



Brooke Astor
1902 - 2007

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LIBRARIES in The New York Community Trust

THE NEW YORK
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For 38 years, Brooke Astor was New York City's fairy godmother. As president of the Vincent Astor Foundation from 1959 to 1997, Mrs. Astor gave away more than \$195 million to libraries, museums, hospitals, homeless shelters, and community programs all over the City. A list of the foundation's grant recipients reads like a must-see itinerary for visitors to the Big Apple: Among the many landmarks Mrs. Astor and her foundation helped support or save are the New York Public Library, the Bronx Zoo, the Morgan Library, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Central Park, and the South Street Seaport. But also prominent in the Astor Foundation's annual reports—and of paramount importance to Mrs. Astor—were thousands of smaller organizations and community programs dedicated to giving all New Yorkers a chance for a better home, a better education, and a better life.

Philanthropy may have ultimately been Mrs. Astor's calling, but over the course of her formidable 105 years she wore many different—and always impeccably tailored—hats. A devoted bookworm, loyal friend, wife, mother, and graceful dancer, Mrs. Astor was always the life of the party. Slightly built though she was, Mrs. Astor did absolutely nothing in a small way. She led the Vincent Astor Foundation until age 95, at the same time serving on a half-dozen charitable boards, writing four books (including two well-praised novels), and

keeping fit by swimming in every season. Always having just the right thing to say, Mrs. Astor even authored, at age 98, a series of essays on etiquette for *Vanity Fair*. She kept company with many of the boldface names of her time. Among her closest friends she counted the Rockefellers, the Reagans, and the de la Rentas. As a girl she attended the funeral of China's Dowager Empress and was invited to lunch by writer Henry Adams; later, newly married to her second, beloved husband Charles "Buddie" Marshall, she dined in Paris with Cole and Linda Porter.

But despite, or perhaps because of, her substantial wealth and rarefied social milieu, Mrs. Astor reserved the majority of her ample energy for her life's work: improving the quality of life for all who live in and love New York, as she did.

HER EARLY YEARS

The woman who would become New York City's best friend and benefactor began life in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on March 30, 1902, as Roberta Brooke Russell, the only child of Major General John H. Russell and Mabel Howard. As a result of her father's distinguished military career—he was named Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps in 1934—the family lived in Annapolis, Hawaii, Panama, Newport, and Peking before settling in Washington, D.C., in 1914.

Brooke was an intellectually curious child. Her mother had imparted her own love of books, and Brooke began keeping diaries and writing poetry at age seven. She entered Washington's elite Miss Madeira's School in 1916, and happily found her place among a group of girls who published a literary magazine. In the summer of 1917, however, her father was reassigned to the Dominican Republic, and when the family returned, Brooke's mother—not intending to send

her daughter to college—enrolled her as a boarding student at another girls' school, Holton-Arms. She graduated in 1919. Years later, in her 1980 memoir, *Footprints*, Brooke reflected that her own commitment to literacy and to broadening educational opportunities for others may have been related to the abruptness with which her own education ended with high school.

Months after leaving Holton-Arms, Brooke was married. She was 16 and about to leave school when, at a Princeton prom, she met John Dryden Kuser, the first of her three husbands. The son of a self-made New Jersey millionaire, Dryden could recite Romantic poetry by heart, and, as Brooke later wrote, had the most striking blue eyes. They married in 1919, and five years later had a son, Anthony Dryden Kuser. The marriage was a thoroughly unhappy one and ended in divorce ten years after it began.

Brooke fared significantly better in her subsequent romances. She met stockbroker Charles “Buddie” Marshall on a hunt in New Jersey while still married to Dryden, and three years after her divorce—and Buddie’s—they married. As Frances Kiernan wrote in her 2007 biography *The Last Mrs. Astor*, “hard-working, thrifty, responsible” Buddie was Dryden’s opposite in every way.

Together, Brooke and Buddie cut glamorous figures both in New York City and farther afield. Early in their marriage they spent summers at a castle in Portofino, Italy. Later, after war made European travel impossible, they bought a summer home in Tyngham, Massachusetts, and Brooke placed herself at the center of a lively, artsy social scene. Back home, Brooke, who’d taken writing classes and reviewed books for *Vogue* before marrying Buddie, took a job in 1946 as an editor at *House and Garden*. She also worked closely with prominent designers like Dorothy Draper,

which would eventually influence her later work in urban housing.

