.
73 “Plans Filed for the New Theatre.”
79 Eliot Gregory to James Hazen Hyde, 5 and 20 February 1906, James Hazen Hyde Papers, NYPL.
80 Eliot Gregory to James Hazen Hyde, 9 February 1906.
81 Eliot Gregory to James Hazen Hyde, 10 January 1906 and 5 February 1906, James Hazen Hyde Papers, NYPL.
82 Eliot Gregory to James Hazen Hyde, February 20, 1906”, February 20, 1906, James Hazen Hyde Papers, NYPL.
83 Eliot Gregory to James Hazen Hyde, n.d., [ca. 20 January 20 - 5 February 1906], James Hazen Hyde Papers, NYPL.
84 Eliot Gregory to James Hazen Hyde, 10 January 1906 and 20 March 1906, James Hazen Hyde Papers, NYPL.
85 “Director of the New Theatre,” New York Times, June 23, 1907. In the end, the theater opened only after Conried had retired, in November 1909. It functioned as its founders had envisioned only for two seasons, and only after incurring a deficit of $400,000. Ultimately, the “shrine of snobbery” was leased to other theatrical managers until it was razed in the early 1930s. Federal Writers’ Project, The WPA Guide to New York City. 79.
86 Eliot Gregory to James Hazen Hyde, [ca. February] 1906, James Hazen Hyde Papers, NYPL.
87 Ibid.
88 Gregory to Hyde, 9 February 1906.
89 Gregory to Hyde, 5 February 1906.
95 Ibid.
99 Ibid.


“Strauss’s ‘Salome’ the First Time Here.”

Ibid.

“‘Salome’ Disgusts its Hearers.”

See New York press accounts, ca. January 27, 1907; also Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company Minutes and Conried Metropolitan Opera Company Minutes, January 1907, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.


“Take off ‘Salome,’ Say Opera House Directors.”

Moses, The Life of Heinrich Conried, 307. By some accounts the Morgan daughter was Louisa (Mrs. Herbert L.) Satterlee.

“No Decision on ‘Salome’; Seats Are Still On Sale.”

Ibid.

“Sick of ‘Salome’; Try to Stop It,” Chicago Daily Tribune, January 27, 1907.

“No Decision on ‘Salome’; Seats Are Still On Sale.”

“Take Off ‘Salome,’ Say Opera House Directors.”

“Ibid.”


Ibid.


“Boston Hesitates.”


Ibid.

See minutes, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company and Conried Metropolitan Opera Company, 30 January 1907, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH; also Conried Metropolitan Opera Co., To the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Co., New York, 30 January 1907, James Hazen Hyde Papers, NYPL. Hyde’s copy includes a note in Kahn’s hand, “Compliments and Kindest regards from OHK.”

Montrose J. Moses, Conried’s biographer, attributes the letter to Conried, however. Moses, The Life of Heinrich Conried, 308.

In his obituary the following year, and reported without irony, his social prestige and experience were credited with handling “the delicate situation of allotting Metropolitan Opera House boxes, without favoritism, so successfully.” “George G. Haven Dies After an Operation,” New York Times, March 19, 1908.


James Speyer to Otto H. Kahn, 23 February 23, 1906, James Hazen Hyde Papers, N-YHS.
128 Minutes, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, 30 January 30, 1907, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
133 Minutes, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, 8 February 8, 1907.
134 Minutes, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, 15 February 15, 1907, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
136 Ibid.
137 Interestingly, Conried was also in the process of producing the play Salome at the Irving Place Theatre at approximately the same time as the opera production. See “May Produce ‘Salome’ at Another Theatre,” New York Times, January 29, 1907.
138 Collins, Otto Kahn: Art, Money, 81.
139 Minutes, Conried Metropolitan Opera Company, 5 March 1903 and 28 April 1904; Minutes, Metropolitan Opera Company, 13 March 1916, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH. Soon after Conried’s departure, his board discovered financial improprieties and renegotiated his severance. See Minutes, Metropolitan Opera Company, May and June 1908, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH. Conried died a year later in April 1909.
140 Minutes, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, April 1908, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
141 Otto H. Kahn to George F. Baker, President, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, appended to Minutes, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, 22 October 1908, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
142 Minutes, Metropolitan Opera Company, 27 February 1908, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
143 There is, however, a large gap in the Metropolitan Opera Company minutes from May 1913 until March 1916.
144 See Minutes, Metropolitan Opera Company, 1908-31, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
146 Ibid.
147 “Timeline of Metropolitan Opera History,” Official Website of the Metropolitan Opera, http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/history/
148 Minutes, 27 February 1909, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
149 Minutes, 14 May 1909, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives; also Minutes, May 1909, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
150 Collins, Otto Kahn: Art, Money, 86; also Eliot Gregory to James Hazen Hyde, 1 March 1906, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
151 Minutes, 4 January 1910, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
152 Minutes, 23 February 1910, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
153 George G. Haven to Otto H. Kahn, n.d., [received 10 February 1914], Box 166, folder 1, Otto H. Kahn Papers, Princeton University.
Although Hammerstein dissolved his Manhattan Opera Company in Spring 1910, selling his enterprise to the Met along with “restrictive covenants” regarding future operatic performances, he returned to New York in Fall 1912 with the intention of producing opera the following year, thus violating the contract he had signed with the Metropolitan Opera Company. Hammerstein effectively had been paid off by the Met to never return to the production of opera in New York City. The Met thus began litigation soon after his return to enforce the official contract; Hammerstein’s defense was that the Met was acting like a “trust”-like entity with a monopoly on opera in the city, thus violating the Sherman Antitrust Act. See Box 166, Otto H. Kahn Papers, Princeton University.

Collins, Otto Kahn: Art, Money, 87.

