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An Expensive Imitation: How the Vanderbilt Family Became the House of Vanderbilt

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The period between the Civil War and the First World War was a time of unimaginable wealth and growth in the United States. No longer was the American economy solely based around the tradition of agriculture as a source of income, but rather industry had taken over. The Northeast became a powerhouse for construction and commercial industry making a handful of families wealthier than ever before. One family in particular was known for their transformation from poor Staten Island farmers to Manhattan millionaires: the Vanderbilts. The Vanderbilt family was notorious for their opulent taste in material items. From imposing mansions to grand balls and parties to jewelry fit for royalty, the family's displays of wealth exemplified a newfound trend in American society. The Vanderbilts were not just fascinated by the idea of being rich but also by the idea of being aristocrats. The family's actions regarding material purchases and social behavior show their attempt to imitate European aristocracy. Their American palaces were modeled after the castles of France, England and Italy; their parties were fashioned after the balls of dukes and duchesses; and their social behavior yearned to be that of European royalty. The efforts of the Vanderbilts to be pseudo-European exemplified the family's reputation for being ostentatious and for being an expensive imitation of true nobility.

American aristocracy during the Gilded Age is not an unstudied topic. Many authors have researched the behavior of society during the era and the reasons behind these behaviors. In *Making the American Aristocracy: Women, Cultural Capital, and High Society in New York City, 1870-1900*, historical researcher Emily Katherine Bibby analyzes the aristocratic women of the Gilded Age from a social approach. She discusses how the "elite" women of the era aimed to shut out the women of *nouveau riche* families. This established circle of families was comprised

of descendants of the original Dutch inhabitants of the Island of Manhattan.¹ These families were the oldest in New York City history and did not want to associate with the “new people.”² The families who acquired their wealth during the Gilded Age were seen as social climbers, although these views changed later in the twentieth century. Bibby states that over time the new money families slowly ascended into the elite circles by way of “etiquette manuals” and other mainstream periodicals.³ The sharing and popularization of the social practices of the upper class made upward mobility possible in the United States, something that was not as common in Europe. The new money wives’ desire to be elites eventually paid off when they learned the social graces that gave them the supposed “cultural capital” that Bibby argues “defined a society woman.”⁴ The *nouveau riche* women had become a part of a certain kind of aristocracy: an aristocracy that Bibby highlights was dissimilar to its European counterpart.

No family exemplified the new money class during the Gilded Age like the Vanderbilt family. The origins of this notorious American family are chronicled in *The First Tycoon* by historical biographer T.J. Stiles. This book tells the story of Cornelius “Commodore” Vanderbilt (1794-1877), the patriarch of the Vanderbilt family, through a biographical standpoint that looks at the professional and social aspects of his life. Stiles’ argument is formed by stories and quotes showing that the Commodore was an innovative businessman who encountered many problems in his private life. Concerning the “Commodore’s” professional life, Stiles claims that Vanderbilt was an innovator in the field of business. “Steamboats and railroads, fare wars, market division agreements and corporations: all were virtually unknown in America when he mastered them,”

¹ Emily Bibby, “Making the American Aristocracy: Women, Cultural Capital, and High Society in New York City, 1870-1900.” (M.A. Thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, 2009), 8.

² Bibby, “Making the American Aristocracy,” 32.

³ Bibby, “Making the American Aristocracy,” 15.

⁴ Bibby, “Making the American Aristocracy,” 10.

states Stiles.⁵ He argues that Vanderbilt was the best businessman of his time, and that his revolutionary tactics were the basis of his success. Along with the professional discussion of the patriarch, Stiles delves into Cornelius's private life. As discussed earlier, the Vanderbilt family was of new money and many people in New York's upper class saw the family as crude, especially Cornelius.⁶ But, by the end of Cornelius' life he had become friends with a few of his elite peers. Stiles argues that this social ascent was directly related to Cornelius' extreme wealth and economic power.⁷ The respect gained by the family patriarch was based solely on these two factors and jumpstarted efforts to shed the *nouveau riche* image of the Vanderbilt family.

