

WHAT NOT TO WEAR TO THE OPERA: OUTFITTING SOCIABILITY AT THE MET

by

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ABSTRACT

This research project proposes that fashion performs a critical role in the perpetuation of class hierarchies in American opera audiences. Dress is used by opera patrons as a mode of expressing their economic, social, and cultural capital, thereby affirming their status within society. The Metropolitan Opera house, opened in New York City in 1883, was built intentionally to create a space for the New York elite class to socialize, incorporating architectural features that reflected the power dynamics of New York society, effectively prioritizing sociability over musical integrity. This study is supported by analysis of early *Vogue* magazine articles that directly contributed to the formation of the opera as a pursuit for the upper-class; as well as a critical investigation of photographs drawn from the Met archive revealing the ways in which fashion at the Met performs economic and social power.. Ultimately, this project uses dress to examine the embedded class hierarchies that sustain an elite, exclusive audience for opera in America; indeed, the study shows that the combination of opera and fashion created class cohesion through mutually acknowledged cultural literacy in New York City.

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INTRODUCTION

The scene was undeniably beautiful. The three circles of boxes were three “glittering horseshoes” of as much glory as could well be shown in evening dress and jewels. Diamonds flashed like stars, and the gay tints of hundreds of the most artistic costumes made the three lines perfect pictures. All this, however, was expected. The audience was waiting, after all, for the opera.

-Unsigned critic in the *Herald*, October 23, 1883

Despite outlandish ticket prices, often reaching thousands of dollars, opening night at the Metropolitan Opera sells out. While the ostensible focus is on the drama unfolding on stage, there is another equally choreographed spectacle taking place before the curtain rises, one that often rivals the performance in glamour. Prior to the performance, finely dressed patrons pour into the lobby, the space brought alive by a buzz of conversation and the anticipation of the night’s spectacle is made palpable through the hum of excited energy. Against the backdrop of the grand architecture of the house, amid sparkling diamonds and lush furs, opera-goers begin the evening’s social rituals, closely scrutinizing each other as they make their way to their seats. While the show has yet to begin, the process of social interaction and appraisal is underway. Indeed, the unwritten dress code of the opera audience turns the lobby into a runway, where opera-goers dress to impress, showcasing the latest and most lavish styles. This practice of dressing for the Met has a long tradition, since The Met was established in 1883 with the intention of channeling the Eurocentrism of the New York cultural scene into the creation of a space for the newly wealthy to socialize. The Met catered to an upper-class audience and

fashioned opera into an elite pursuit by inextricably linking it to the possession of economic means, both through extreme ticket prices and its implicit extravagant dress code. By creating a space for foreign language opera, the Met cemented New York as the cultural heart of America during the Gilded Age (1870-1900) and provided the perfect place to be seen wearing the latest fashions from Europe. This elitism was not imported from Europe along with the opera genre, as a common misconception continues to hold, but is in fact a home-grown American phenomenon. Indeed, prior to the 1880s, opera provided entertainment to the middle-class and was not classified as a high art. My research looks at the understudied but critical role fashion played in the American creation of opera as an elite pursuit, a pursuit that goes back to the very conception of the Metropolitan Opera beginning 135 years ago at the time of writing the Major Research Paper.

On October 22nd, 1883, the Metropolitan Opera opened its doors for the first time, ushering in the New York elites and setting a precedent for a form of entertainment that necessitated possession of economic, social and cultural capital, both on the side of the producers and the consumers. The creation of this space for opera consumption facilitated the display of New York's wealthiest citizens in their finest clothing. The architecture of the space, notably the system of boxes commonly known as the 'diamond horseshoe', focused on dividing social classes, visually and physically, through the arrangement of seats and ticket prices. Access to more economic capital allowed the purchase of prime seating that would ensure the social visibility that anyone looking to confirm their social status was seeking. The purchase of a box at the Metropolitan Opera house was the ultimate status symbol, as supply was limited and often restricted to those with good social standing. As is illustrated in Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, the opera house can be seen as the ultimate metaphor for the class-bound nature of

Gilded Age New York, and the lack of social mobility within the space is reflective of the same situation outside of it. Without the right name, the possession of massive economic capital and the appropriate aristocratic behavior, accessing the most sought-after seats at the opera was impossible, mirroring the similar obstacles to social progress that citizens faced in the streets of New York.

In these ways, the Metropolitan Opera house functioned as a social microcosm that lends itself well to the study of capital, taste and the performance of cultural competency. Further, the Met provides a valuable lens with which to examine the validity of American exceptionalism, challenging the conception of fluid social mobility and uncovering the hierarchical structures that underpin the enjoyment of this cultural form. The US has long been believed to have a greater level of social mobility than most class-bound European nations, a quality that is referred to by many as “American exceptionalism” (Piketty 10). But, as Thomas Piketty argues in his work *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, social mobility in the United States is, in many cases, still restricted by classist and elitist attitudes. I use the space of the Met to analyze the validity of this idea and the implications it has for the understanding of the function of fashion within the socialization practices of New York society.

More specifically, this humanities-based research paper relies on archival research and literary sources to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the ways in which dress operated to create and entrench class hierarchies among Metropolitan Opera Company patrons. Starting from its opening in 1883, the Met has occupied different physical spaces, beginning with its initial location at 39th Street and Broadway and ultimately ending up at Lincoln Center, where it remains today. I will trace the history of the Met throughout the 20th century, focusing especially on the first 30 years and then again on the years around the grand re-opening of the current

facility at Lincoln Center in 1966. Since these two time periods coincide with the periods identified by Piketty as being periods of extreme wealth concentration and minimal social mobility, the years 1883-1913 and 1958-1976 are ideal for illuminating the class divisions that are the concerns of this study. Moreover, these time periods will provide an opportunity for a comparative diachronic analysis, through which I hope to examine both the motivations behind opera attendance and the factors affecting dress in the course of time. The first part of my analysis focuses on the *Vogue* archive, exploring concrete instances where this leading American fashion magazine played an active role in perpetuating the Met's reputation as a high-class social space and encouraged certain standards of dress. While many American news sources also fulfilled similar roles in relation to coverage of the Met, *Vogue* is particularly pertinent to this study as it emerged a mere nine years after the Met, and their influence grew in parallel to one another. While *Vogue* provided an outside perspective that actively constructed ideas about expected dress and behavior for opera attendance, the second part of my analysis takes an inside look at archival photographs from the Met archive, mostly centred around the 1950s and 1960s and the reopening of the company at Lincoln Center. A study of the Met allows for the examination of how a uniquely American experience of opera was developed in a country that had little prior opera tradition.

Finally, this study can also yield significant insight on a more recent, 21st century phenomenon, namely, the dwindling numbers of opera audiences (Cermatori 2013). While my analysis does not focus on the 21st century, my findings regarding the perpetuation of these dress standards might provide a possible explanation for the decline in interest. My research will examine the role that fashion plays in perpetuating the idea that economic capital is required to attend the opera. As an art form, opera has long carried with it an exceptionally high risk factor,

as it is one of the most expensive genres of entertainment to produce. Despite this high cost, opera has a great potential to appeal to diverse audiences, given that it combines music, acting, stage design, and storytelling. Opera provides many different entry points at which the audience member can engage, combining multiple disciplines: music, acting, costume design, set design, and dance, among others. The interdisciplinary and unique nature of opera makes it an excellent medium for producing captivating and engaging entertainment even as the genre is plagued by the vestiges of conservatism that remain within the institution. Moreover, shifting the spotlight from the stage to the audience allows us to shift our perspective and to open a critical window through which to examine how dress and glamour was and continues to be exclusionary. Ultimately, analyzing societal interactions as they are moderated through dress within the space of the Met provides a valuable perspective that can provide answers to larger questions about audience involvement and engagement within the genre. In doing so, I hope to shift our critical understanding of the powerful relationship between fashion and the maintenance of a social hierarchy that sustains the perception of opera as an elite activity.

CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL FRAME AND METHODOLOGY: FASHION, OPERA, AND ELITE CULTURE

Other scholars have preceded me in documenting the long history of the Met. Renowned New York music critic Irving Kolodin (1908-1988), a regular writer of program notes for both the opera and the symphony, wrote a history of the Met, *The Story of the Metropolitan Opera, 1883-1950: a Candid History* (1966) from the perspective of an insider. His book gives evidence of an intricate network of patronage, which moreover charted the careers of some of the Met's biggest stars, such as mezzo soprano Martha Lipton, soprano Leontyne Price, and tenor Enrico Caruso (Kolodin 449). Kolodin critically and helpfully emphasizes the role the Met played in the social life of the New York elite, a study complemented more recently by Charles and Mirella Afron's *Grand Opera: The Story of the Met* (2014), a retrospective of almost 140 years.

The Met has long held a position of cultural dominance in America, as documented in the work of scholars Marsha Siefert, Kristen Turner and Paul DiMaggio (DiMaggio 1992; Siefert 2004; Turner 2014). As the dominant national operatic institution since its foundation in 1883, the Met is the epitome of high culture, which in the words of Pierre Bourdieu constitutes an art form that possesses high cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Up until the 1880s, opera was not considered a form of high culture, especially not in America (Affron 2014; Turner 2014) and visitors from Europe in the early 1800s often remarked that American audiences were visibly different from those in Europe, noting their lack of conformity of dress, behavior and appearance (Dizikes 1993). Scholars agree that the Met was created with the intention of using opera to create an elite cultural audience in New York, turning this previously middle-class entertainment into something that was only accessible to those with economic means (DiMaggio 1992; Turner

2014) so that by 1905, the Met was firmly entrenched in the New York cultural and social scene (Dorris 2009).

Indeed, for many Met audience members and donors, the opera was not just entertainment but a lifestyle. Nena Couch's study of Francis Robinson, tour and press director for the Met and host of the Saturday afternoon matinee radio broadcasts, chronicles the complete devotion to the institution practiced by Robinson and many others during the 20th century (Couch 2010). Kolodin documents that patrons used the opera as a social function, in which a mutually acknowledged social leader who dictated fashionable arrival and departure times, with intermission functioning as the ideal time for social interaction (Kolodin 63). By building and targeting a privileged audience for opera, the Met hailed the upper class as consumers and participants in the New York cultural and fashion scenes, a point that is key to my study, as is the work of sociologist Paul DiMaggio, who examines the evolution of American culture into a strict dichotomy between high and low, a process that consecrated the opera through its institutionalization (DiMaggio 1992).

More specifically, DiMaggio and Michael Unseem argue that families who differ in social class engage with different practices of socialization and that once a distinct cultural preference has been established within a class, these traditions are maintained through generations resulting in class continuity in patterns of arts consumption (DiMaggio and Unseem 142). As they write, "the adoption of artistic interests, tastes, standards, and activities associated with a social class helps establish an individual's membership in that class" (143). Since the upper class excludes other classes from acquiring the education to appreciate upper-class cultural pursuits as a means of preserving class dominance (144), arts consumption enhances class cohesion, building social solidarity that is protected by the erection of boundaries, both physical

and ideological that include some and exclude others (152). With the development of these class rituals, a feeling of ownership and tradition becomes deeply embedded within upper-class socialization. This phenomenon is exemplified by the Boston Symphony Orchestra's Friday afternoon performances, which were once considered an "obligation of the Boston social elite" (152) and, as I propose herein, such exclusionary art consumption is epitomized even more in The Metropolitan Opera.

What is interesting for the purposes of analysis of the Metropolitan Opera is that the section of society that participates in the high arts, including opera, has remained virtually unchanged over the past 140 years. Participation in the operatic arts has decreased due to the lack of audience renewal in young people, suggesting that the capital of arts engagement has less social value in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries than it had a century ago (DiMaggio and Mukhtar 180). At the same time, opera has maintained a small but consistent audience that is still comprised of members of the wealthiest part of society (189). The preference for and participation in opera and classical music has long been linked to the upper class, as found by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and Richard Peterson and Albert Simkus (1992). To explore further these sociological dimensions, we now consider their intersection with the field of opera studies where much research has focused on performance and production at the neglect of studying audience, even though the audience is key given the long-term loyalty of members and given also that a considerable number of opera-goers are donors who commit generous to occasionally exorbitant amounts of funds to the cause of the opera. Exploring the evolution of the "fanatic" opera patron, Claudio Benzecry (2009) focuses on the development of opera fanaticism in Buenos Aires, arguing that although knowledge is often required to appreciate opera, the taste for opera does not necessarily stem from a high-class upbringing and can be

developed through learning. He notes that the space of the opera house is a unique social microcosm, as it unites people in a secluded space, distanced from the outside world, allowing an intense sociability (Benzecry 135).

Understanding the process of the institutionalization of opera is key to this project. Studies of the early experience of opera in America are particularly telling, as many scholarly works discuss the accessibility of the genre prior to the late 19th century. According to John Dizikes, “markets and warehouses, taverns and tobacco sheds, the local courthouse – these were the first homes of opera in North America” (58). Initially, it was commonplace to see all different social classes intermingling within the space and there existed no conformity of dress or behavior, but on November 29th, 1825, one of the first attempts was made in New York City to establish opera as an expression of aristocratic behavior. At the Park Theatre, “numerous elegantly dressed women” arrived at 8:00pm, which was viewed as the fashionable time for the curtain to rise (Dizikes 6). Prior to this event, many concerned patrons wrote to newspapers inquiring about how they could dress for the opera in a “European manner” (Dizikes 7). Opera at the Park Theatre was not a sustainable production and did not have much longevity, due to the expensive nature of the genre. Another early attempt to elevate opera was made in New Orleans in 1835, when James Caldwell established the St. Charles Theatre, where he wanted to draw and develop an aristocratic audience to match the European image (Dizikes 69). Caldwell enforced a strict dress code for the first tier of the house, setting a standard for dress and appearance that promoted exclusivity.

The work of Victoria Johnson (2007), on cultural entrepreneurship in the founding of the Paris Opera also informs my study and allows examination of parallels or differences with the Met. Since certain organizational structures have more desirability based on historical and social

influences and since the founding context of an institution leaves a lasting impression (Johnson 98), the backing of key stakeholders in the founding of the Paris Opera fundamentally directed the formation of the institution and left traces of its founding context that remain critical parts of the organization to this day (Johnson 100). Citing evidence from numerous studies, she writes that the structure and operation of many organizations are often based on mimicking behaviors that maximize legitimacy instead of efficiency (104), an idea that can easily be applied to the formation of the Metropolitan Opera. The operational structure of the Met was based on an ideology that put a premium on the transfer of European opera production style that was believed to promote the legitimacy of the company. In all of these studies, there are occasional references to dress, but none of these studies has performed a central examination of fashion, which I propose herein and which now requires a brief introduction of fashion theory including a theorizing of celebrity and glamour.