Ibid.

Minutes, Metropolitan Opera Company, 16 October 1931, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.


Ibid. "Timeline of Metropolitan Opera History."

Ibid. Minutes, Metropolitan Opera Company, 27 December 1917, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

Ibid. Minutes, Metropolitan Opera Company, 28 December 1917, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

Ibid. Minutes, Metropolitan Opera Company, 31 December 1917, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH. Four percent debenture bonds valued at $363,650 and taken out on February 1, 1910, were to mature on May 15, 1918; Kahn was recommending that they be paid prior to their maturity. In order to make the payment possible, the capital stock of the company needed to be increased.

Ibid. The remaining stockholders retained their previous interest in the company without increase: Henry R. Winthrop, at 24 shares; Robert Goelet, at 4; and Frank Gray Griswold at 2; along with Ziegler’s 3 and Lewis’s 2 shares from Kahn.

Ibid. "Timeline of Metropolitan Opera History."


Ibid., 572. See also Handlin, “American Views of the Jew at the Opening of the Twentieth Century.”

Higham, “Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age,” 573.

Ibid.


Kobler, Otto the Magnificent, 520.

Ibid. See also Box 165, Otto H. Kahn Papers, Princeton University.

The directors elected at the meeting were: George F. Baker, August Belmont, R. Fulton Cutting, G. C. Haven, A. D. Juilliard, Luther Kountze, Ogden Mills, J. P. Morgan, H. A. C. Taylor, William K. Vanderbilt, George Henry
Warren, George Peabody Wetmore, and H. P. Whitney. See Minutes, 9 May 1917, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.


180 Minutes, 9 May 9, 1917, Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company.

181 Ibid.

182 See Minutes, 29 June 1917, Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH. Edith Cooper (Mrs. Lloyd S.) Bryce inherited 150 shares in Box 13 from her father, former Mayor Edward Cooper, a descendant of Peter Cooper who had willed his residuary estate to his daughter, his only living child. Edith Bryce died in April 1916, thus leaving an opening in Box 13, which Warren filled. See “Ex-Mayor Cooper's Will,” New York Times, March 9, 1905., also “A Bright May Wedding,” New York Times, June 1, 1879.

183 Collins, Otto Kahn: Art, Money, 121.

184 For example, several members of the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company board were Commerce Bank directors with Kahn at time of Chicago City Railways project in 1906, the funding of which was disputed in 1915. George G. Haven, Adrian Iselin Jr., Luther Kountze, D. Ogden Mills, J. P. Morgan, Harry Payne Whitney, and Juilliard were all on the bank’s board, which also included Jacob Schiff and Daniel Guggenheim, in addition to Kahn. See The Tribune Bureau, “Directors of Six N.Y Banks Must Pay $2,000,000,” New York Times, February 7, 1915.

185 As late as 1926, an article in the Times reporting the sale of two parterre boxes stated that only eleven such sales had been recorded in the history of the opera house. See “Two Opera Boxes Sold; Price Over $200,000; Buyers Are Frazier Jelke and R.S. Brewster,” New York Times, October 12, 1926.


188 “A.D. Juilliard, Capitalist, Dies,” New York Times, April 26, 1919. His residuary estate was estimated at between $5 and $20 million.

CHAPTER SEVEN
“We can do our little part while we are here”: Towards a Modern Library

1 Garceau, The Public Library in the Political Process, 46.

2 Apart from being a distinguished librarian and bibliographer, Billings was a doctor and surgeon who served in the Union Army during the Civil War and notably during the Battle of Gettysburg. He had developed the U. S. Surgeon General’s library, was a professor of hygiene at the University of Pennsylvania, and designed the buildings of the Johns Hopkins Hospital.


5 Ibid., 458.
6 Ibid.
7 Notable among these were the Berg Collection of English and American Literature and the Phelps Stokes Collection of American Historical Prints.
10 Ibid., 460. Only the Library of Congress and the university libraries at Stanford, Harvard, and Yale were collecting Slavonic resources at the time.
11 Ledyard was both a trustee and the legal counsel for the Tilden Trust.
13 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 225.
17 Ibid., 221.
18 George L. Rives to Hon. Herman A. Metz, 15 February 1906, RG5, Box 4, Carnegie Folder, Founding Members’ Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.
19 See “Five Trustee Museum Bill” folder, ca. April 1909, Box 5, RG5, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.
21 John L. Cadwalader to George L. Rives, 15 November 1910, Box 5, RG5, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.
22 “I am rather sorry to elect any more lawyers, but we must get a quorum for the transaction of business, and we must get some people interested in the Library in the future, because we are all older than we were,” Cadwalader commiserated with Ledyard. John L. Cadwalader to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 24 April 1911, Box 1, 1911 folder, RG5, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.
23 Ibid.
24 “City's $29,000,000 Library is Opened,” *New York Times*, May 24, 1911.
25 Cadwalader to Ledyard, 24 April 1911.
26 [George L. Rives] to Stephen H. Olin, 3 June 3, 1915, Box 6, RG5, Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.
27 Ibid.
28 None of the great American writers of that particular period would have been appropriate to join the Public Library’s board. Upton Sinclair, the author of the 1906 masterpiece *The Jungle*, was a socialist bohemian muckraker; Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound were expatriates living in Europe; Abraham Cahan was a socialist and editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*; and William Dean Howells was ebbing in stature by then.
29 See Dain, “Public Library Governance and a Changing New York City,” 228.
In 1910, the U.S. per capita income was $338 or $923 for the "gainfully employed." By 1919, the numbers were $637 per capita, with $1,690 for the "gainfully employed," although buying power had significantly diminished; at 1913 purchasing price levels, $637 in 1919 could buy $359 worth of goods, while $1,690 could buy $951. See National Bureau of Economic Research et al., *Income in the United States: Its Amount and Distribution, 1909-1919* (National Bureau of Economic Research incorporated, 1922), 338.