The ability to move up in society became easier in the Gilded Age. Not only were wealthy families like the Vanderbilt's making concerted efforts to see and be seen, but many everyday people bought into the industry of social training. As stated earlier, many women used etiquette manuals to learn how to be a proper lady; likewise their male counterparts were doing the same. In *Character is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in the Gilded Age*, Judy Hilkey, professor of history at the City College of New York, analyzes the effects that success manuals had on men of the Gilded Age. These manuals provided a guide for how to become wealthy and "successful" during the era by promoting the ideas of social mobility. These books were sold by door-to-door salesmen and became a prominent form of literature during the period subsequently affecting many male's views of what was considered successful.⁸ Hilkey argues that these manuals were key in defining success during the Gilded Age and eventually what

⁵ T.J. Stiles, *The First Tycoon* (New York: Random House, 2010), 170.

⁶ Stiles, *The First Tycoon*, 190.

⁷ Stiles, *The First Tycoon*, 322.

⁸ Judy Hilkey, *Character Is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 3.

people thought of as successful in general in America.⁹ The existence of these manuals shows that the focus on upward social mobility existed and that it helped to shape how the new rich and other lower class peoples aimed to change themselves socially.

The wealthy of the era did not just spend their money on items like success manuals but also on grand projects. By observing these lavish spending habits and preferences for certain material items, researchers can understand certain social practices of the time. In “The Rich Man’s City: Hotels and Mansions of the Gilded Age,” Molly Berger discusses the structures that were built by the wealthy families of New York City during the era. Published in the *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, this article draws the connections between the lavish private homes of families like the Vanderbilts and the Astors and the hotels that the families built and managed. From the Waldorf Astoria Hotel to the St. Regis Hotel, the most famous hotels in New York City were built and controlled by the elites of New York.¹⁰ They modeled these hotels and the services of the establishments after their own homes and help. Berger goes on to describe the homes of the Astors and the Vanderbilts in striking detail. The tension between the *nouveau riche* Vanderbilt family and the old money Astors is apparent in Berger’s use of stories of rivaling events and building projects.¹¹ She argues that what caused these displays of wealth, both privately in their homes and publicly in their hotels, was the development of New York as a financial center and as the wealthiest city in the country. The structures of the Gilded Age in Manhattan were all the support that Berger’s argument needed.

⁹ Hilkey, *Character Is Capital*, 9.

¹⁰ Molly W. Berger, “The Rich Man’s City: Hotels and Mansions of Gilded Age New York,” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 25, *The American Hotel* (2005): 49.

¹¹ Berger, “The Rich Man’s City,” 58.

Analyzing the general economic state of the Gilded Age is also key to understanding the era. Alan Trachtenberg, professor of American Studies at Yale, discusses the topic of the economy's effects on the social structure of America during the Gilded Age in *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. Trachtenberg argues that the expansion and development of American industry created the elite social class.¹² He discusses that social mobility of the formerly poor was made possible by the constant development of new lucrative business ventures. The themes of westward expansion, the second industrial revolution, and the development of capital compose the economic part of the book that proves Trachtenberg's argument that the fiscal practices of the time helped to form the social practices of every class of society of the era.

The scholars and writers who have addressed the period of the Gilded Age have discussed and researched the era from many different avenues. Each approach shows different aspects of what life was like and why people functioned as they did. The general discussion of societal norms provides a background for the time period, while the specific stories about certain people, buildings, and literary works provide a window into the general mindset of society. From the general claims made by these different authors I could see that the existing literature never claimed that the Vanderbilts were blatantly imitating European aristocracy. From this I developed an original claim that the Vanderbilts material displays and social conduct show that the family was modeling themselves after the aristocracy of Europe.