Joanne Entwistle's *The Fashioned Body* (2015) provides an excellent framework for studying fashion as an embodied experience that helps construct personal and social identities. Indeed, fashion is a means with which to display social status and thereby assert a place within social hierarchy (Entwistle 44). For example, the upper class consistently uses clothing to distinguish themselves from the lower class (Entwistle 49). Likewise, Elizabeth Wilson's *Adorned in Dreams* (2003) documents how critical the city is to the creation of fashion and fashionable experiences, arguing that New York was the 'capital of the 20th century' (134). Since fashion works as a symbolic system that is crucially important to the performance of socialization (xiii), dress works as a marker of both distinction and social conformity (35). Consequently, the theatre becomes a place for the display of fashionable dress, with audience members gathering sartorial inspiration from both the stage and their peers (169).

The intersection of fashion and opera, while deeply relevant to this study, has remained underexplored in scholarship with a few exceptions. The most similar body of work is that of Marlis Schweitzer, whose book *When Broadway Was the Runway* (2009) examines fashion and Broadway theater, focusing on the more popular culture forms of entertainment. As a meeting point of theatrical spectatorship and consumerism, Broadway theater functions as a space that was critical to the development of a mass market for goods and the rise of celebrity culture (4). By extension, as the cultural heart of the United States, New York is a place where most new products and ideas emerged in the late 19th and 20th centuries (5). Much like the Metropolitan Opera, Broadway theatre functioned as a semi-public space that was a safe place for the display of the latest fashions (147). It is a “public yet domesticated space governed by clear rules for audience behavior” (147). While much of Schweitzer’s analysis and the frameworks used are applicable to the Metropolitan Opera, her argument focuses more on the development of mass market consumer culture as instrumental to the popularity of Broadway productions and she does not address the capital value of this type of arts consumption, although she does bring our attention to the importance of space as a category.

Within any cultural space, seating is arranged according to either social or economic capital. In their study of London Fashion Week (LFW), Joanne Entwistle and Agnes Rocamora (2006) use Bourdieu’s field theory to analyze the hierarchical system of relations at play within the space of a fashion show, looking at the ways in which key institutions and agents engaged (738). They observed that London Fashion Week was only accessible to those who were already members of the field, and that physical boundaries were delineated to emphasize the exclusivity of the events (739). As they conclude that “not all tickets are created equally” and that the possession of tickets for better seating is directly correlated with the amount of capital one has

within the system (740), the scholars stress the importance of existing both physically and socially within the space, something that hinges upon the acquisition of visibility (740). In the space of the opera house, this is especially clear as both stage and seating are constructed to enhance visibility in line with Michel Foucault's idea of panopticism, based on work of 18th century philosopher Jeremy Bentham, where prisoners are arranged around a central viewing tower constructed to provide maximum surveillance (Foucault 2005). Foucault argues that space is an active player in the development of social relations and its important effect on the construction of the audience experience cannot be overlooked.

In the case of the Met, it is clear that, as an institution, it has frozen particular power relations through the creation of space so that the upper class is advantaged because they have access to better seats (Berg 2013). Part of the experience is about being seen by other attendees. The conspicuous consumption of opera and the lavish dress required to attend it in appropriate style are often more important to audience members than the actual performance (Veblen 2011). For many, attending the opera is an opportunity to create memorable social visibility, and dress is critical to making an impression. The cost of getting dressed for the opera often far exceeds the ticket price, as couture gowns and opulent accessories have remained the norm (Reeder 2010). In *The Fashioned Body*, Entwistle argues for the importance of a location for fashion to engage with the consumer and cites the development of the department store as a prime site for this engagement (Entwistle 229). I am applying this idea to the space of the opera house and I make the argument that the Met was also a site for fashion display, much in the way that the department store was, but in a much more socially stratified way. She also describes how the increasing concentration of wealth at the upper end of society in late 1900s resulted in an attempt to "re-create an aristocratic way of life" (Entwistle 161). The creation of a space for opera to

function as an entertainment form and social opportunity for the New York elite is an excellent expression of this attempted neo-aristocracy. Opera as a genre had great potential for the expression of cultural capital because it combined a European art form with foreign languages, all within a space that was a prime site for consumption of goods and images (Turner 2014; Entwistle 2015).

Ultimately, understanding audience behaviour is key to unlocking the motivations behind their dress. One major influence on fashion is celebrity culture, which celebrity scholars define in terms of recognizability, that is, as a form of capital that constitutes a valued power resource (Driessens 543). Driessens situates his work within the theoretical framework of Bourdieu's theory of capital and discusses the convertibility of capital, specifically celebrity capital, into other forms, such as economic, cultural or social. Pamela Church Gibson's work on the intersections of fashion and celebrity theory will also provide valuable insight (Church Gibson 2012).

Methodology

In the social hierarchy of cultural forms, opera has long occupied a place near the top, according to Pierre Bourdieu. His 1988 work, *Distinction*, forms the basis of my framework to analyze the dress of the opera-going elite in New York City. In his analysis of cultural engagement in French society, the French sociologist theorizes three types of capital that influence social mobility and interaction and discusses what factors create taste (Bourdieu 1988). To support Bourdieu's definition of capital, I draw on Thomas Piketty's book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, to strengthen the link between cultural practices and economic trends. Piketty defines capital as the "sum total of all non-human assets that can be owned or exchanged on some market" (47). The

Metropolitan Opera can be seen as a key institution, or market, upon which agents interact in a political economy of culture. The opera is not a political, social or economic end, in and of itself, but is a means to an end that is achieved through the display and interaction of capital.

Bourdieu discusses the hierarchy of the arts, stating that some forms of art are more respected than others. Opera resides at the top of this arts hierarchy, as it combines elements of all the typically high arts: music, drama and dance. One of the defining traits that characterizes arts at the top of this hierarchy is the necessity of some cognitive acquirement to enjoy or understand it. Another key defining feature is the lack of natural enjoyment. Typically, being able to naturally enjoy something connotes a form of lower entertainment, usually within the sphere of popular culture, such as pop music or movies. The denial of this natural enjoyment, as is often the case for opera patrons, necessitates added layers of social interaction. If faced with boredom or disengagement, patrons turn to their neighbors to converse or leave the theatre to interact in the lobby. This leads to more opportunities for socialization and, through this, more opportunities for the display of capital. Opera can sometimes require significant prior knowledge to truly understand, as it is often performed in a foreign language and might feature subject material that is unfamiliar to audience members. Opera attendance carries with it the connotation of the possession of a certain amount of cultural competence, which in turn implies acquirement of the cognitive capabilities and education to participate.

If social mobility is primarily motivated by and achieved through the idealization of a higher strata, the American experience of opera is a unique case study. As wealth accumulated in New York in the late 19th century, upper-class society was looking for a way to assert its status and idealized European culture as the epitome of the higher strata that it should strive to engage with and enjoy. Opera was used as a way to civilize New York society into a type of aristocracy,

as the space of the Metropolitan Opera house was divided into seats which were delineated by price. In the opera house, the “physical reality of inequality is left visible to the naked eye” (DiMaggio 1978). Access to economic capital meant access to the social and cultural capital attached to the possession of box seats and more prominent social visibility, both physically within the space and within the societal imagination.

As the opera developed as a space for social interaction and power relations, it also became a place where cultural tastes were developed. Bourdieu states that “taste classifies and it classifies the classifier” (6). Using this phrase as a lens to look at opera attendance, it is evident that having a taste for the genre was a key part of belonging to the upper class in New York. As Paul DiMaggio writes, cultural tastes function as class cues, signifying to others that you belong in a certain social group, and not having these tastes can function as a barrier to social mobility (DiMaggio 1978).