Annual Report for 1930, New York Public Library. NYPL Archives, NYPL. Deficits amounted to around $60,000 in 1919; $251,000 in 1920; $151,000 in 1921; and $142,000 in 1922; both the Reference and Circulation Departments in 1929 documented the largest numbers of public use in the Library’s history, a record that was broken in 1930, when the number of recorded readers at the library was 2,239,455, or 459 percent the total number of readers in 1912. See also “*3 Give $6,000,000 to Endowment Fund of Public Library,*” *New York Times*, February 15, 1923.

86 Ibid.

Annual Report for 1930, New York Public Library, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

87 Dain, “Public Library Governance and a Changing New York City,” 229-30.

88 Lewis Cass Ledyard to George F. Baker, 23 September 1921. Box 4, RG5, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1921 file Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

89 John D. Rockefeller Jr. to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 30 March and 15 June 1921, Box 4, RG5, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1921 file Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

90 The check, in fact, was for $43,544, the actual net amount of the deficit, which was within Ledyard’s estimate of $50,000. The deficit estimate at the beginning of the year had been $251,003.13. See Lewis Cass Ledyard to John D. Rockefeller Jr., 9 January and 13 January 1922, Box 4, RG5, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1922-24 file Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

91 Rockefeller pledged $3 million, Whitney $2 million, and Harkness $1 million.

92 Fiorello LaGuardia to Lewis Cass Ledyard, June 30, 1921. NYPL Archives, RG5 Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, Box 4, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1921 file.

93 Dain, “Public Library Governance and a Changing New York City,” 229-30.

94 John Price Jones, *The American Giver; a Review of American Generosity* ([New York: Inter-River Press, 1954], 15; New York Public Library, *After One Hundred Years, an Account of the Partnership Which Has Built and Sustained the New York Public Library, 1848-1948* (New York: New York Public Library, 1948), ii. In 1928, Rockefeller's total gifts for public purposes totaled $30 million; Payne Whitney's bequests to hospitals, medical schools, and public libraries were $45 million; while Harkness gave over $11 million to Harvard and helped Columbia and the Presbyterian Hospital complete their $30 million medical center. In the years from 1848 to 1948, the chief bequests of $1 million or more to the Public Library, apart from the Rockefeller, Whitney, and Harkness gifts, were from Harriette M. Arnold ($2.5 million), Mrs. Stephen V. Harkness ($1 million), John Stewart Kennedy ($3.5 million), Ledyard ($2.1 million), Oliver H. Payne ($1 million), and Mary C. Thompson ($2.3 million). Payne Whitney's total gifts to the Library were $16 million, while George F. Baker's were a relatively small $500,000.

95 See NYPL Archives, Box 4, RG5, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1921 file, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

96 Edwin H. Anderson to Edward W. Sheldon, ca. April 1924, Box 4, RG5, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1922-24 file, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.
430

48 R. Fulton Cutting to George L. Rives, 15 June 1909, Box 6, folder “L,” RG5, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.


50 John L. Cadwalader to William W. Appleton, 5 June 1911, Box 2, Cooperative Apartment Housing for Staff, 1911 folder, Board of Trustees, Founding Members Records, NYPL Archive, NYPL.

51 Dain, “Public Library Governance and a Changing New York City,” 232. See also Edwin White Gaillard, NYPL Staff Association, to Edwin H. Anderson, 7 June 1923. Box 4, RG5, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1922-24 file Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

52 Mary Frank to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 27 March 1922, Box 4, RG5, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1922-24 file, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

53 Mary Frank to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 5 April 1922, Box 4, RG5, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1922-24 file, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

54 Lewis Cass Ledyard to Mary Frank, 6 April 6, 1922, Box 4, RG5, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1922-24 file, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

55 Lewis Cass Ledyard to Hon. George M. Jesse, 19 February 1923, Box 4, RG5, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1922-24 file, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

56 Extract from minutes of a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the New York Public Library, Wednesday, 14 November 1923, Box 4, RG5, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1922-24 file, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL. Ledyard received information from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching on its suggestions of policies for the employees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Henry R. Pritchett to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 18 December 1923, RG5, Box 4, Ledyard 1922-24 Folder, Founding Members’ Records [Series 2], NYPL Archives, NYPL.

57 Edwin White Gaillard to Edwin H. Anderson, 7 June 1923, RG5, Box 4, Lewis Cass Ledyard’s File, Board of Trustees Correspondence, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

58 Dain, “Public Library Governance and a Changing New York City,” 233.

59 Frank L. Polk to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 30 June 1927, RG5, Box 4, Ledyard 1927-30 Folder, Founding Members’ Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

60 Edwin H. Anderson to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 5 July 1927, RG5, Box 4, Ledyard 1927-30 Folder, Founding Members’ Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

61 Because of the Staff Association's strong public campaign, salary increases were appropriated in Hylan's final year as mayor. See Dain, “Public Library Governance and a Changing New York City,” 233.

62 Mary T. Haugh to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 11 December 1928, RG5, Box 4, Ledyard 1927-30 Folder, Founding Members’ Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

63 Lewis Cass Ledyard to Mary T. Haugh, 14 December 1928, RG5, Box 4, Ledyard 1927-30 Folder, Founding Members’ Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.