To understand the Vanderbilts specifically, it is logical to provide a background of how Gilded Age society functioned. The catalyst for the start of this new era ties back to its economic roots of industrialization. According to H. Wayne Morgan, a historian of the Gilded Age, the

¹² Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 6.

period from the late 1860s until 1919 saw an explosion in production and the building of infrastructure in the United States. The railroad and boating industries were the most profitable forms of transportation, becoming a source of monumental fortune for a select few. Steam engine technology had become popular in the 1830s spawning huge amounts of investment in steam-powered ferries in the Northeast for commercial and public use. Along with the transportation developments came oil discovery in California, fur trades in the Midwest and Canada, and steel manufacturing in the North. These industries were dominated by a small group of men who monopolized the different corporations. From Carnegie to Rockefeller, people identified certain industries with a certain prominent surname. These men found unspoiled sources of fortune that in combination with suspect business practices became unending springs of income. The modern corporation had officially taken over the economy and had spawned a class of never-before-seen wealth.¹³

The economic changes of the country also gave rise to societal changes. The typical American city was transforming from a large village to a booming metropolis. New York City expanded northward from the southern tip of Manhattan Island to the marshy north end of the island, which was dredged and developed into what is now Central Park and the prominent neighborhoods of Uptown. Detailed in Joel Shrock's *Gilded Age*, the city plan of America transitioned, creating zoned areas for commercial, industrial, and residential areas.¹⁴ The prices of land in cities skyrocketed along with the wealth of the general population. The urbanization of cities was directly connected to the mass movement of people looking to gain personal wealth. Those who did "find" money spent it on luxuries such as their residences. Construction became an obsession of the general population. The wealthiest built modern-day castles that took up

¹³ H. Wayne Morgan, *The Gilded Age* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1970), 14.

¹⁴ Joel Shrock, *The Gilded Age* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004), 61.

blocks of city streets with electricity. The moderately wealthy built townhouses in their city's most expensive neighborhoods. Even middle class homeowners installed gas heating and hot water heaters in their more simple abodes.¹⁵ The idea of luxury became the focus of the American public during the Gilded Age, a change that can be seen specifically in one certain family.

The study of one family provides a concentrated focus on an example of an American imitation of European society. For this reason I decided to specifically examine the Vanderbilt family. The Vanderbilt family did not initially model themselves after the aristocracy of Europe; they originally came from humble beginnings. Cornelius Vanderbilt, called "the Commodore" by friends, was the great-great grandson of a Dutch immigrant who began his career by ferrying people from Staten Island to Manhattan.¹⁶ Over many years Cornelius learned how to run a successful and efficient boating business. His investments in commercial ocean liners during the California Gold Rush along with his dominance in the steam power ferries in the Northeast further grew his fortune. Eventually the Commodore saw an opportunity in railroad industry. As stated earlier, railroad infrastructure had become a popular investment during the mid-nineteenth century. Over a few years Vanderbilt purchased the majority of the northern United States' railways and created one of the largest corporations in American history ever by combining the New York Central and Hudson River lines. Vanderbilt had established himself as the railway magnate of the United States and the wealthiest man in the world at the time of his death in 1877. Following Cornelius' death William Henry Vanderbilt, his eldest son, was left ninety-five

¹⁵ Shrock, *The Gilded Age*, 62, 68.

¹⁶ Stiles, *The First Tycoon*, 178.

percent of the family's money. William Henry and the other family members spent lavishly and transformed the Vanderbilt name to be synonymous with grandiosity.¹⁷

The generations after the Commodore exemplify the efforts to imitate European aristocracy. William H. Vanderbilt took over his father's railroad interests and doubled his fortune in nine short years.¹⁸ William Henry had multiplied his father's wealth in a fraction of the time that the original fortune was amassed and he planned to enjoy the new money. William built a grand mansion on Fifth Avenue in New York City that was unlike any home ever built in Manhattan.¹⁹ He threw parties for New York society in the home, one of which was chronicled in a British publication *Leisure Hour*. The article describes how Vanderbilt invited one thousand guests to his home for an extravagant ball that included endless amounts of fine food, a live band, palm trees lining the halls, and roses covering the tables.²⁰ Vanderbilt was quoted describing his party as one that "should lay over the levees of ancient and modern kings and prove a snorter," a snorter meaning a remarkable example of something.²¹ This attempt to match the opulence of a royal ball by William Henry is one recorded example of a Vanderbilt blatantly imitating European society.