In 1952, after 20 years of marriage, tragedy befell the Marshalls. The family had been spending Thanksgiving weekend in Tyringham, and Buddie, preparing for the next day's hunt, suffered a fatal heart attack.

BECOMING MRS. ASTOR

In May of 1953, Brooke attended her first dinner party after losing Buddy. Seated across from her was Vincent Astor, 62, tall, twice married, and notoriously prickly. In addition to his family's substantial real estate portfolio, Vincent owned the St. Regis Hotel and *Newsweek* magazine. His great-great-grandfather, John Jacob Astor, had arrived in America in 1784 a butcher's son and died its first multi-millionaire. Vincent's father, John Jacob Astor IV, went down with the Titanic, making Vincent, then a Harvard freshman, heir to one of America's most storied fortunes.

Vincent was much taken with Brooke, and invited her to his country home for a Memorial Day weekend retreat. A month later, he proposed. It would take some time—plus dozens of impassioned love letters and a trip to Asia—for Brooke to consent. When they finally married in Bar Harbor, Maine, in October 1954, it was an intimate affair, with Brooke's son Tony the only guest.

The Astors lived a quiet life. Winters were spent in Phoenix, summers in Maine, and weekends the rest of the year at Ferncliff, Vincent's upstate New York retreat. Soon after becoming Mrs. Astor, Brooke joined the boards of the New York Public Library and the Bronx Zoo, and redecorated a number of suites at the St. Regis. Vincent continued to occupy his time managing his family's holdings and keeping an eye on the Vincent Astor

Foundation, which he had established in 1948, its mission broadly defined as “the alleviation of human misery.”

Before Vincent died of a heart attack five years after the wedding, he charged his widow with taking over his foundation, having told her—as she often recounted in later years—“Pookie, you are going to have a hell of a lot of fun running it.”

And she would. After all, roughly half of Vincent Astor’s \$127 million estate had gone to the foundation, which meant that leading it in an effective and meaningful way would be a big job. Mrs. Astor was raring to go.

LEADING THE VINCENT ASTOR FOUNDATION

When Brooke Astor took the reins at the Vincent Astor Foundation in 1959, it was no longer business as usual.

The new president set the tone for the foundation’s work as soon as she took office, announcing that it would follow two core principles. First, the foundation’s beneficiaries would be New Yorkers. Mrs. Astor reasoned that the Astor fortune had been made in New York City, and should therefore go back to the city. Second, there would be no rubber-stamping grant applications at the Vincent Astor Foundation. Though Vincent Astor had sat on the foundation’s board and kept an office there, he’d left most of its work—annual donations to charitable organizations like New York Hospital and the American Red Cross—to paid staff. Mrs. Astor, by contrast, would follow the advice of her friend John D. Rockefeller III, who told her, “The person who has control of the money should also be personally involved in the giving.” As she said in an 1996 interview, “People came here and asked for money and they gave it. I said, ‘I don’t want to do that—I want to see what I’m giving to.’”

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Mrs. Astor became well known for seeing what she was giving to. Linda Gillies, the foundation’s director from 1973 until 1997, estimates that over the course of her tenure she and Mrs. Astor made hundreds of visits to organizations throughout the city to meet with grant applicants. No matter her destination or audience, she invariably dressed in coordinated suits, hats, gloves, and jewelry. As she said in a 1984 interview, “If I go up to Harlem or down to Sixth Street...people expect to see Mrs. Astor, not some dowdy old lady, and I don’t intend to disappoint them.”

Grants from the Astor Foundation lent extra credibility to the grantee organizations. Meetings, after all, gave Mrs. Astor and her staff first-hand experience of the facilities, participants, and impact of a given program. Ms. Gillies points out, “She wouldn’t recommend anything to the board that she hadn’t seen herself, so you knew that if you got an Astor grant, it had been through its paces.”

THE SIXTIES & SEVENTIES

Mrs. Astor got her philanthropic feet wet making small grants that aligned with her interests in literature, art, architecture, and historic preservation. Larger grants followed to convert a former department store into the New York Public Library's Mid-Manhattan Library and help build the Bronx Zoo's World of Darkness. In the late sixties and seventies, the foundation would spend \$7.6 million to help the Bronx Zoo acquire and develop land for Wild Asia and build a monorail. These were two organizations to which Mrs. Astor had long-standing connections. Her first husband's father had underwritten expeditions by the New York Zoological Society/Bronx Zoo. As for the New York Public Library, Astor's great-grandfather John Jacob Astor had been a founder, and Astors—including Mrs. Astor since her marriage to Vincent—had always sat on its board of trustees.