64 “The New York Public Library Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations,” informational pamphlet, February 1906. [more info]

65 See Paula D. Watson, “Founding Mothers: The Contribution of Women's Organizations to Public Library Development in the United States,” The Library Quarterly 64, no. 3 (July 1, 1994): 233-69. Also see the works of Gerda Lerner and Joan W. Scott.
67 Dain, The New York Public Library: A Universe of Knowledge, 70, 64.
68 Ibid., 74-75.
71 See Woman Trustee file, RG5 Board of Trustees Secretary Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.
72 Watson, “Founding Mothers.”
73 Katrina Ely Tiffany to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 3 July 3, 1925, Box 4, RG5, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1925-26 file, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.
74 Cornelia E. Marshall to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 16 June 1925, Box 4, RG5, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1925-26 file, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.
75 Harry M. Lydenberg to Lewis Cass Ledyard, 20 July 20, 1925, Box 4, RG5, Board of Trustees Correspondence, Lewis C. Ledyard’s file, 1925-26 file, Board of Trustees Founding Members Records, NYPL Archives, NYPL.
76 Dain, “Public Library Governance and a Changing New York City.”
77 Ibid., 233.
78 Annual Report for 1937, New York Public Library, NYPL Archives, NYPL.
79 Haygood’s study was the largest sample of urban library patrons in the United States with 19,595 questionnaires.
80 William Converse Haygood, Who Uses the Public Library; a Survey of the Patrons of the Circulation and Reference Departments of the New York Public Library (Chicago, Ill: The University of Chicago press, 1938), 15.
81 The motivation to use the Reference Department broke down into three categories: Intellectual (48.7 percent); Vocational (38.7 percent); and Recreational (11.3 percent). New York Public Library, Finding Aid for Harry Miller Lydenberg Records, 1927-1970 (bulk 1926-1944).
82 Haygood, Who Uses the Public Library: a Survey of the Patrons of the Circulation and Reference Departments of the New York Public Library, 21, 112. From 1930-55 the Library restricted use of the research libraries by high school and college students to only those who could not otherwise find materials in their school libraries. See Dain, The New York Public Library: A Universe of Knowledge, 54.
83 Haygood, Who Uses the Public Library: a Survey of the Patrons of the Circulation and Reference Departments of the New York Public Library, 112.
84 The quote was from Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, a nineteenth-century French historian whose particular obsession was historical “truths.” A handful of men, including Charles Beard, Professor Roy Nichols, Henry Noble MacCracken, and Lyman Beecher Stowe, were on the sponsor list.
86 Harry Miller Lydenberg to Miss Markowitz, December 6, 1935, RG Central Administration Director’s Office, Harry Miller Lydenberg Records, Box 2, World Center for Women’s Archives, November 1935-January 1941, folder 15.
CHAPTER EIGHT
“A New Mental Attitude”: The Metropolitan Museum Broadens its Reach


3 JoAnne M. Mancini, “‘One Term Is as Fatuous as Another’: Responses to the Armory Show Reconsidered,” *American Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (December 1999): 833-70.


7 H. W. Kent, “Robert W. de Forest” [draft biography], n.d., Misc. Notes, biog. Notes, resolutions, etc. 1917, 1919, 1923, 1928, 1929-31 folder, Robert W. de Forest file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

8 See Trask, “‘American Things’.”


13 Poore, “Our Veteran Captain of Philanthropy.”

14 De Forest proposed and brought about the necessary appropriations for the Regional Plan through the influential Russell Sage Foundation, of which he was president.

15 Gregory Gilmartin, *Shaping the City: New York and the Municipal Art Society,* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1995); “De Forest Funeral to be Held Today,” *New York Times*, May 8, 1931. While De Forest would be hailed as a “first citizen” for his leadership on a staggering number of charitable and cultural boards, he also was excoriated by the aesthete Mayor George McClellan for accepting such appointments without attending meetings. But the Municipal Art Society, according to Gilmartin, did not complain, as it still benefited from the association with him. See Gilmartin, *Shaping the City*, 270.


17 Elisabeth Luther Cary, “Mr. de Forest and the Metropolitan,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1931.


19 Ibid.

20 Metropolitan Museum Bulletin, March 1911, 64; see also Trask, “‘American Things’,” 70.

21 Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces*, 188.


23 Robert W. deForest [as President, Metropolitan Museum], n.d. [ca. 1928], untitled typewritten manuscript, Clippings: Re: Charity Organizations, Misc. 1912, 1922-25, 1927-28, 1930-31 folder, Robert W. de Forest file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

25 “De Forest Honored for Forty Years’ Work as Charity Head,” New York Sun, January 11, 1928, in Clippings: Re: Charity Organizations, Misc. 1912, 1922-25, 1927-28, 1930-31 folder, Robert W. de Forest file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

26 Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 192.

27 Ibid., 192-93.

28 Ibid., 213.

29 Dana displayed functional artifacts that might be relevant to “manufacturers, housewives, students, importers, and dealers”—thumbling his nose at the “cultured few” who were more impressed by “museum pieces” of certified rarity and excellence. “Newark Museum to Set New Goal,” New York Times, January 28, 1923; Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 213.


31 See, for example, Paul DiMaggio, “Progressivism and the Arts,” Society 25, no. 5 (July 1988): 70-75.

32 See Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 215-16.

33 Trask, “‘American Things’,” 72-75, passim.

34 Cary, “Mr. de Forest and the Metropolitan.”

35 William Sloane Coffin to Robert W. de Forest, 31 December 1929, Misc. Correspondence 1927-30 folder, William Sloane Coffin file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

36 Robert W. de Forest to William Sloane Coffin, 26 April 1928, Misc. Correspondence 1927-30 folder, William Sloane Coffin file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

37 Kent to William Sloane Coffin, 30 April 1929, Misc. Correspondence 1927-30 folder, William Sloane Coffin file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


40 William Sloane Coffin, “Art and Leisure,” typescript speech [to American Federation of Art], 10 May 1932, Misc. Speeches, etc. folder, William Sloane Coffin file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.