After William Henry's death in 1885, he left the majority of his fortune to two of his sons. Cornelius Vanderbilt II became the head of the New York Central railway and its subsidiary lines while his brother, William Kissam Vanderbilt, worked at a lower status in the company. Both sons were given upwards of fifty million dollars at the time of their father's death. The other siblings were given amounts in the lower millions, a sum that was still large for

¹⁷ Stiles, *The First Tycoon*, 192, 193, 402.

¹⁸ Louis Auchincloss, *The Vanderbilt Era* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1989), 28.

¹⁹ Auchincloss, *The Vanderbilt Era*, 31.

²⁰ James Macauley, "American Life From Two Points of View," *Leisure Hour*, February, 1884.

²¹ Macauley, "American Life From Two Points of View."

the time. With their new fortunes many of William Henry's children continued to spend their money on lavish material items. The most common thing that the scions spent their inheritances on were large, extravagant homes.²²

Three of William Henry's children commissioned some of the most impressive building projects of the era, all of which referenced the manors of old European aristocracy. William Kissam Vanderbilt, William Henry's second oldest son, and his wife Alva were the first of the second generation to build a grand residence.²³ Alva wanted their home to be built in the French Chateau style, a style not yet popular in the United States. Renowned architect Richard Morris Hunt, who had designed many of the Vanderbilt family mansions in the United States, was chosen for the project.²⁴ He worked with Alva to design what was considered one of the most opulent homes in Manhattan: a four story structure with large amounts of stone work located on the corner of Fifty Second Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan (see figure 1).²⁵ The home stood as a beacon of the Renaissance Revival architecture during its time of use.²⁶

Just after William Kissam had finished his Manhattan home, his older brother Cornelius decided that he wanted to build a home to replace his vacation cottage in Newport, Rhode Island that had burned to the ground.²⁷ Completed in 1893, "The Breakers" was the most astonishing Vanderbilt home yet. Built in the Italian Renaissance style the 65,000 square foot home was one of the largest in the United States (see figure 2).²⁸ Referred to by the press as a "palace," the

²² Auchincloss, *The Vanderbilt Era*, 37, 38.

²³ Auchincloss, *The Vanderbilt Era*, 47.

²⁴ John M. Bryan, *Biltmore Estate: The Most Distinguished Private Place* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications 1994), 17.

²⁵ Bryan, *Biltmore Estate*, 17.

²⁶ The William K. Vanderbilt Mansion was demolished in 1926 after it was sold by the family.

²⁷ Bryan, *Biltmore Estate*, 19.

²⁸ "The Breakers at Newport: Description of the Magnificent Villa Where the Wedding Took Place," *New York Times*, August 26, 1896, 5.

home was truly fit for royalty.²⁹ A description of the house from an 1896 issue of the *New York Times* stated that the home was adorned with gilded furniture covered in red velvet.³⁰ Marble was used in almost every part of the house along with antique wood paneling. The *Times* also detailed pieces of the home like the imported Parisian fresco that was installed in the home and the mantelpiece that was unearthed in the ruins of Pompeii for which Cornelius' wife Alice paid \$75,000 (see figure 3).³¹ The large price tags of the European objects that were purchased by Cornelius and his wife show their desire to have these specifically European pieces in their home as opposed to items of American or other origin. The Breakers and its collection of furniture and art was meant to stun people with its size and grandeur, while the efforts to import pieces from Europe for the home display the Vanderbilt's effort to make their lives more "European."

At the same time that The Breakers was being constructed in Newport, Cornelius and William Kissam's little brother George was planning an unprecedented work of architecture that would put all of his siblings' homes to shame. The Biltmore House was completed in 1895 in Asheville, North Carolina, breaking the record for the largest privately owned home in the world (see figure 4). At nearly 180,000 square feet, the home was comprised of 250 rooms set on a 125,000 acre estate.³² Biltmore was truly an American version of a European manor. The home was built in the French Chateausque style and drew inspiration from the Chateau de Blois, the Chateau de Chambord, and the Palais du Jacques Coeur in France (see figures 5 and 6).³³ The home was distinctly European—not just architecturally but also decoratively. The interior of the house was filled with objects from all over Europe. Hundreds of crates of furniture, paintings,

²⁹ "The New Vanderbilt Palace," *New-York Tribune*, June 16, 1895, 28.