CHAPTER 2:

VOGUE: GATEKEEPER OF SOCIETY STYLE AND BEHAVIOUR

On December 17th, 1892, *Vogue* released its inaugural issue. Intended to be a social gazette for the New York elite, the first issue contained a definition of the title word, *vogue*, the mode of fashion prevalent at any time, and cites examples of its usage, including one phrase, “the vogue of opera continues” (Dec 17 1892 p1), which is highly pertinent to my study. Right from the beginning of its existence, *Vogue* magazine realized the social capital that could be gained by associating with the opera and ensured that its title could be defined within the operatic sphere. Especially in its early years, a critical part of *Vogue* was the society event coverage that described what was going on in the city, who was hosting parties and where notable events were taking place. The magazine informed the socially concerned reader about where they should be seen, what they should be wearing and with whom they should be interacting. Each and every page played upon the aspirational nature of the New York upper-class, outlining ways in which an elite life could be led and documenting social encounters. While American society often attempted to eschew the class stratification that was integral to the European aristocratic system, it was impossible to deny the superior value ascribed to culture imported from there. The New York elites possessed economic capital, but needed something to add civility and class to their social interactions and opera was the perfect venue for this new sociability. *Vogue* magazine helped to encourage the Euro-centricity of New York’s cultural aspirations and centred the Metropolitan Opera as a space in which these aspirations could be manifested. Although the Met was established nine years prior to the launch of *Vogue*, both institutions were created with similar intentions and the magazine played a critical role in ensuring that the Met maintained its place of social and cultural significance.

The Metropolitan Opera's inaugural opening night took place on October 22nd, 1883. While *Vogue* was not yet in existence, other New York publications documented the glamor and ceremony of the evening, setting a precedent that would continue to be followed. Reviews written by those lucky enough to attend described the architecture, audience and content of the performance, painting a vivid image of the evening in a way that made it clear to those who had not attended the night that the Met was going to be a place where society would interact in a major way. From the moment the doors first opened on that historic night, it was evident that the intention of the space was for the purpose of social interaction, not musical enjoyment, and that audience members were taking full advantage of this opportunity. Critic Henry Krehbiel was in the audience that evening and wrote a review for the *New York Daily Tribune* that speaks to this phenomenon.

When the opening notes of the overture sounded through the house there 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 (Krehbiel 1883).

The scene Krehbiel describes perfectly illuminates the way the space of the Met was used, from the very beginning, as a place for sociability and that the utmost purpose for the space was to facilitate conversations and interactions among the audience. Indeed, the architecture of the space stood out, as it was evident that throughout the building process, a priority was placed on

creating space for socialization, often at the expense of acoustics. A reviewer from *The Nation* remarked that,

From an artistic and musical point of view the large number of boxes in the Metropolitan Opera House is a decided mistake. But the house was built avowedly for social purposes rather than artistic, it is useless to complain about this, or about the fact that the opportunity was not taken to make of the building itself, externally, an architectural monument of which the city might be proud (October 25 1883).

By publishing reviews acknowledging the intentionality behind the construction of the Met as a space that had primarily social purposes, critics helped to widely spread the news that New York had a new place for the elite to mingle. From the moment the first patron walked through the door, there was a sense that this space was going to play a key role in the New York social scene, and as the curtain rose for the first time and the orchestra struck up the first few chords of Gounod's *Faust*, the Met had rooted itself firmly within society's consciousness.

Following this spectacular opening night, the Met put on several more successful seasons, each garnering more attention than the last. However, this success was brought to a halt following a tragic fire in 1892 that burned the house to the ground, just nine years after its opening. Without the Met as a place to consort with their peers, the upper-class shortened the social season that year and devoted much energy to efforts to rebuild with haste. This fire coincided with the release of the first issue of *Vogue*, and the devastating effect the loss of this space had on New York society was well documented in this initial issue. The society supplement included in this issue describes that "keenly, however, must the debutantes feel the loss of the opera, which gives the most agreeable variety to a girl's first season. In the opera is

the opportunity to pass on from a first dinner to the glittering horseshoe, resplendent with gems” (Dec 1892 S1). The “glittering horseshoe” refers to the circle of boxes within the opera house that were purchased by members of the New York elite as a means of showcasing wealth and status. The boxes were arranged in a way that featured an excellent view of the stage, but also allowed for clear observation of fellow box occupants. As is implied by the description, the box seats were the ultimate place to display the latest fashions and jewelry, making the opera a key part of the debutante’s social season. Not only did the loss of opera profoundly impact the opportunities for fashion display, but it also removed a key space for conversation between patrons. In a cartoon illustration from the same issue, titled “A Great Loss”, two women are having a conversation about what a tragedy it is that the Met was not a part of their social life. “‘It is just too awfully bad there isn’t any opera this year,’ moaned Mrs. Dash-about. ‘There isn’t a place where one can really enjoy a social chat with one’s friends, now’” (34). The interaction illustrated in this cartoon showcases the value of the Met as a venue for social interaction. Interestingly, the common theme through both of these examples is that the Met’s absence during the social season was most keenly felt by those who relied upon it as a space for socializing and networking, not by those who valued the opera for the opportunity it provided for the enjoyment of music. Going to the opera was a social spectacle that allowed patrons to see and be seen, providing an excellent venue for the display of economic, social and cultural capital that affirmed the dominance of the wealthy and fostered social cohesion among the elite.

As class cohesion was encouraged through mutual observation of established expectations of dress and behavior, New York’s elite opera lovers were also united through a pervasive admiration for European culture. Although the experience of opera at the Met was uniquely American in its glamor and exclusivity, many socialites viewed the genre as a way to

embody their own interpretation of European cultural practices, however much their ideas diverged from the reality of European opera-going. *Vogue* played into the idealization of European culture, and published articles that both explicitly and implicitly drew connections between the activities and interests of New York society and this imported culture, as written about by Alison Matthews David (2006). One regular column titled “Of Interest to Her” was a space where young society women could look for inspiration on how to look, dress, and behave. The column also often pointed out fashionable places to be seen, from balls and dinner parties to notable cultural events and restaurants.

One such restaurant was Delmonico’s, located on the corner of Beaver Street in downtown Manhattan, and it is described in *Vogue* as a place where an eligible husband may be found. Now that it is established that social capital, through marriage, can be gained through dining at Delmonico’s, the column goes on to use descriptors that link the restaurant with cultural competency. It is noted that, “within, the restaurant presents a gay scene, and the hum of conversation with an occasional burst of laughter, reminds one of the Metropolitan Opera House, when one of Wagner’s gems was in process of interpretation” (237 April 1893). Linking this restaurant to the Met gives it a certain cultural and social legitimacy as a place that is recognized as an appropriate space for exclusive social interaction. Further, the reference to the music of renowned German operatic composer, Richard Wagner, appeals to the cultural competency that anyone wishing to partake in society life should have. The comparison drawn in this article is also indicative of the superficial nature of opera patronage in New York, as priority was given to the potential for interaction at a performance, over the artistic content of the performance itself. Wagner’s works are notoriously solemn, dramatic and lengthy, so the description of the bubbling laughter and conversation at the restaurant as comparable to that occurring during a Wagner

performance exemplifies the lack of intellectual and artistic gravitas held by New York audiences. Patrons of the opera in New York placed value on the opera as a space for social visibility and often dismissed the content of the production as long as they were able to exercise their social, economic and cultural capital. The mutual acknowledgement of a shared level of cultural competency was a critical component of becoming a respected member of society.