45 Gold Diggers of 1933, starring Ruby Keeler, Joan Blondell, Ginger Rogers, and Dick Powell, was directed by Mervyn LeRoy, with choreography by Busby Berkeley. Coffin recited his “forgotten man” poem at the opening of a show he had sponsored at W. & J. Sloane, displaying the artworks of unemployed draftsmen.


“The New Museum Head.”


See William Sloane Coffin Clippings, Obit, Biographical Notes 1931-34 folder, William Sloane Coffin file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


“A Great Educational Institution.”


“Branch in Metropolitan Museum Plans.”


“Clerks Can Lift Public Taste in Art, Says Coffin,” [publication unknown], February 7, 1932, Clippings, Obit, Biog. notes 1931-34 folder, William Sloane Coffin file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


Metropolitan Museum of Art Annual Reports of the Trustees of the Association, 1930 and 1933.

It is interesting to note that a good portion of bequests were from women in honor of others; this was perhaps the only area in which women held some financial power and clout.

Coffin, “Address of William Sloane Coffin.”


Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 253.

Ironically, although John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was no supporter of modern art and was opposed to the museum, he did donate the land for its building. See Bernice Kert, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller: The Woman in the Family (New York: Random House, 1993).

The following month, Stephen Carlton Clark, another member of the Museum of Modern Art board, was also elected to the Metropolitan’s trustees.


Ibid.


Jewell, “Behind Scenes at the Costume Show.”


Goldstein, William Sloane Coffin, Jr. a Holy Impatience, 15.
80 Ibid.
83 William Sloane Coffin to William Church Osborn, 18 December 1929, Finances 1929, 1941, 1943-45 folder, William Church Osborn file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.
84 See General Correspondence 1905-41 folder 1 of 3, George Blumenthal file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.
85 “Blumenthal Head of Art Museum.”
86 In Memory of George Blumenthal, 1858-1941 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1941), Clippings, Biographical Notes, Obituary, etc. folder 2 of 2, George Blumenthal file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.
88 Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 221; Seligman, Merchants of Art, 1880-1960, 144.
90 Metropolitan Museum of Art [HW Kent], “George Blumenthal. Elected President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, January 9, 1934,” General Correspondence 1905-41 file, 1934-37 folder (2 of 3), George Blumenthal file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.
92 “Blumenthal Head of Art Museum.”
93 Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 219.
94 Ibid. Osborn, however, remained vice president from 1932-41, and was one of the more active trustees throughout his tenure on the board, beginning in 1904. He ultimately did serve as president from 1941-47.
96 Clippings, Biog. Notes, Obits, etc. file, 1930-31, 1934-36, 1941, 1943, 1954, 1964-65 folder 2 of 2, George Blumenthal file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.
97 In Memory of George Blumenthal.
98 See General Correspondence 1905-41 folder, George Blumenthal file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.
100 Geoffrey T. Hellman, “Masterpieces and Mummies--I,” 36.


105 In 1923, Blumenthal also gave the museum $2000 for a car to take members of the museum’s Egyptian Expedition from their headquarters to the tomb of Tutankhamen, a time-consuming trip by donkey.


108 George Blumenthal to Herbert Winlock, 13 July 1933, 1905, 1909-10, 1913-16, 1918, 1920-33 folder, George Blumenthal General Correspondence 1905-41 file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

109 George Blumenthal to the Trustees and Director of the Metropolitan Museum, Cablegram, 21 Dec 1914, 1905, 1909-10, 1913-16, 1918, 1920-33 folder 1 of 3, George Blumenthal General Correspondence 1905-41 file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


112 G. L. Greenway to William Sloane Coffin, 7 October 1932, Publicity 1931-33, 1957 folder, Michael Friedsam Bequest file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

113 J. S. Burke, for the Estate of Michael Friedsam to William Sloane Coffin, 3 October 1932, Publicity 1931-33, 1957 folder, Michael Friedsam Bequest file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

114 “Pass Million Mark in Jewish Campaign,” *New York Times*, November 17, 1925; “Walker Asks All to Aid Jewish Drive,” *New York Times*, May 5, 1926. Otto Kahn was the second highest individual donor, with $10,000.


117 “$56,200,870 Given by Jews in a Year,” *New York Times*, August 31, 1931. $20,497,120 went to non-Jewish causes; presumably the $10 million Friedsam donation was included in that number.


125 See invitation for Monday, 22 January 1934, 1934-37 folder 2 of 3, George Blumenthal, General Correspondence 1905-41 file, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

126 Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces*, 281.

127 Ibid., 302.

128 Ibid., 222.


131 Tomkins, *Merchants and Masterpieces*, 223.


136 See William Church Osborn Papers 1904-53, Box 3, Museum of Modern Art 1934-35 folder, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA. A decade later, under William Church Osborn, the museum seriously discussed consolidating the Whitney Museum into the Metropolitan’s collections. See William Church Osborn Papers 1904-53, Box 2, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


139 Goodwin, “A New Jewish Elite,” 56.


141 Goodwin, “A New Jewish Elite,” 56.

142 George Blumenthal to William Church Osborn, 24 June 1939. Selection of Director 1931, 1937, June 1-24, 1939 folder, William Church Osborn Papers 1904-1953, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

143 C. R. Morey to William Church Osborn, 26 June 1939, Selection of Director folder June 26, 1939 – 1940, William Church Osborn Papers, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

144 H. E. Winlock to William Church Osborn, ca. 20 July 20, 1939, Selection of Director June 26, 1939 – 1940 folder, William Church Osborn Papers, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


146 Ibid., 56.

147 Ibid., 59.

148 Ibid., 60.

CHAPTER NINE
Brother, Can You Spare a Dime? The Opera Goes Begging

1 See Minutes, 7 December 1920 and 23 January 1925, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

2 Minutes, 7 December 1920, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

3 Minutes, 11 December 1922, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

4 Ibid. After several years’ discussion, which included the proposal to build in or around Central Park, the City Art Centre project was scrapped.