Mrs. Astor moved beyond her usual cultural sphere, and her philanthropic focus broadened to encompass public housing. Influenced by Jane Jacobs's 1961 work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Mrs. Astor underwrote grants that helped create what she called "outdoor living rooms." These small parks with benches, chess tables, and landscaping were meant to foster community in New York's public housing projects. The first opened in the early 1960s, at the George Washington Carver Houses in East Harlem and the Jacob Riis Houses in the East Village. Part of the reason for Mrs. Astor's keen interest in urban housing, according to Linda Gillies, was that "she understood right down to her toes that you cannot be happy unless you like where you live."

The Vincent Astor Foundation reconfirmed its commitment to urban revitalization in 1967, when it gave \$1 million to the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, a community initiative

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*- Linda Gillies, former president,
Astor Foundation*

created by Senator Robert Kennedy, to construct two “superblocks”—effectively, car-free zones—in Brooklyn’s low-income, high-crime Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood. Another \$500,000 in 1969 funded a community center there. Eventually, the model for redevelopment that the foundation supported in Bed-Stuy would be replicated thousands of times in communities across the city and country.

THE EIGHTIES & NINETIES

Mrs. Astor had served as a trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art since 1964, and was deeply involved in all aspects of the museum’s operations, getting to know staff by name, routinely attending their holiday party, and exploring her long-held interest in Asian art, which dated back to her childhood in China. Throughout the seventies the Met had been developing its Asian art collections, and in 1979, about to publish her second memoir, *Footprints*, Mrs. Astor had traveled to China along with one of the museum’s Chinese art experts. The very public result of that nostalgic visit—the Metropolitan



The New York Public Library in Bryant Park.

Museum's Astor Court—opened in 1981, a \$9.6 million gift of the Vincent Astor Foundation. The Chinese scholars' room and garden, crafted in Suzhou, China, included a skylight, koi pond, and Ming Dynasty furniture. Mrs. Astor had hosted the 27 workmen who came to New York to install it—and their chef—for six months at a hotel.

In 1983 Mrs. Astor retired as a trustee of the Met and decided to devote herself full-time to the New York Public Library. Few brave souls ventured toward Bryant Park in the late seventies. Books were falling apart, resources were scarce, and the library's backyard was crawling with drug dealers. A \$10 million grant from the Vincent Astor Foundation, as well as dynamic new library leadership, helped begin to turn it around. Her example and her enthusiasm for the library encouraged others to get involved and give, as well. "Mrs. Astor absolutely loved the library, everything about it," says Linda Gillies, "and she made it so much fun for everyone on the board." Her commitment to reading and libraries would endure even beyond the lifetime of the foundation.

FROM FOUNDATION TO FUND

According to Linda Gillies, it had always been Mrs. Astor's intention to eventually dissolve the Foundation. "I started working for her in 1973, and in my very first interview she told me the Foundation would not continue past her lifetime," Ms. Gillies recalls. As 1996 came to a close and Mrs. Astor approached her 95th birthday, she announced her plans to the public. Following the foundation's annual Christmas party, she took Ms. Gillies aside and explained that she wished to distribute the foundation's remaining funds and cease operations by the end of the following year. The final \$25 million, Mrs. Astor said, would go primarily to education and literacy programs, as well to as the "crown jewels" of the city that the foundation had long supported.

The foundation's final grant, for \$5 million, established the Astor Fund for Public School Libraries in The New York Community Trust. "She was a great reader," says Linda Gillies, "and reading was so important to her, that she wanted everyone to be able to read and to enjoy reading. Mrs. Astor understood, too, that it was impossible to lead a productive life if you were unable to read." It remains among her enduring legacies.

"A WONDERFUL LIFE"

When Brooke Astor died in August 2007 at age 105, the *New York Times* called her the city's "First Lady of Philanthropy," and thousands of New Yorkers mourned her passing. She was buried not far from her Westchester estate with a headstone that read, "I had a wonderful life." Thanks to her generosity, Brooke Astor continues to bring hope and wonder to the lives of countless New Yorkers.

Cover photo by Mark Peterson/Redux

The New York Community Trust

is a community foundation, helping New Yorkers achieve their charitable goals and making grants that respond to the needs of our City.

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