A key component of showcasing this multi-dimensional capital was through fashion, and the opera house functioned as a superior space for the display of wealth through clothing. *Vogue* documents this in many articles. A regular fashion column, “What She Wears”, often observed the trends being worn at the Met and consistently centers the opera house as a place for fashion. One way to make an impactful impression upon fellow audience members was through taking up physical space, by wearing items that necessitated attention by virtue of their size. One article, written by an unnamed fashion critic, discusses what cloaks should be worn with ball gowns on a cold December night.

There is a great variety in the cloaks worn with ball gowns. Some are made quite short and others reach the bottom of the skirt. White satin, white brocade, all sorts of fancy materials and velvets are used for these wraps. They are all made with a full, fluffy effect about the collar, and many a girl looks much prettier in them than in anything else she wears; and I have often thought what a brilliant picture it would make to have a photograph of the entrance of the Metropolitan Opera House when the women sweep in with their handsome wraps (6 December 1893).

Wearing a cloak with a large fur collar was one way in which to assert personal space to demonstrate status, and the lobby of the Met was a prime place for this fashion performance in which the sweeping gesture further animates the garment, drawing attention to the expensive

fabric and cut, and bestowing prestige on its wearer through the act of conspicuous consumption and ostentatious display of wealth and luxury.

Making a strong impression through fashion was critical to attracting attention and showing off one's capital, but getting dressed for a night at the Met carried with it a certain societal expectation to conform to ideas of what was appropriate dress for the occasion and *Vogue* helped to disseminate these expectations and encourage compliance. In another edition of "What She Wears", a night at a winter season performance after the Met was rebuilt is described.

I saw some very pretty gowns worn at the Metropolitan Opera House on one of the German opera nights recently. While this season of opera was, of course, not so fashionable as the one in the early winter, every box was filled and it was a very brilliant audience that listened to Damrosch's careful rendering of Wagner. The gowns worn by people in the boxes were almost universally light in color, white and pink being the favorite colors, and I saw no violent contrasts of velvet sleeves of bright hues such as I had seen worn before Easter. Miss Lillie Graham wore an exquisite gown of white brocaded satin, with light pink waist almost covered by the deep bertha of pointed lace, which formed a vest in front in quite a novel fashion (7).

The article goes on to detail what certain people are wearing, and comparing the gowns and jewels of various patrons. The text demonstrates, particularly through the description of Miss Lillie Graham, the level of scrutiny that was applied to the sartorial statements of audience members. For those invested in social stature, appearing in a *Vogue* article carried with it a great amount of capital, contributing to wearers' recognizability and boosting their position within the social hierarchy. Knowing that a *Vogue* fashion critic would be attending the opera and writing

about what and whom they observed there was a extremely influential factor to be taken into consideration when dressing for an evening at the Met. The article goes on to describe the dress practices of those sitting in the Orchestra, a considerably cheaper area of seating that did not allow the same visibility or carry the same respect as the box seats. “Down in the orchestra, as a rule, the women wear high-necked gowns and bonnets” (7). The plainer gowns observed in the Orchestra form a direct correlation with the lower price point of the seats available there. Therefore, within the opera house, visual distinctions between classes are being made clear through dress and physical separation within the space and these class-based divisions are being written about and perpetuated by *Vogue*.

Once word had spread among the New York elites that a box at the Metropolitan Opera was a necessity for any person possessing aspirations to social prominence, demand quickly outstripped supply. Naturally, scarcity caused the exclusivity of box ownership to sky rocket, and the lucky few who had snatched them up soon started experiencing a whole new level of social superiority. In a regular *Vogue* column, “As Seen by Him”, on the subject of “Togs at the Opera”, the author complains that, “society has become so large that there must be at least a double parterre circle to satisfy all aspirants”. Programs for any given evening’s performance would include a diagram mapping out who was occupying which box, providing a blueprint for the people watching that made up a critical part of the evening. Often the change in ownership of a box would be documented in local newspapers and *Vogue*, and the influx of money generated by those bidding for boxes was a substantial part of the revenue that sustained production.

The box system created a clear physical division between classes, but another division that affected the opera house was the rivalry between true opera fans and the socialites. In a special feature in *Vogue*, joy is expressed at the abandonment of the Metropolitan Opera by

music critics. The article describes the “rabid lovers of Wagner’s music who hiss at the occupants of the boxes when they imagine that because the works of their favorite composer are being murdered...[,] all the world should keep silent”. There is a reminder that “society maintains the opera and if it wishes to brighten the long, dreary, musical interludes with social converse, it has certainly the right to do it” (5 April 1894). Society maintained the opera because they relied on this space as a semi-controlled environment in which to facilitate their interactions and display and anchor power dynamics.

In a different *Vogue* feature, the author argues that America is just as hierarchical as any of the monarchical countries, despite claiming to be free from nobility. He writes, “that with us class distinctions are as finely drawn, social aspirations as pronounced, and snobbishness as prevalent as in any nation that confers titles and ignores the principle of equality”. He states that “society, if it is to exist at all, must have its marks and limitations[;] ...there are social differences in all communities.” Readers of *Vogue* would be taking in this information and applying it in real time, throughout the breadth of their social interactions. To have class distinctions not only acknowledged, but encouraged by the magazine was a key to the widespread acceptance and practice of the perpetuation of these divisions.

CHAPTER 3

PERFORMING SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH FASHION

From the very beginning, *Vogue* chronicled the fashion spectacle at the Met and validated its place as one of the social centers of New York society. Following the turn of the century, fervor around the opera continued and intensified and the Met maintained its position as a key playground for those at the top of New York's social hierarchy. For the social elites, power was consolidated, in part, through fashion and social, economic and cultural capital was performed by upholding the standards of dress and behaviour that had been established as critical to the consumption of opera. To examine this performance of power through dress, I now turn to the archives at the Metropolitan Opera.

The earliest photograph selected for analysis dates from 1939 and the latest is from 1968. As we shall see below, these photographs encode pertinent information about the class to which opera fans belong or aspire to, and reflect the demographic makeup of Met audiences. Indeed, in analyzing these photographs, three distinct areas of patrons emerge, where similar backgrounds or motivations for opera attendance identify subtle differences that divide the upper-class. In the following I analyse three groups of opera goers and their sartorial choices to reveal the function of fashion as it intersects with class and power relationships in the lives and careers of politicians, socialites and celebrities.

Politicians at the Opera

The first distinct division of patrons that emerged in the photographs was those with political ties. These audience members often displayed a more muted version of acceptable dress, often

choosing simple elegance over extravagant opulence, perhaps in an attempt to appeal to the masses and expand their power base. The earliest image I found where I could identify these themes was a photograph taken on November 26th, 1945 of Mrs Elizabeth “Bess” Truman and her daughter, Miss Margaret Truman, while President Harry Truman was in office (Figure 1). In their social conspicuous roles as the country’s First Lady and First Daughter, respectively, both women are dressed elegantly but notably less adorned than an unidentified woman who occupies the center of the image. Margaret’s gown is visibly made of a luxurious fabric but lacks any pattern, embroidery or decorative accents. She completes the outfit with a stylish coat, where we see some decorative elements in the form of a simple applique design. What is most striking about this image is that the President’s daughter is not wearing a necklace, or any overt jewelry, except for straightforward stud earrings, and her hair is kept in a simple style. Overall, she has chosen to portray an image of restrained elegance, using fashion to intentionally not create an attention-grabbing look.