5 See Minutes, 24 November 1925, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

6 See Otto H. Kahn to R. Fulton Cutting, 5 January 1926, appended to Minutes, 11 January 1926, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.


8 Kahn to Cutting, 5 January 1926.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Minutes, 11 January 1926, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

150 William Church Osborn to George Blumenthal, 27 June 1939, Selection of Director June 26, 1939 – 1940 folder, William Church Osborn Papers, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

151 George Blumenthal to William Church Osborn, 28 June 1939, Selection of Director June 26, 1939 – 1940 folder, William Church Osborn Papers, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.

152 Tomkins, Merchants and Masterpieces, 273.


154 H. E. Winlock to William Church Osborn, ca. 20 July 1939, Selection of Director June 26, 1939 – 1940 folder, William Church Osborn Papers, MMAA.


156 Blumenthal was eulogized by Sigismund S. Goldwater, President of the Associated Hospital Service of New York, and Frederick W. Beekman, the Dean of Holy Trinity, Paris, who closed with the Old Testament benediction, “The Lord bless thee and keep thee; the Lord make his face to shine upon thee” from Numbers 6: 24-26.

157 “In Memoriam,” 147.


159 Hellman, “Masterpieces and Mummies--III,” 29.
See R. Fulton Cutting to Otto H. Kahn, 12 January 1926, appended to Minutes, 11 January 1926, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

“Present Directors Won't Undertake Opera Building.”

Ibid.


Kahn reminded Cutting that the new opera house had been “repeatedly discussed” for a year with Cutting’s predecessor as president, George G. Haven. Frank Dodd to the Directors of the Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, 20 January 1926, with copy of letter from Otto H. Kahn to R. Fulton Cutting, 18 January 1926, Cornelius N. Bliss Papers, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.


Lillie Bliss to Cornelius N. Bliss, 8 February 1927, appended to memorandum from Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, Cornelius N. Bliss Papers, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.


Morris, “Opera in New Home Will Have Wider Aims.”


Ibid.

Morris, “Opera in New Home Will Have Wider Aims.”


August Belmont Jr. died in 1924.

“Changes in Boxes at Opera are Many,” New York Times, October 25, 1926.


Ibid.


In its founding years the Club boasted such members as John Jacob Astor, the younger William K. Vanderbilt, the elder Robert Goelet, Kahn’s one-time nemesis James Speyer, the statesman Elihu Root, the sculptor Augustus St. Gaudens, and the architect Whitney Warren—a group that was a broadly mixed club-within-a-club. Frank L. Baker, “Opera Club Held Unique Place,” New York Times, April 10, 1927.


Jean Appleton, the daughter of the twentieth century labor leader David Dubinsky, recalled how her parents shared a ticket to the Metropolitan Opera in the 1910s and 1920s, oral history series with author, 2008-09.

Robert Livingston Gerry (Elbridge T. Gerry’s son), Edward S. Harkness, and E. Roland Harriman, and Frederic Potts Moore also were elected new board members at the same meeting.

See Minutes, 28 April 1913, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.


In an alternate scheme, 150 persons would be invited to be boxholders for $140,000, for the use of the box one night a week. See “$140,000 May Be Asked for Opera Box Leases,” New York Times, February 5, 1927.

New Opera House Uptown Assured.


“More Vanderbilts Quit Metropolitan.” The Vanderbilt sisters’ box sold to Frazier Jelke.


Minutes, 12 April 1927, Metropolitan Opera and Real Estate Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

R. Fulton Cutting to Robert S. Brewster, 1 May 1927, Cornelius N. Bliss Papers, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

The architects were leaning towards a lower building, which indicated that with the great span of the auditorium, it would be both “unwise and inartistic” to also construct a tower. “Await Cost Figures on New Opera House,” New York Times, April 13, 1927.

Irving Kolodin, The Metropolitan Opera, 1883-1966; a Candid History, (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1966), 20. Morris in 1935 would join the Metropolitan Museum board, reinforcing the Morgan connection, and was chairman of its Development Committee in the 1940s. See William Church Osborn Papers, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Otto H. Kahn to R. Fulton Cutting, 15 July 1927, Cornelius N. Bliss Papers, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.


See Sketches, Metropolitan Opera House 1926-27, Joseph Urban Collection, Columbia University.

“Tentative Design for Opera Ready.”

However, later, as the new plan was foundering in January-February 1928, apparently unbeknownst to Kahn, Morris was sending Bliss and Cutting designs for a theater on a parcel of land on the Columbia University site that
would become Rockefeller Center. See New Opera House 1929 folder, Cornelius N. Bliss Papers, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

71 “Vanderbilt Joins Directorate of Opera; Backs Plan to Move Metropolitan Uptown,” New York Times, January 18, 1926. See also Minutes, Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company, April 12, 1927, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

72 Minutes, Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company, April 12, 1927, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

73 Ibid.

74 “Mrs. C. Vanderbilt Dies at Home Here,” New York Times, January 8, 1953. See also “Historical Notes: Quality,” Time, January 19, 1953. Mrs. Vanderbilt was the youngest child of Richard T. Wilson, a New York banker originally from Georgia, whom polite New York society had looked down upon because his self-made fortune had been acquired through cotton speculation, a line of work more gentlemanly Southerners had shunned. In 1896, Wilson’s daughter eloped with Cornelius (Neily) Vanderbilt III, thus incurring the wrath of his father, Cornelius Vanderbilt II, and resulting in his near-disinheritance. Yet even before the death of her father-in-law and the generous restoration of some of her husband’s legacy by his brother Alfred Gwynne, Grace Vanderbilt already was a hostess in the lavish Vanderbilt style, in not-so-friendly competition with her mother-in-law. By the time of her death in 1953, she held the singular position of having entertained or been entertained by more members of European royal houses than any other woman in America, a distinction that earned her the moniker “Kingfisher.”