³⁰ "The Breakers at Newport," 5.

³¹ "The Breakers at Newport," 5.

³² "Mr. Vanderbilt's Estate, Biltmore," *Scientific American*, February 1, 1896, 75.

³³ Bryan, *Biltmore Estate*, 46.

tapestries, silverware, rugs, curtains, lamps, and many other decorative items were shipped from Europe to New York and then to North Carolina.³⁴ The library was filled with thousands of rare books from across the world along with an original European fresco that was installed and mounted to the ceiling.³⁵ Fredrick Law Olmstead, who had just completed the design for Central Park in New York, designed the grounds of the estate. According to historian John M. Bryan, Olmstead designed the property to have a combination of natural countryside and formal French gardens, extending the European influence to every last part of the estate.³⁶ The general public's opinion of Biltmore was that George had built the estate to be a symbol of the European feudal system. His purchases of every tract of land adjoining the property and the construction of the Biltmore Village to house the Biltmore staff resembled the actions of a medieval European Lord assembling his manor. *The Washington Times* mocked George's actions by saying that George had "utterly failed in his attempt to transplant the landlord system from Europe to America," after he invested a majority of his wealth into the property.³⁷ George's attempts to maintain his European style estate led to his economic demise when he died in 1914 nearly bankrupt.³⁸

The second generation of the Vanderbilt family had proven their desire to model their material spending after European aristocrats, but the next generation extended this aspiration to their social practices. Alva Vanderbilt, mentioned earlier, married into the Vanderbilt family via William Kissam. She was born in Mobile, Alabama but moved to Manhattan when she was a child. Eventually her parents left New York for Europe after being shunned for their southern

³⁴ Bryan, *Biltmore Estate*, 135.

³⁵ Bryan, *Biltmore Estate*, 138.

³⁶ Bryan, *Biltmore Estate*, 141.

³⁷ J. H. Caffee, "Vanderbilt's Colossal Scheme," *The Washington Times*, July 12, 1908, 4.

³⁸ Due to the private nature of certain members of the family, there is a lack of quotes in the press from Vanderbilt family members comparing themselves to European aristocracy, a fact that is contradictory to their choices in construction and entertaining.

roots during the Civil War.³⁹ Alva's parents, Mister and Mrs. Murray Smith, rented an apartment on the Champs Elysees in Paris and mingled with the court of Napoleon III and Empress Eugenie. Alva was exposed to elite Parisian society during her formative teenage years and she became enamored. Alva was schooled by French governesses and traveled freely to the chateaus of the Loire Valley, those that inspired the aforementioned William Kissam Mansion. Her fascination with the imperial court of the Second Empire wet her appetite for the lifestyle of the European elite. Alva epitomized what it meant to be a Francophile and from this point on it would be her mission to model her life, and her family member's lives, after the lifestyles of French and other European aristocrats.⁴⁰

Years later Alva and William Kissam began having children. One of the couple's offspring lived a life that exemplified the European aristocratic lifestyle that Alva and William desired. Consuelo Vanderbilt was everything her mother had hoped for. The beautiful, intelligent, and compliant Consuelo was an ideal candidate for an arranged marriage and so Alva planned to find her daughter the best possible husband.⁴¹ Alva's fondness for French society, stemming from her time spent in Paris, led her to search for a European suitor for Consuelo.⁴² After months of screening possible suitors for her daughter, Alva Vanderbilt met Charles Spencer-Churchill, the Ninth Duke of Marlborough, during a trip to England and decided that he would marry her daughter.⁴³ Alva was later quoted saying: "I forced my daughter to marry the Duke. I have always had absolute power over my children... When I issued an order, nobody

³⁹ Amanda McKenzie Stuart, *Consuelo and Alva Vanderbilt* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 30.

⁴⁰ Stuart, *Consuelo and Alva Vanderbilt*, 31, 33.

⁴¹ Clarice Stasz, *The Vanderbilt Women: Dynasty of Wealth, Glamour, and Tragedy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 117.

⁴² Stasz, *The Vanderbilt Women*, 117.