Mrs. Truman dresses in a similar way, again with a simple unembellished gown topped by a patterned jacket. She also has no visible jewelry other than stud earrings and wears her hair in a similarly simple style. What really brings out the contrast is the unidentified woman who occupies the center of the photo. She is wearing large earrings, draped in an ostentatious white fur and wears an elaborate headpiece in her hair. Her dress choices reflect a more overt portrayal of glamor, offering a marked contrast to both of the Trumans. Not only were the Trumans important supporters of the opera, but President Truman’s Vice President, Alben Barkley, and his wife, Jane Hadley Barkley, are pictured on December 1, 1949 (Figure 2). The attached description states how they “beam in their box at the opera this evening”. In a similar vein to the Trumans, as pictured earlier, the dress choices conform with societal expectations but are not

overwhelming in their luxurious affect. Mrs. Barkley also wears little visible jewelry, even opting to forego earrings, and her hairstyle repeats the pattern of simplicity demonstrated by the Trumans. As she is seated, a true picture of her dress cannot be completely seen, but the parts of it that are available to the eye showcase subdued elegance as there are no embellishments or embroideries beyond a corsage of flowers pinned to it. While the image is conveying messages about the subjects through their fashion choices, the surrounding architecture situates the couple within a place of power in the hall. As previously demonstrated, box occupancy and ownership was regarded as the epitome of social success, and in this image, we see the Barkleys occupying the front row seats in their box, a position that would have allowed them the best view of the stage but also put them in a prime position to be observed and admired. The accompanying description states how they “beam in their box at the opera this evening”, making it known that they are part of the privileged few to own a box, asserting their membership as part of this elite class.

To truly illuminate the intentional simplicity behind the dress choices of President Truman’s close circle during his time in office, we turn to an image of Margaret dating from 1957, five years after her father left office (Figure 3). Interestingly, she now appears to be dressed with far more glamour, and it is possible to find a correlation between this more elaborate stylistic choice and her release from the public scrutiny that was fixed on her during Truman’s presidency. In contrast with her previous lack of jewelry, Margaret now wears a double looped pearl necklace, earrings and a brooch. Her dress, although plain, appears to be made of a luxurious dark velvet, creating an eye-catching display when paired with her white opera gloves. Although the difference from photos taken during the Truman presidency is not

obvious, there is a clear shift in the way the Margaret used fashion following the end of her father's time in office.

As we move later in the 20th century, the intentionality of simplicity in dress choices for politicians and politically powerful people remains remarkably similar, despite tremendous changes in fashion. Now moving into the 1964-65 season of the Met, Lyndon B. Johnson has assumed the presidency. His wife, Mrs. Claudia Johnson, known as Lady Bird, a well educated woman intent on beautifying the country, had strong ties to the opera and was often seen there, mingling with New York's most powerful. She is photographed wearing a simple white coat and single string of pearls with matching earrings (Fig 4). The coat, along with her bouffant hairstyle, are both very much informed by the trends of the 1960s, aligning Mrs. Johnson with fashion and highlighting her possession of cultural and economic capital through the knowledge required to be aware of what was stylish but also through the economic means required to be a part of the cyclical system of fashion. Her coat is unembellished, with just three round buttons running along the front. While this can be seen as in line with the more streamlined stylistic agenda of the 1960s, her outfit creates a stark contrast with that of Mrs. Anthony A. Bliss, pictured next to her. Mrs. Bliss was the wife of the Met's general manager at the time, and in the photograph she wears an elaborately embroidered strapless gown with a double string of pearls that provides a marked contrast to Lady Bird Johnson's attire and emphasizes its relative simplicity. It is evident that there is a trend towards understated expressions of sartorial power for those entering the space of the opera house from the political sphere and that this can be traced through images of politically influential patrons.

Celebrities at the Met

While in the beginning, Met attendance was mostly for wealthy New Yorkers, as the century progressed and Hollywood gained more clout, movie stars and actors started to join the crowd. Although they may not have had the economic capital to participate on the same scale as the exorbitantly wealthy New Yorkers, their celebrity status carried a large amount of influence and they were welcomed as opera patrons. Despite having unparalleled levels of fame and notoriety, Hollywood stars and Broadway actors did not have the decades of social establishment behind them. To counteract this shortcoming, a pattern among the celebrity photos appears to be attempts to conform to expected standards of dress. Whereas, on the red carpet, more bold fashion statements would be made, at the Met, there are many visible attempts to accessorize and mimic the dress choices of high society.

Emerging young stars, actor Debbie Reynolds and her singer husband, Eddie Fisher, attended a glamorous evening at the Met during the 1955-56 opera season (Figure 5). In the photograph, much like long-standing patrons of the opera would, Reynolds is wearing a simple, single string of pearls and a white dress that on the surface mirrors the typical high society dress uniform for a night at the opera; likewise, Eddie is outfitted in a suit that mirrors the styles of the gentlemen around him, with the pair able to assimilate into high society with ease. The couple's dress signals to the public that they are peers and possess the capital to interact with them on equal footing. But more than just mirroring high society, the pair have a distinct glamour that in fact outshines their peers who surround them in the photograph, whose wardrobes look more mundane and more conventional—and most certainly less glamorous. In fact, Debbie Reynolds wears a strapless white dress with a fur trimmed neckline that carries a distinct sexual allure, while Eddie wears an elaborately arranged bow tie, possibly a clip-on, that stands out, as well a

large tapered white pocket square matching her white dress. Not only does the pair stage their sartorial literacy and glamor at the Met Opera, but they do so with a sartorial style that inevitably reminds the public of their recent nuptials just a few months earlier. Young and romantically conjoined at the Met, with Fisher leaning toward his wife and Debbie gazing adoringly at her husband—they turn away from other opera goers toward each other: their date at the Met was a performance of their capital as a newly wedded glamour couple—whose relationship and romance—so ostentatiously performed for the camera—would scandalously break apart by 1959, when Fisher began an affair with his wife’s best friend, actress Elizabeth Taylor. The public conjoining at the Met, like a second wedding performance, marked the birth of what was then touted “America’s favorite couple”—making their divorce just a few years all the more shattering and scandalous. Just months after his divorce in 1959, Eddie Fisher would display his new marriage with Liz Taylor, a lifelong opera lover, in the Louis Sherry Bar at the Metropolitan Opera House—Liz Taylor in a sleeveless form-fitted silvery white dress with jeweled bodice giving the sexual allure an added turn.

Indian-born actress Merle Oberon, known for starring in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1933), was another regular at the Met during the 1960s, pictured in a strikingly simply white gown a style also mirrored by the woman next to her – a member of the Metropolitan Opera Guild (Figure 7). Given Oberon’s mixed-race ancestry, and her personal encounters with racism in white America and Britain, and given also her reputation for turbulent romances, her choice of a garment becomes charged with additional meaning, namely, her longtime efforts to shed and hide her past, including her ancestry. Often marketed as exotic, and known to her public also for her role in *Wuthering Heights* (1939), where she played the passionate wind-swept heroine Cathy side by side a tortured Heathcliffe played by Laurence Olivier, Oberon used the opera to push

against racial stereotyping and affirm her influential position in society. Dressed in white at the opera, she eschewed the strong colours and the colourful life associated with her to pass in a world of glamour and elegance. Interestingly, Oberon chose to accessorize with a bold collar and matching cuffs, bringing a trendier aspect to her stylistic choice. By choosing this mix of the expected and the unexpected, Oberon was able to challenge expectations and assert her position as a fashion icon with her own unique style—a style nonetheless marked by a desire to keep her rebellion in check, even as she put her trademark boldness on display with her accessories. In this case, the opera allows the actress to pass in white society as she performs herself as regal and classy, blending in with the other patrons as she hides her background.