75 See Minutes, April 1927 through 1929, Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

76 See New Opera House folders 1928 and 1929, Cornelius N. Bliss Papers, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

77 See Minutes, 17 February 1926, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

78 Box 30, folder 7, Joseph Urban Collection, Columbia University. A typewritten document dated March 14, 1927 enumerated all of the current Metropolitan Opera storehouses and their estimated total cubic feet, including the heights of tall scenery, clearly intending to consolidate all of the spread-out ancillary storage spaces under one roof in the new plan.

79 Scheme 9 folder, Metropolitan Opera House, ca. June 1927, Joseph Urban Collection, Columbia University. The new operas Pelleas and Melisande [Claude Debussy, 1902], Coq d'Or [Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, 1907-09], Rossignol [Igor Stravinsky, 1914] were particularly difficult to stage in accordance with the composers’ wishes.

80 Ibid. The excerpted article was attributed to Paul Kerby, in a column entitled “Questions for Opera Directors.”

81 The Fifth Avenue and Park Avenue Association heads spoke out against even entertaining the notion, and after some consideration recommended that the opera house be built either adjacent to the East River, between Fiftieth and Fifty-seventh streets, or between Sixth and Eighth Avenues, above Fiftieth Street and below Fifty-ninth Street, which was more or less the location of Kahn’s property. See ““Show’ Streets Shun New Opera Building,” New York Times, October 28, 1927.


83 An “unnamed official” of the Real Estate Company thought that Central Park would be “ideal” for it; Mayor Jimmy Walker dismissed the idea. Someone else suggested Bryant Park, behind the New York Public Library; the Forty-second Street Property Owners’ Association was “absolutely against it.” The site of the old New York Athletic Club, at the southeast corner of Sixth Avenue and Central Park South, was mentioned, although interestingly, not considered. “Bars Opera House from Central Park,” New York Times, August 3, 1927; “Bryant Park Urged as Site for Opera,” New York Times, October 29, 1927; “Old N.Y.A.C. Home Offered for Sale,” New York Times, February 19, 1928.

84 Mrs. Vanderbilt and Goelet supposedly favored the idea, realizing Oscar Hammerstein’s prediction that the Metropolitan Opera House would one day take over the palatial theater at Central Park West. “Favor Opera on Site of Century Theatre,” New York Times, November 11, 1927.
"Opera Site Action Waits on Morgan," *New York Times*, October 11, 1927. The other members of the committee were Robert Fulton Cutting, Cornelius N. Bliss, Robert S. Brewster, and DeLancey Kountz.

Ibid.

"Bars Opera House from Central Park."


Ibid.

Ibid.

"Drops 57th St. Site as Home for Opera," *New York Times*, February 20, 1928.

Ibid.

De Lancy Kountze to R. Fulton Cutting, 15 February 1928, New Opera House 1928 folder, Cornelius N. Bliss Papers, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.


1908-29 Minute Book, unnumbered last page, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

Minutes, Metropolitan Opera Company, October 16, 1929, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.

"Engineers Engaged for Opera Centre," *New York Times*, October 5, 1929.

"Max Maretzeck is Dead," *New York Times*, May 15, 1897.


Ibid., 217. See also Otto H. Kahn, "Memorandum", 7 April 1931, Otto H. Kahn Papers, Princeton University.

Kahn, "Memorandum."


Ibid., 207.


120 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
125 Minutes, 16 October 1931, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
126 Minutes, 18 November 18, 1931, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
127 Ibid.
128 Minutes, Annual Meeting, 14 March 1932, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
130 Minutes, 23 March 1932, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.
132 “Opera Season Next Year Viewed as Certain As New Metropolitan Group Elects Officers,” New York Times, April 7, 1932.
133 “Public Pledges Aid to Opera in Crisis,” New York Times, April 12, 1932.
136 “New Opera Seeks Wider Popularity.” See also “Plans Filed for $4,500,000 Opera House; Rockefeller-Metropolitan Deal Is Hinted,” New York Times, April 9, 1932.
138 “New Opera Seeks Wider Popularity.”
140 Olin Downes, “San Francisco’s New Opera House,” New York Times, October 9, 1932. The auditorium was smaller than the Metropolitan Opera’s, although designed as an open fan, not unlike Joseph Urban’s conception for the Met’s unrealized building.
144 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid.


150 Ibid.

151 There were Cornelius N. Bliss, Cutting, Robert S. Brewster, and Myron C. Taylor of the Real Estate Company; Cravath, Charles Hayden, Frederic Potts Moore, and Henry Rogers Winthrop of the Opera Association; John Erskine of the Juilliard School; Thomas H. McNerney of the former Chicago Opera board; and Adrian Van Sinderen of the Brooklyn opera committee. “Pleas for Opera Win Wide Replies,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1933.

152 “Cravath on Radio in Plea for Opera,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1933.


154 “$13,000 Audience Aids Opera Drive.”


157 “Eugenie Pageant to Feature Ball.”


159 Represented were Jenny Lind; the prima ballerina of Paris; the composers Liszt, Wagner, Meyerbeer, Berlioz, Gounod, and Waldteufel; and the great (Academy of Music) soprano Adelina Patti. The climax was a performance by Jascha Heifetz, in the role of Johann Strauss, playing and conducting the “Vienna Woods” waltz.

