

Inside the Met Gala: Glitter, glamour and 275,000 pink roses

By **JOCELYN NOVECK**
AP National Writer

NEW YORK — Met Galas, he's been to a few. But James Corden, schmoozing at this year's cocktail reception, looked around and pronounced that this might be his favorite yet.

"Classy," he explained. "It just feels really classy."

The TV host waved his arm around the room, taking in the hundreds of guests who'd followed the sartorial instructions — "gilded glamour" — and came in the best Gilded Age finery they could muster. Elegant gowns, shimmering with gold. Classic black and white. Tails and even some tophats. Headpieces and bustles and perhaps the accessory of the night: the tiara, sported by none other than Vogue's Anna Wintour, who runs the gala, wearing a family heirloom. Even allowing for creativity, this was not the night for artfully ripped jeans.

Of course, take one letter off "classy" and you have "class," with all the tricky implications of channeling an era that saw the creation of excessive wealth and income inequality in the United States. Some guests wrestled with that thought as they pondered the meaning of the evening. Others pointed out, accurately, that the gala funds the Met's Costume Institute, allowing for exhibits such as "In America: An Anthology of Fashion," which opens this week and seeks to uncover unsung heroes

and untold stories in American fashion history, especially women, and women of color.

Others said the night was an important way of showing that New York was back in full force, even with the pandemic still upon us. "We're celebrating craftsmanship and we're celebrating America," said celebrity chef Marcus Samuelsson, who again this year curated the night's menu, choosing a slate of female chefs and taking on the main course himself — a barbecue-style beef, he said, with corn and succotash. "We're showing that New York is back."

Certainly New York florists were back, if they hadn't been already. The question is whether there were any pink roses left in the city after Monday's gala. The outside steps to the Metropolitan Museum of Art were lined with 50,000, with another 75,000 surrounding the lobby centerpiece. Another 150,000 roses bathed every inch of the Great Hall staircase — a striking backdrop for the hosts' receiving line.

Also striking: The giant centerpiece, this year the tallest it's ever been — a 50-foot, golden creation representing the torch in the hand of Lady Liberty. (Museum officials said this year for the first time, the centerpiece will remain in place another day, for public view.)

As guests entered from the red carpet, with crowds screaming outside, they passed a 12-piece chamber orchestra that played Amer-

ican classics like "At Last" until dinner. After greeting Wintour and her celebrity hosts (Blake Lively and Ryan Reynolds, Lin-Manuel Miranda and Regina King) guests wandered through the Arms and Armor galleries toward the American Wing and the huge Charles Engelhard Court, where cocktails were served and where curators built a bridge to access the exhibit in the period rooms.

Usually, guests eschew the exhibit for the cocktails, but there was a decent flow of people in and out of the show, for which nine film directors were tapped to create cinematic vignettes. It was, said some of the directors, a chance to engage in a different kind of storytelling.

"It was really fun," said Tom Ford, not only a top fashion designer but one of those nine directors. Ford, assigned a room housing a grand, circular painting of Versailles and its gardens, chose to dramatize the story of the Battle of Versailles — a famous night for American fashion in 1973, when American sportswear designers showed up their French couture counterparts. Ford decided to stage a real conflict, involving weapons like fencing foils. "My 9-year-old kid was watching a lot of 'Mulan,'" he quipped, when asked his inspiration. "I'd better go see that now," said actor and producer-director Mindy Kaling, who'd been chatting with Ford. "Yes!" he encouraged her, and off she went.

Inside the exhibit, mean-



Associated Press

TESSA THOMPSON attends The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute benefit gala celebrating the opening of the "In America: An Anthology of Fashion" exhibition on Monday, in New York.

while, director Autumn de Wilde ("Emma") was showing her own work in the period rooms to a few friends. "That woman has probably just lost the house with her gambling," she said, pointing to a clearly distressed woman mannequin next to an overturned cards table. "I wanted to show how messy people's lives are," she said. "A beautiful home doesn't mean a beautiful life."

At that moment, a real "Gilded Age" character walked in — actress Denée Benton, who stars in HBO's series of the same name. She congratulated de Wilde for her work, and de Wilde told her she was "obsessed" with her show.

Benton may not have chosen to wear a Gilded Age bustle, but Franklin Leonard did — two of them, actually. Leonard, a film executive who helped curator Andrew Bolton pick the diverse slate of film directors for the exhibit, said he was channeling Frederick Douglass in a coat that had not one bustle but two — on either side — one of the more clever looks of the night.

"I guess it's a double bustle," he said, crediting designer Ken Nicholson. Leonard, attending his first gala, said it was a surreal experience. "I, the captain of the high school math team in Columbus, Georgia, never thought I'd be

wearing a double bustle jacket, inspired by Frederick Douglass, at the Met Ball," he said. "It wasn't part of the plan."

"Listen," Leonard said, pondering the uneasy balance between art and excess. "For all the excess, this is a fundraiser for the Costume Institute." And he was said was proud to have helped put together the slate of filmmakers for the show, who include not only gala hosts Ford and King but Radha Blank, Janicza Bravo, Sofia Coppola, Julie Dash, de Wilde, Martin Scorsese and Chloé Zhao, last year's Oscar winner. "They were the best group of filmmakers out there," he said.

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