As these examples illustrate, celebrities used fashion to assimilate into elite society, using their cultural capital to gain social capital through opera attendance and by mingling with the upper-class. The dress strategies of these stars purposefully adopted all the markers of appropriate opera style, including fur stoles, pearl necklaces, and white opera gloves. By visually signalling to those around them that they should be regarded as part of this elite circle, celebrities at the Met became integral parts of high society. For these movie stars, fashion provided the power to transcend their class and blend into a new one, but also gave them an opportunity to express their cultural and social power among the elite of New York city.

Philanthropists at the Met

While the politically connected use opera attendance and their related fashion choices to expand their power base and gain influence, and while the actors stage their carefully crafted public personae, the philanthropists of New York society see the Met as a space to gain cultural and social capital through donations of time and money. As the images of prominent New York

philanthropists suggest, fashion played a key role in how they defined themselves as major contributors to the experience and perpetuation of the Met. Often, the most notable socialites self-identified as philanthropists, so it becomes evident that these two overlapping groups utilize fashion in similar ways. An emphasis is placed on display of wealth and creating a striking look that would allow the person to stand out amongst a crowd of society onlookers. Typical characteristics include excessive accessorizing, the use of color or patterns, or voluminous garments, used to take up physical space to command visual attention.

One of the most iconic opera supporters and socialites of the early 20th century was Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt III, or Grace Vanderbilt. While marrying into the prestigious New York Vanderbilt family gave her a massive amount of social and economic capital, she ensured that she could maintain and develop her position at the pinnacle of society by regular opera attendance to keep up social visibility. As she neared the end of her life during the late 1940s and 1950s, when she was in her late seventies and eighties, she still made a point of attending the Met on a frequent basis, as pictured in this image, that is accompanied by the following caption (Fig 8). “In New York last night...from a wheel chair, Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt threatened to rap a newspaper photographer with her cane at the opening of the 65th season at the Metropolitan Opera House. Carleton Smith, member of the Vanderbilt party, propelled the chair” (Nov 22 1949). In the photograph, Mrs. Vanderbilt is seen wrapped in a luxurious fur with jewels spilling down the front and sleeves of her velvet coat, showcasing her wealth and good taste. For Vanderbilt, going to the opera becomes a way of defying disability, challenging stereotypes of both age and ablism. Indeed, her refusal to miss the opportunity to express her power through sartorial impact is seen in her chastising of a photographer, who intrudes into her space in an attempt to take her picture; using her cane, she keeps the photographer at a distance.

n this self-representation at the opera, she becomes an almost iconic representative of the older opera-going class, a group that relied on word of mouth and society columns to gain information about opera patrons and their activities. For her, the photographer can be seen as an invasion of the semi-public space of the opera house but also a sign of what is to come.

As press photographers were increasingly welcomed into these spaces, *Vogue* started including these images in features about the Met. A particularly striking spread is from the February 1961 edition. At this point, photographers are a regular occurrence at the Met, so now patrons are not only dressing for one another but dressing for the cameras, intensifying the pressure and increasing the expectations. One image features three elegant society ladies, each dressed in their finest apparel for opening night of one of the winter season productions (Fig 9). Each woman is dressed in a distinctive style, as being able to make a lasting social impression relied partially on the ability to stand out. This photograph features Mrs. William McCormick Blair, wife of the United States Ambassador to Denmark, Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, wife of the noted art collector and famed for her lavish collection of jewelry and accessories, and Princess Irene Galitzine, a fashion designer. All three of these women were named to the International Best Dressed list on many occasions and epitomized the ideal of a New York socialite.

Another image from this spread features Rudolph Bing, general manager of the Met and Mrs. Paul Felix Warburg (Fig 10). Both are dressed sharply, but this image particularly illustrates what a sophisticated social interaction should look like at the Met. Two wealthy people who are drawn together through mutual acknowledgement of each other's good taste and appropriate behaviour.

One of the most iconic fixtures of the Metropolitan Opera social scene was Mrs. George Washington Kavanaugh, a descendant of George Washington who married into extreme wealth,

giving her access to the economic capital necessary to enable the development of her social and cultural capital. Photographs of her are pervasive throughout the Metropolitan Opera archive, and during the first half of the 20th century, she was synonymous with excess and luxury among the New York elite. When she passed away on January 24th, 1954, her obituary was titled “Fabulous First-Nighter of Met” and in it she is described as being referred to as “Tiffany’s Front Window” on account of the dazzling diamonds she consistently wore to opening night. Mrs. Kavanaugh was “famous among the occupants of the Metropolitan Opera House’s Diamond Horseshoe”.

An interesting way in which Mrs. Kavanaugh wielded her power and used fashion to validate her influence was through constantly ‘losing’ valuable jewelry while at the opera. Numerous newspapers document these missing jewels and their value, granting Mrs. Kavanaugh an unparalleled level of media exposure and ensuring there was no doubt as to her wealth and status. On November 29th, 1939, the Washington Post reported that she lost her purse which contained a spare necklace, while wearing jewelry valued at more than \$200,000 dollars to a Met opening night. The article describes how she hired a detective to attend alongside her to safeguard the jewels, something that was intentionally done to attract attention.

The photographs of Mrs. Kavanaugh from the Met archive all were accompanied by a caption, unlike many of the other images. The earliest dates from March 12, 1940, at a benefit opera performance put on by the Milk Fund.

“New York...Socialite Mrs. George Washington Kavanaugh, of New York, left, and the Duchess of Talleyrand are pictured at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York City, where they saw “Rigoletto” presented by the Free Milk Fund for Babies, which was founded 14 years ago by Mrs. William Randolph Hearst, wife of the publisher.

Thousands of needy children who receive free milk daily through the care of the fund benefitted by “Baby’s Night at the Opera”

In this description which was widely circulated along with the image Mrs. Kavanaugh asserts her dominance as a social fixture and a prominent New York philanthropist, aligning herself with Mrs Hearst. In the accompanying image, Mrs. Kavanaugh is seen bedecked in an exquisitely embroidered gown, wrapped in a chinchilla fur stole that nearly reaches the ground (Fig 11). Chinchilla was one of the most sought after and expensive furs at the time, and through her possession of it, she is showcasing her wealth. Her accessories include at least three visible bracelets, a pendant necklace and earrings, all appearing to be made of diamonds and other rare gems. She has removed her opera gloves so as to better display her jewelry, especially the three rings visible on her hands. She provides a marked contrast to the Duchess of Talleyrand, standing directly beside her, dressed in a more subdued gown with notably less jewelry.

In a later image, from 1942, Mrs. Kavanaugh’s commitment to conspicuous consumption is made evident (Fig 12). The accompanying description details how many patrons left their diamonds “in the strong box out of deference to the war situation” but that Mrs. Leonora Warner and her mother, Mrs. Kavanaugh both “felt that ‘the show must go on’ and they attended the Metropolitan opening with as much ‘ice’ as ever”. It is noted that Mrs. Kavanaugh is wearing six diamond bracelets, the same stunning diamond and emerald pendant necklace as in the previous image and a diamond tiara. Her dress feature an elaborate pattern with sequin embroidery, her purse is made of exotic feathers and she tops the ensemble with a white fur cape accessorized by a flower brooch. Her daughter also wears a voluminous fur, asserting her status by taking up physical space, but is clearly under-accessorized in deference to her mother. Both women make a striking contrast to the more understated and muted dress worn by people in the background of the

photo. The men are primarily in military dress and the three women visible are all wearing kneelength dresses and more sombre colors, in keeping with the wartime aesthetic. It is clear that Mrs. Kavanaugh used the sombre mood as an opportunity to flaunt her dominance by visually standing out against the crowd.

