

Leading Lady: The New York Legacy of Brooke Astor

Built by William Waldorf Astor in 1901, The Astor embodies Gilded Age elegance on the Upper West Side. While other projects included the original Waldorf Hotel, his cousin John Jacob built the adjoining Astoria (as well as the Knickerbocker and the St. Regis) before perishing on the *Titanic*. The Astor family were the nation's first millionaires. Widely known as the landlords of New York, they were also the stars of *fin-de-siecle* society. The Astor's legacy and sway in the city lasted for almost two centuries.

In the decades after the first world war, socially conscious William Vincent Astor divested the family holdings of slum properties, built playgrounds in Harlem and the Bronx, supported Roosevelt's New Deal, and – as director of Chase Manhattan – spied for the United States during the Cold War by reporting Soviet account balances to the U.S. Treasury.

Vincent Astor's role, however, was eclipsed by his shining wife, Brooke Astor. While her husband eschewed high society, Mrs. Astor's style, elegance, and intelligence meant she was more than capable of stepping up to fill the social role expected of the family, and she became one of the most important social figures of 20th-century New York.

Widowed only six years after her marriage to Vincent, Brooke Astor carried on the Astor legacy for the rest of her life. Before his death, her husband had already placed her on the board of the Astor Foundation, and after he was gone, she took charge of the family's other philanthropic ventures. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the New York Public Library, the Fresh Air Fund, the Animal Medical Center, the Astor Home for children, and New York Hospital were only some of the many institutions she actively supported. Her charitable work and generosity led to a 1998 Medal of Freedom from President Clinton—all the more notable, perhaps, given that she was a steadfast Republican who had strongly supported the campaigns of both Ronald Reagan and the first President Bush. "Power," she is reported to have said, "is the ability to do good things for others."

Although her spirit was democratic, Brooke Astor nonetheless recognized that her position required her to fulfill lingering expectations of high society. "People expect to see Mrs. Astor," she said – rightly – and in public she was always wore tailored outfits and looked polished. She was also known for sporting ladies' hats after most other women had stopped doing so. Her figure was petite, doubtless helped along by her love of dancing and swimming, and her vivacious charm was well known; she once said that though she would never marry again, she "still enjoyed a flirt now and then."

Behind her grand philanthropy and elegant appearance, Brooke Astor was educated and intelligent. She wrote book reviews for *Vogue* in her twenties and columns for *Vanity Fair* at age 98. In between she wrote two novels, *The Last Blossom on the Plum Tree* and *The Bluebird is at Home*, and two memoirs, *Footprints* and *Patchwork Child*. She also served as features editor for *House and Garden* magazine during the 1950s.

A woman of letters, Brooke Astor was also, of course, a reader. After the publication of Jane Jacobs's seminal work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Mrs. Astor began to take an interest in urban renewal and preservation; again her influence was monumental, so much so that the New York Landmarks Conservancy proclaimed her a "Living Landmark" in 1996. It is fitting, then, that among 21st-century New York's new luxury condos and New York penthouses, developers are hearkening back to and restoring some of the grand developments of the previous century's beginnings. The condos for sale at The Astor, for example, which feature original mosaics, balustrades, and fireplaces lovingly restored to their original glory and custom craftwork in impressive new residences, preserve the legacy of the great family to which Mrs. Astor belonged while enhancing both the past and the future of the great city to which she dedicated her life's works.