⁴³ Stuart, *Consuelo and Alva Vanderbilt*, 116.

discussed it. I therefore did not beg, but ordered her to marry the Duke.”⁴⁴ Consuelo described her marriage to the Duke as loveless and sad.⁴⁵ The couple divorced in 1926 after two children and many years of separation, but Consuelo had rooted herself in British society during her time as Duchess of Marlborough. Consuelo kept ties with British aristocracy even after her divorce and was eventually buried near Blenheim Palace (where she had lived during her days as Duchess) alongside her youngest son. Consuelo’s marriage became an icon of loveless, arranged matrimonial unions meant for social gain and cemented part of the Vanderbilt family as legitimate European aristocracy.⁴⁶

The family’s admiration for European society was expressed in other ways besides the practice of marriage. Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt, a son of Cornelius II, was an avid equestrian who was interested in the English tradition of coaching. Alfred spent much time riding horses in England and was observed by many British citizens as he rode down the prestigious Brighton Road from London to Brighton, England.⁴⁷ Alfred loved the British tradition of riding and had many horses shipped to Britain via steamship for coaching expeditions.⁴⁸ An article in the October 1910 issue of *Pall Mall Magazine* describes his love for the sport and for the area of England that he always chose to ride in.⁴⁹ Alfred’s undying love for England and its customs eventually ended his life when he died during the sinking of the RMS Lusitania sailing from New York to Liverpool, England for business.

⁴⁴ Cornelius Vanderbilt Jr., *The Queen of the Golden Age* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1956), 45.

⁴⁵ Consuelo Vanderbilt Balsan, *The Glitter and the Gold* (New York: Harper, 1952), 187.

⁴⁶ Stuart, *Consuelo and Alva Vanderbilt*, 128, 502.

⁴⁷ P H Oakley Williams, “Mr. A. G. Vanderbilt and the Brighton Road,” *The Pall Mall Magazine*, October, 1910.

⁴⁸ Williams, “Mr. A. G. Vanderbilt.”

⁴⁹ Williams, “Mr. A. G. Vanderbilt.”

Like Alfred and Consuelo before her, Grace Vanderbilt was also fascinated with European society. Grace was not blood-related to the Vanderbilts but was married to Cornelius “Neily” Vanderbilt III. The two had eloped against the wishes of Neily’s father, Cornelius II, and started a very long marriage that was marked by social ascension.⁵⁰ Neily and Grace were close friends with many European royal families, most notably spending time in the courts of Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, King Albert I of Belgium, and the successors of Queen Victoria of England.⁵¹ According to Grace’s biography written by her son, Cornelius IV, the couple used Neily’s yacht, *The North Star*, to travel all around Europe. In the biography, Grace’s son describes one voyage in which the couple sailed to the Bay of Naples to visit the Pope along with King Edward VII of England and Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany.⁵² In a personal letter from Grace to her sister she tells a story of being invited onto the King of England’s yacht. Grace writes:

Punctually we arrived on board and were met by Seymour and Hedworth. The King was still breakfasting but in a few minutes he appeared and really, Sister, I cannot describe to you the charming impression he created upon us all. So majestic, so wise, so strong and yet so gentle, so considerate.⁵³

This quote from her personal correspondences is not unlike many others of Grace telling her stories of her connections to European aristocracy. Quotations like these show a sense of pride that Grace had about her social successes, as she seems to be bragging. These examples of the intermingling of Vanderbilts with European aristocrats and royalty show the fixation that the family had on Europe: a fixation that led to emulation.

⁵⁰ Vanderbilt, *The Queen of the Golden Age*, 59.

⁵¹ Vanderbilt, *The Queen of the Golden Age*, 195.

⁵² Vanderbilt, *The Queen of the Golden Age*, 192.

⁵³ Vanderbilt, *The Queen of the Golden Age*, 193.

