

ART ACTIVITY

Vanderbilt Costume Ball

Background

The technological innovations of Industrialization led to business opportunities in industries like steel and railroads, and created an increase in the number of millionaires in the United States. Women who benefitted from this *nouveau riche* – or “new rich” – lifestyle were often at the center of the social scene. In 1883, Alva Vanderbilt hosted a costume ball in the Vanderbilt Mansion on New York City’s Fifth Avenue. The cost of the party was extravagant, and the costumes worn by guests symbolized both the excesses and the inventions of the Gilded Age. The rich regularly enjoyed the luxuries of high society but the working class, whose labor contributed to the wealth of the rich, did not. The women who worked in domestic service in the homes and the parties of the ultra wealthy, were forced to witness these class disparities firsthand.

Task

Students will create a costume for a working class woman of the Gilded Age inspired by the designs worn at the Vanderbilt costume ball. They will consider the styles and industrial innovations of this time period, and create a DIY costume from assorted craft, repurposed, and upcycled materials.

Materials

Base Materials:

- Fabric

- Old t-shirts, dresses, and assorted clothing
- Cardboard

Decorative materials and embellishments:

- Coffee filters
- Yarn
- Battery operated lights
- Craft Feathers
- Old CDs
- Tin foil
- Plastic bottles
- Bottle caps
- Plastic beads and string
- Sequins
- Tulle
- Other assorted found objects, and recyclable or unwanted materials
- Fabric Paint (suggested brands: Jaquard and Tulip)

Adhesives:

- Fabric glue
- Hot glue gun

Art Vocabulary

- **DIY:** “Do-it-yourself;” the activity of doing or making something without professional training or assistance.
- **upcycled:** The process of transforming by-products, waste materials, useless, or unwanted products into new materials or products perceived to be of greater quality, such as artistic value or environmental value. Also

known as creative reuse.

Steps

- Invite students to explore the concept of innovation.
 - What does the word “innovation” mean?
 - What are some examples of modern innovation?
 - What were some of the major innovations of the Gilded Age?
 - Who benefitted from these innovations? At whose expense were many of these innovations made?
- Explain to students that during the Gilded Age, the rich benefitted from the inventions and technological innovations of the time. They lived lavish lifestyles that were afforded to them by the wealth they gained through industry. Working class Americans who labored long hours to keep these industries running did not have access to the extravagant lifestyle of the nouveau riche.
 - How might it have felt for working class Americans to work long hours, but not enjoy the full benefits of their labor?
- Introduce students to the Vanderbilt Costume Ball of 1883, a party hosted by socialite Alva Vanderbilt that cost \$250,000 (about \$6 million today!). Lead an inquiry with the photographs of the Vanderbilt Costume Ball using the line of questioning below.
 - What stands out to you about these photos?
 - Who do you think these women were? How did they benefit from the rapid economic growth of this time period?
 - Who do you think would be invited to a party like this? How do these women’s costumes reflect the social importance of this invitation?
 - Who do you think would have worked at a party like this? How might they have felt about the event and the attendees?
 - Now let’s take a look at the costumes themselves. What details do you

notice?

- What materials are these costumes made from?
 - What can these costumes tell us about the innovations of the Gilded Age?
 - What can these costumes tell us about the lives of the upper classes during the Gilded Age?
- Let students know that they will now get to design a costume for a working class woman of the Gilded Age using a modern innovation called upcycling. Upcycling is a low-cost creative process (with many environmental benefits!). Unlike the innovations of the Gilded Age, its products are accessible to more than just the wealthy. Students' designs should be inspired by the styles of the costumes in the photographs, but will be created with reusable materials and low-cost craft supplies.
 - Have students begin by taking another look at the photographs from the Vanderbilt Costume Ball, and make a class list of the materials used to make each costume.
 - Next, discuss the properties that these materials have. Create another class list of found materials or craft supplies that students could substitute for each element that would still have a similar aesthetic.
 - Break students up into small groups and distribute the materials and craft supplies. You can have materials pre-selected for them, or you can ask students to bring reusable materials from home the day before the lesson. Show them a few examples of upcycled projects to inspire their creative reuse.

**NOTE: If you are a teacher in New York, [Materials for the Arts](#), a creative reuse center in Long Island City, provides public schools with access to free materials!*

- Have each group choose their designers and their model. You can give each group pencils and paper if they'd like to sketch some ideas for their design before beginning their costumes (group models should contribute to the design too!).
- Have each group begin with one of the base materials to build on. This can be

draped fabric or old clothing (oversized t-shirts, dresses, etc.) and pieces of cardboard to create more structural elements of the costume.

- Once students have chosen the base of their costume, have them begin adding the decorative details and accessories. Things like coffee filters can be used to create frills and ruffles, old CDs can create shiny embellishments that catch the light, and bottle caps can be glued to string to create necklaces and bracelets. They can also use fabric paint to add color or create patterns on their costumes.
- When each group has completed their costume, have a class fashion show where each group's model displays their design.
- To reflect, have students compare and contrast their upcycled designs with the inventive designs of the Gilded Age. Have them consider the following:
 - How was your group inspired by the costumes of the women who attended the Vanderbilt Ball?
 - What choices did you make in your designs and why? How did you think creatively to produce similar aesthetics with upcycled materials?
 - How did your team exhibit creativity and innovation in your design?
 - What did it feel like to create a design that could be accessible for all and not just the elite?
- Extension 1: Have each group create an invitation to their class costume ball. What would the invitation say? How would you communicate the theme and give suggestions for costumes that guests should wear?
- Extension 2: The Vanderbilt Costume Ball was reported on heavily by newspapers, and the stories included details about the cost and decadence of the event. Have students write their own newspaper articles about their costume ball. What details would it cover? How would they highlight the work they did on their costumes and the importance of creative reuse?