After the end of the war, there is another image of Mrs. Kavanaugh from November 21, 1949, which again depicts her and her daughter at the opening of the 65th season at the Met (Fig 13). This image is particularly striking because it shows an unidentified woman reaching out to touch Mrs. Kavanaugh's notorious diamond and emerald pendant necklace, seen also in the previous two images, illustrating how even fellow members of high society were captivated by her glamour. Both women are dressed in white gowns and fur coats, and Mrs. Kavanaugh appears to be wearing a tiara and multiple rings. The accompanying caption states that the "multi-million dollar display of jewels and finery vied with the colorful stage". By consistently dressing in a striking way that consistently captured the attention of society and the press, Mrs. Kavanaugh used fashion to secure and sustain her position at the pinnacle of the New York social hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

The world of fashion was still content to reassemble every winter in the shabby
red and gold boxes of the sociable old Academy.

-Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*

The Metropolitan Opera house provides a valuable case study through which to analyze the validity of American social mobility. Created with the intention of providing a place for the wealthy upper class to interact within the confines of a semi-public space, the Met and its audience members reflect the social hierarchies of the outside world. Through shifting our gaze from the stage to the people surrounding it, fashion's role in the perpetuation of these hierarchies has been investigated to facilitate an understanding of why these power dynamics remain in place after over 100 years of Met history. Starting from its beginning in 1883, the Metropolitan Opera hailed consumers from the upper class through the promise of premium cultural entertainment that would allow themselves to be aligned with the idea, if not reality, of European aristocracy.

As I have documented, in order to fulfill the vision of a high-class cultural outing, appropriate rules for behavior and standards of dress needed to be met. Following seven successful seasons of opera at the Met, the launch of *Vogue* magazine further facilitated a cultural entwining of opera and fashion, as the magazine spread the word about society events, create standards of style and establish trends. Through its articles, *Vogue* perpetuated and encouraged the standards of fashion that created cohesion among the upper-class and fostered a greater sense of class identity and exclusivity. Furthermore, these ideas can be seen playing out

through the photographs drawn from the Met archive. As there were different types of power playing out on the New York social scene, patrons embodied and developed styles of dress that conformed to the societal standard while still fulfilling a secondary stylistic goal, allowing opera goers to challenge boundaries while maintaining their privilege and status.

Through conducting this study, I have set a precedent for a future investigations into what audience members are influenced by when getting dressed for the opera; I invite further considerations for how these stylistic choices conform to unwritten rules that must be followed to be regarded as part of the elite. Indeed, as fashion is a method through which capital can be showcased, sartorial display at the opera plays an active role in perpetuating the class hierarchies that have affected opera for the past century and continue to affect it today. Nonetheless, as we have seen, such sartorial display can also function simultaneously to assimilate into the racial class narratives of society and to challenge some of the limitations of age, gender, ability. Consequently, by acknowledging the powerful role that fashion plays in sustaining these power structures, we also need to recognize possibilities to subvert that power and use fashion to create more inclusive spaces. It is my hope that future research will look closely into how fashion can be used to engage new audiences and diversify the opera audience. Opera is an art form that has a vast appeal, enthralling audiences with dramatic tales, passionate vocal leaps and visually dazzling costumes and scenery. Because of this depth of intensity and all-encompassing artistic vision, opera can engage many different consumers and, I hope, that by challenging the power structures that limit attendance, this appeal will last for generations to come.

APPENDIX A - IMAGES



Figure 1. Photograph of Mrs. Harry S. Truman (R) and Miss Margaret Truman (L), November 26th, 1945. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives.



Figure 2. Photograph of Mr. Alban Barkley, Vice President of the United States, and his wife, December 1, 1949. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives.



Figure 3: Photograph of Margaret Truman (L), 1957. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archive.



Figure 4 (L): Photograph of Mrs. Claudia “Lady Bird” Johnson (R) and Mrs. Anthony A. Bliss (L), 1964-65 season. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives



Figure 5 (R): Photograph of Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt III, November 22, 1949. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives.



Figure 6: Photograph of Mrs. William McCormick Blair (L), Mrs. Charles Wrightsman (C), and Princess Irene Galitzine (R), February 1961. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives

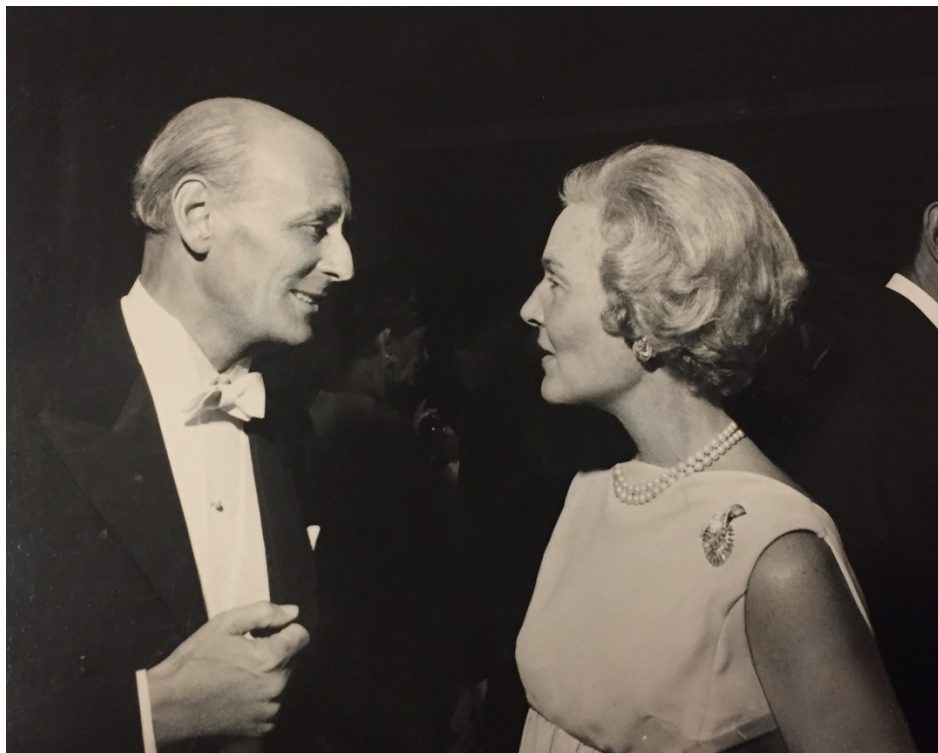


Figure 7: Photograph of Rudolf Bing and Mrs. Paul Felix Warburg, February 1961. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera archives.



Figure 8: Photograph of Debbie Reynolds and Eddie Fisher, 1955-56 season. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera archives.



Figure 9: Photograph of Merle Oberon (R) and an unidentified Guild member, 1960s. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives.



Figure 10: Photograph of Mrs. George Washington Kavanaugh (L) and the Duchess of Talleyrand (R), March 12, 1940. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera archives.

Figure 11: Photograph of Mrs. George Washington Kavanaugh (R) and Mrs. Leonora Warner (L), 1942. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera archives.



Figure 12: Photograph of Mrs. George Washington Kavanaugh (C) and Mrs. Leonora Warner (R), November 21, 1949. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera archives.

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