The connections between the Vanderbilts and Europe are apparent. The family members' first imitations of the European lifestyle were the duplications of European manors and estates. The homes of the Vanderbilts were undoubtedly styled after the grand structures built by aristocracy in countries all over the European continent. In addition to the material likenesses, many family members attempted to connect themselves with actual European aristocrats. Some were successful while some were not. In the end, the attempt to create an American aristocracy like that of Europe succeeded in some ways. People came to know the family as the "House of Vanderbilt" and identified them as opulent in style and demeanor. Unfortunately for the family members, their lives of excess eventually led to their financial demise. The discussion of social mobility in American culture ties back to the Vanderbilt's lifestyle. The family tried to spend and marry their way into the elite of the world, specifically that of Europe. The houses and the social gatherings were what the family had to do to be who they wanted to be. Emily Katherine Bibby, who wrote on the topic of social mobility of the time, summed up the efforts of those like the Vanderbilt's simply with this quote: "Aristocracy abroad was what it was, America's "aristocracy" was what it did."⁵⁴ The Vanderbilt's were defined by what they did, not by what they were. This idea shows that the families actions made them appear to be a pseudo-aristocrat like that of Europe, not the actual thing.

⁵⁴ Bibby, "Making the American Aristocracy," 10.

Illustrations



Figure 1: William K. Vanderbilt Mansion, New York, New York (1883).⁵⁵



Figure 2: The Breakers, Newport, Rhode Island (1893).⁵⁶

⁵⁵ “Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt Mansion,” <http://www.nycago.org>, accessed November 20, 2013, <http://www.nycago.org/Organs/NYC/html/ResVanderbiltWKdetails.html>.

⁵⁶ “Mansions of the Gilded Age: A Display of Wealth, Power & Prestige,” <http://robindegroot.ca>, accessed November 20, 2013, <http://robindegroot.ca/newsite/?p=4402>.



Figure 3: The library of The Breakers with the mantelpiece unearthed in Pompeii in the center.⁵⁷



Figure 4: The Biltmore Estate, Asheville, North Carolina (year built: 1895).⁵⁸

⁵⁷ “The Breakers Library,” <http://commons.wikimedia.org>, accessed November 20, 2013, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Breakers_Library.JPG.

⁵⁸ “Mansions of the Gilded Age: A Display of Wealth, Power & Prestige.”



Figure 5: Palais Jacques-Coeur, Bourges, France (year built: 1451).⁵⁹

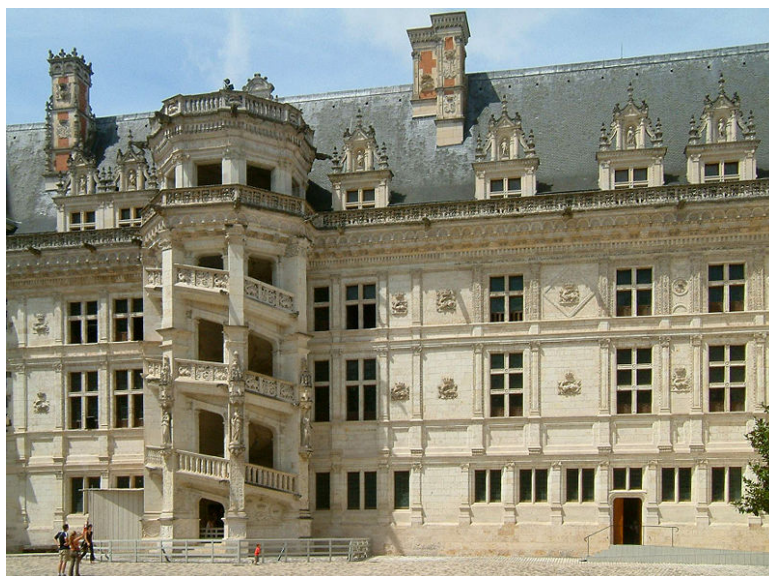


Figure 6: Staircase of the Chateau de Blois, Loir Valley, France (year built: 1515).⁶⁰

⁵⁹ “Bourges Façade du Palais Jacques Cœur,” <http://pt.wikipedia.org>, accessed November 20, 2013, http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficheiro:Bourges_fa%C3%A7ade_du_palais_jacques_c%C5%93ur.jpg.

⁶⁰ “Francis I Wing,” <https://sites.google.com/site/>, accessed November 20, 2013, <https://sites.google.com/site/unescoloire/chteaux/blois/francis-i-wing>.

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