160 Among the participants, Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, namesake of the Dutch New Amsterdam founding patroon, was cast as the minor French Prince Oscar de Suede; Mrs. Benjamin Moore, of the Brooklyn paint business, was the Comtesse Walewski; Mrs. E. Marshall Field, of the investment banking and department store family, was the Comtesse de Castiglione; Mrs. Vincent Astor portrayed the Empress of Austria; the British fashion photographer and designer Cecil Beaton was Major General F. H. Seymour, Groom of the Robes; the conductor Arturo Toscanini’s daughter Wanda played a countess and the violinist Heifetz’s wife, a marquise; the lawyer, WWI colonel, and historical document collector Preston Davie appeared as the French Duc de Grammont-Caderousse; and Mrs. William Paley, wife of the CBS radio network founder, was the Russian Princess Gortschakoff, accompanied by a bona fide Russian prince, Serge Obolensky, recently divorced from Ava Alice Astor, John Jacob IV’s daughter and Vincent’s sister.


163 For example, the prime orchestra was reduced from $37.50 to $36, and balcony boxes from $288 to $264. “20% Rise in Patrons is Seen for Opera,” *New York Times*, May 17, 1933.

164 “Cravath Pledges the Best in Opera,” *New York Times*, November 13, 1933.

165 Ibid.


168 See Correspondence box, Eleanor Robson Belmont Papers, Columbia University. See also Coleman, “The Woman Behind the Met.”

169 Coleman, “The Woman Behind the Met.”
Ibid.
Ibid.

Paul Underwood Kellogg to Eleanor Robson Belmont, 27 December 1933, Correspondence box, Eleanor Robson Belmont Papers, Columbia University. See also “Drive on to ‘Adopt’ Families in Need,” New York Times, March 31, 1933.


“Smith to Aid Drive for Family Relief,” New York Times, October 8, 1934.

Belmont, The Fabric of Memory, 265.


Belmont, The Fabric of Memory, 265.

“Opera Heads Laud Bori for Campaign,” New York Times, May 1, 1933. See also Minutes, 2 May 1933, Metropolitan Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Archives, MOH.


Otto H. Kahn to Paul D. Cravath, 21 February and 24 April 1933, Otto H. Kahn Papers, Princeton University. See also Collins, Otto Kahn: Art, Money, 254.


Ibid.

“Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


As part of the terms of Juilliard support, the Metropolitan Opera had to offer an appearance in a major role to the winning Juilliard student in a competitive contest.


Collins, Otto Kahn: Art, Money, 253, 298.

Upon his death, Kahn’s estate was valued at $3,970,860, a figure that did not include cash, real estate, art, and other assets. Ibid., 302.

In the end, while the press reported that over his lifetime Kahn had given approximately $2,000,000 to artistic causes including the Metropolitan Opera, the actual amount probably was much more.


Ibid.

“New Metropolitan Opera Season Assured; Necessary Funds Raised, Miss Bori Reveals,” New York Times, April 28, 1934.

“Opera to Carry on Without Public Aid.” See also Belmont, Fabric of Memory, 265-66.


Ibid.


“Opera Head Favors Civic Centre Plan.”


The Chicago Civic Opera Company, which had fallen victim to financial trouble, had been that city’s first world class opera troupe, set up as a “democratic” opera company aimed for a popular audience.

Belmont, The Fabric of Memory, 266.

Ibid., 267.

Ibid.

Ibid., 266-67.

Ibid., 279.

Coleman, “The Woman Behind the Met.”

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"Mayor Asks Trade to Aid the Opera," *New York Times*, December 6, 1935.


Ibid.

Ibid.


"Nation Gets Plea to Aid Opera Here," *New York Times*, January 28, 1940.

"10,000 Letters Spur Opera Drive; Anonymous Giver Sends $11,000," *New York Times*, January 30, 1940.

"Opera Fund Forms Uptown Committee," *New York Times*, February 8, 1940.

"Opera Gets $216,000 in 2 Weeks; $700,000 Gift From Juilliard Fund," *New York Times*, February 10, 1940.

"Musicians to Raise $100,000 for Opera," *New York Times*, February 24, 1940.

"Opera Gets $216,000 in 2 Weeks; $700,000 Gift From Juilliard Fund." *New York Times*, April 10, 1940.


"Industrialists Help Opera Fund Drive," *New York Times*, March 6, 1940.


"Lehman Sends Gift to Aid Opera Fund," *New York Times*, March 27, 1940.


"Business Contributes $130,000 to Aid Opera," *New York Times*, April 11, 1940.


"Opera Fund Passes its $1,000,000 Goal," *New York Times*, May 10, 1940.


“Governor Pleads for Opera Cause,” *New York Times*, March 17, 1940.

Downes, “The Opera’s Future.”
CONCLUSION: Navigating a Negotiation

1. Rugoff, America’s Gilded Age, 92.
3. Ibid., 148.
6. Ibid., 200-1.
7. See Box 2, Robert Moses files, William Church Osborn Papers 1904-53, Office of the Secretary Correspondence Files, 1870-1950, MMAA.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
Ibid.

Stephanie Strom, “Big but Not Easy: As Donors Set Terms, Some Charities Resist,” *New York Times*, November 15, 2004. Gilder had given millions of dollars not only to the Historical Society, but to the Central Park Conservancy—on the condition that it match his $17 million grant; to the American Museum of Natural History, where he financially spearheaded not only the Rose Center for Earth and Space, but a Ph.D. degree-granting graduate school bearing his name; to Yale University, his alma mater, to which he donated $4 million towards a boathouse; and served on the boards of the Morgan Library and other smaller historical institutions. In 1994, with Lewis Lehrman, he founded the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, a nonprofit organization committed to the study of American History.


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Abbreviations:
MMAA: Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives
MOH: Metropolitan Opera House
NYPL: New York Public Library

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