

# Note from the Editor

Of the thousands of manifestations of “Second Gilded Age” or “New Gilded Age” over the last decade or so, most intend to emphasize political-economy and moral-economy connotations of the term. The notion of a Gilded Age seems relevant again to the extent that the United States confronts an unsavory alliance between capital, the state, and the professional classes that buttresses the unaccountable, exploitative impulses of capitalism, itself mutating in ominous ways. In our previous Second Gilded Age, the 1980s, commentators seemed drawn as well to a second theme stressed by Van Wyck Brooks and other culture critics who after World War I fixed the use of “Gilded Age”: the desiccating marriage of conventionality and materialism, of garishness and sentimentality that supposedly made the arts derivative, stifled intellectual exploration, and left culture rootless and barren. Such themes appear here and there in the 1873 satire, *The Gilded Age*. But Brooks’s theme in *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (1920)—where the term became permanently separated from Twain and Warner’s book and play—was that Samuel Clemens hankered too much for Gilded Age respectability and success consistently to transcend his era’s shallowness.

In the 1920s–30s, certain writers, for example Charles and Mary Beard, were uncomfortable with condemning late nineteenth-century thought and culture in the course of deploring its version of industrial capitalism. Eventually Brooks himself repudiated that aspect of his earlier work and wrote appreciatively and at length about once-despised figures such as William Dean Howells. To the Beards, the Gilded Age’s social tension spurred intellectual and artistic creativity. Brooks (and to a lesser degree his former protégé Lewis Mumford) came around to the view that formalism and historicism could provide a foundation for originality and perceptiveness and were not by themselves stifling.

The usable past—another Brooks term—that justified the 1920s popularization of “Gilded Age” was the agenda of breaking through the late 1800s back to the expressive, if ill-disciplined, individualism associated with the generation of Emerson and Thoreau, which in retrospect seemed the source of what was distinct and alive in American culture. In a similar spirit, critics of the 1980s contrasted the era’s showy materialism and empty Yuppie ambition with 1960s-style assaults on conventionality and quests for transcendence.

The counterculture, one recalls, insisted that it represented a return to a true American spirit of radical expressiveness. Such contrasts seem irrelevant in the 2010s in part because the substantive critique offered by the postmoderns of the 1980s has sunk deep. After all, why should one prefer authenticity and organicism to mannerism and historicism? What makes the former pairing a better vehicle for creativity and debate than the latter?

This and similar insights have opened a hundred fresh ways of thinking about and engaging with the first Gilded Age. In my own field of urban history, to cite a simple example, one observes the revival of architect Daniel Burnham's reputation and an increased appreciation for how his version of the City Beautiful represented a projection onto urban space of progressive civic ideals, for good and sometimes for ill. The New Left inherited from Mumford a dismissal of Burnham as a charlatan whom John Wellborn Root tolerated for some reason and of the City Beautiful as corporate capitalism's updating of the absolutist urbanism that Mumford associated with the Baroque. Likewise, the Beards would have applauded the extent that Second-Gilded-Age analyses of the present draw upon first-Gilded-Age-style critiques of banking and real estate, such as those associated with Henry George, whose profound influence on American progressivism will be the subject of two essays this coming year.

This issue's forum on women and music hinges on an ability to grasp Gilded Age culture on its own terms, whatever one thinks of its political economy. The three figures profiled, Emma Abbott, Laura Langford, and Natalie Curtis, all developed their roles within music and expressed their interests in and love of music in ways that fit—at least at first—within that era's assumptions about gender and the arts.

Jacqueline Moore relates a familiar theme in western history to the Gilded Age tension between customary male behavior and bourgeois respectability. The innovative Gilded Age idea that mature men controlled their violent impulses might have been artificial and even a concession to urban and female notions of civilization, but few would discard it in the name of rituals of male expressiveness.

More ambiguous in implication is Pero Dagbovie's historiographic overview of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, which Rayford Logan memorably periodized as the Nadir from the perspective of race relations. Competing traditions that lived side-by-side during

Reconstruction and the Gilded Age sustained African American efforts to participate in and thereby deepen American democracy, but also supported the drive to suppress black self-actualization and self-government. Historians have lately converged on the enterprise of re-examining root ideas and practices of American democracy, but this will take place within the realization that democracy in the United States has come to depend on repudiation of many aspects of the Gilded Age understanding and practice of it.

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