



The Trouble with J. P. Morgan's Millions

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Published: November 19, 2012 | Last modified: September 11, 2017

Permalink: <http://239days.com/2012/11/19/the-trouble-with-j-p-morgans-millions/>

'ABDU'L-BAHÁ'S AUTOMOBILE halted in front of 33 East 36th Street after dark on Monday, November 18, 1912.¹ He stepped out onto slushy pavement in the brisk evening air,² and ascended a broad flight of steps between two sleek Assyrian lionesses named Prudence and Felicity, who kept watch in pink Tennessee marble before the recessed portico of an Italian Renaissance villa in midtown Manhattan.³

The architect of the place, Charles Follen McKim of the renowned firm McKim, Mead & White, had suffered a nervous breakdown over this building—or, more precisely, over having to accommodate the insistent demands and fastidious tastes of his client.⁴ On other projects McKim might have done as he pleased, but one simply did not say no to J. Pierpont Morgan.

Volcanic. Imperious. Intimidating. The qualities of the man blaze from the photographic portrait Edward Steichen took of him in 1903. Morgan's ferocious eyes burn from behind his massive nose, which had been swollen and turned purple by a chronic skin disease. His left hand grasps a dagger—or so it appears from the way the light glints off the arm of his chair.⁵

Morgan's powerful physical presence symbolized his ubiquitous command over the

¹ "Persian Highbrow Dubs Morgan 'Some Philanthropist,'" *Buffalo News*, November 19, 1912 (photocopy, National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, IL); For a detailed discussion of the timing of the visit, see note 7 below.

² "The Weather," *New York Times*, November, 19, 1912, 22. According to the weather report, the New York and New England regions experienced light snow on November 18, and the temperature in the city declined from 39°F at noon to 36°F at 6 p.m., warm enough to partially melt the snow but probably not to reduce it completely.

³ "McKim Building," The Morgan Library & Museum, accessed February 24, 2015, <http://www.themorgan.org/about/architectural-history/2>; "33 E 36th St., New York," Google Maps, accessed February 19, 2015, <https://goo.gl/maps/TFzbE>.

⁴ Holland Cotter, "Let There Be Light and Elegance," *New York Times*, October 8, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/29/arts/design/29morgan.html>; See also Mosette Broderick, *Triumvirate: McKim, Mead & White: Art, Architecture, Scandal, and Class in America's Gilded Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 457, 493.

⁵ Edward J. Steichen, *J. Pierpont Morgan, Esq.*, Gum bichromate over platinum print, 1903, printed 1909–10, from Metropolitan Museum of Art: *Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949*, JPEG file, accessed February 14, 2015, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/269287>.

national economy. Like millions of Americans, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had never been far from Morgan’s mighty reach. He had sailed to New York on a Morgan ship; conversed after dinner beneath the glow of Morgan light bulbs; slept in Morgan-operated Pullman cars speeding along Morgan-controlled railroads and across bridges made from Morgan steel; had stories printed about him in the Morgan-financed *New York Times*; sent telegram messages from Western Union stations bankrolled by Morgan money, over telegraph wires fashioned from Morgan copper; and he had joined New Yorkers as they watched the new Woolworth Building rise on Broadway in 1912 to become the tallest building in the world, built by a Morgan civil engineering firm.⁶

The titan of Wall Street had invited ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for a private interview this evening, here at his private library.⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá entered through heavy bronze doors into the illuminated splendor of a vaulted rotunda.⁸ Mosaic panels, and columns of veined skyros and cippoline marble, textured the space and at ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s feet a colorful marble floor unfurled, inlaid with pieces from the Roman Forum and a central disc of deep purple porphyry.⁹ The domed ceiling of blue and white stucco bore paintings

⁶ The dozens of companies Morgan owned, controlled, or financed included the International Mercantile Marine Company—which owned the White Star Line—General Electric, four of the Big Seven railroad networks, U.S. Steel, AT&T—which owned the Western Union Telegraph Company until it divested it in 1913—the Kennecott Copper Corporation, and the American Bridge Company, which built the Woolworth Building. And when Adolph Ochs, publisher of the *Chattanooga Times*, wanted to purchase the *New York Times* in 1896, Morgan lent him the money. Jean Strouse, *Morgan: American Financier* (London: The Harville Press, 1999), 457–481 [International Mercantile Marine], 311–315 [General Electric], 563 [railroads and AT&T], 400–411 [U.S. Steel], 400 [American Bridge]; Stephen J. Ostrander, “All the News That’s Fit to Print: Adolph Ochs and the *New York Times*,” *Timeline* 10, no.1 (January–February 1993): 38–53; “Kennecott Copper Corporation,” Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School, accessed March 11, 2015, http://www.library.hbs.edu/hc/lehman/company.html?company=kennecott_copper_corporation;

⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Alfred Lunt, 22 July 1919 (typescript, Alfred Lunt Papers, National Bahá’í Archives, Wilmette, IL); “Persian Highbrow,” *Buffalo News*; Although I can find no record of the time of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s arrival at the Morgan Library, there is considerable evidence that the visit took place in the late afternoon or evening after sunset, under a dark or darkening sky. According to Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spent the morning writing letters, received visitors at his residence into the afternoon, and kept a dinner appointment in the evening. Therefore he must have visited Mr. Morgan’s Library sometime during the later afternoon or early evening. Mahmúd does not mention the Library, but he may not have been present, since the *Associated Press* wire report of the visit, printed in the *Buffalo News*, mentions only ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s translator Ameen Fareed and Mr. H. H. Topakyan, the Persian Consul-General of New York. An early evening visit before dinner is also supported by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s letter to Lunt, in which he states that Morgan’s invitation to the Library also came with a dinner invitation, which he declined. Furthermore, the *Associated Press* report was written the next day—the article says the event happened “yesterday”—and dated November 19, which suggests that the visit took place too late on the 18th for the reporter to draft and file the story before the end of the workday. Finally ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s letter states that Morgan had been called away on important business, but Morgan’s engagement book at the Library (see note 17 below) indicates that he had two meetings there, at 3 p.m. and 4 p.m. Assuming the engagement book is accurate, we might conclude that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá must have arrived later on, after Morgan had departed. The sun set at 4:36 p.m. in New York on November 18, 1912, and twilight ended at 5:05 p.m. “Sun or Moon Rise/Set Table for One Year,” United States Naval Observatory, accessed March 12, 2015, http://aa.usno.navy.mil/data/docs/RS_OneYear.php; Mahmúd-i-Zarqání, *Mahmúd’s Diary: The Diary of Mirzá Mahmúd-i-Zarqání Chronicling ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Journey to America*, trans. Mohi Sobhani (Oxford: George Ronald, 1998), 398–399; Morgan had acquired an original photographic print of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which had been taken on April 11, the day ‘Abdu’l-Bahá arrived in the United States, and had added it to his collection. *The Head of a New Religious Cult [Photograph]*, silver gelatin print, 8 3/8 x 6 1/16 in., New York: Underwood & Underwood, April 12, 1912, Pierpont Morgan Library Archives, New York. Catalogue record at <http://corsair.themorgan.org/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?BBID=223054>.

⁸ Strouse, *Morgan: American Financier*, 505; “The Rotunda,” Morgan Library & Museum, accessed February 25, 2015, <http://www.themorgan.org/about/architectural-history/3>.

⁹ “The Rotunda”; Strouse, *Morgan: American Financier*, 505; Leland M. Roth, *McKim, Mead & White, Architects* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), 292.

and reliefs of classical figures that Henry Siddons Mowbray had modeled on Raphael and installed beneath the gentle light of a central oculus, which was now blackened by the lightless sky.¹⁰ Gazing upward, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá could see murals inspired by Pinturicchio, which adorned lunettes over the main entrance and above doors to the East and West rooms, depicting scenes and legendary lovers from Greek and Roman epics, Arthurian romances, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and Renaissance lyric poetry.¹¹

Morgan received guests in the West Room, his large, plush study. His son-in-law wrote that no one could really know him who hadn’t seen him sitting quietly in front of the fire; chomping on a big black cigar; playing solitaire beneath the coffered wooden ceiling; enveloped by the bright red damask silk that lined the study’s walls.¹²

But today he wasn’t there. Some urgent business matter had arisen, and, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá learned, Morgan wouldn’t be able to come. He was directed instead to the East Room, a golden hall thirty feet high, which housed Morgan’s enormous collection of rare books and manuscripts in three tiers of floor-to-ceiling bookcases, made from bronze and rich Circassian walnut.¹³ McKim had imported an ornate mantel from Italy for the room, carved from Istrian marble, and above it Morgan hung an old Flemish Renaissance tapestry, which dominated the long eastern wall. It was called “The Triumph of Avarice.”¹⁴

A few years later, a New England lawyer wrote ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to ask his views on some economic problems—on profit-sharing between employers and workers, and on wealth. “The essence of the Bahai [*sic*] economic teachings is this,” he replied, “that immense riches far beyond what is necessary should not be accumulated.”¹⁵

And ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke of Morgan.

The well-known Morgan who owned a sum of 300 million and was day and night restless and agitated did not partake of the Divine bestowals save a little broth. . . . He invited me to his library and to his home that I may visit the former and have a dinner at his house. I went to the library in order to look at the oriental books but . . . did not accept his [dinner] invitation.¹⁶ In

¹⁰ “The Rotunda.”

¹¹ “The Rotunda Paintings,” Morgan Library & Museum, accessed February 25, 2015, <http://www.themorgan.org/about/architectural-history/4>; Strouse, *Morgan: American Financier*, 505–506.

¹² Roth, *McKim, Mead & White, Architects*, 292; “Mr. Morgan’s Study,” Morgan Library & Museum, accessed February 25, 2015, <http://www.themorgan.org/about/architectural-history/7>.

¹³ “Mr. Morgan’s Library,” Morgan Library & Museum, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://www.themorgan.org/about/architectural-history/5>.

¹⁴ Richard Guy Wilson, *McKim, Mead & White, Architects* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 223; “Mr. Morgan’s Library,” Morgan Library & Museum, accessed February 25, 2015, <http://www.themorgan.org/about/architectural-history/5>.

¹⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Alfred Lunt, 22 July 1919, trans. Shoghie Rabbani (unpublished typescript, Alfred Lunt Papers, National Bahá’í Archives, Wilmette, IL).

¹⁶ It appears that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had accepted a prior dinner invitation for that night. See note 7 above.

short, he eagerly desired that I should visit him in the library but meanwhile important financial problems arose which prevented him from being present and thus he was deprived of this bounty. Now had he not such an excessive amount of wealth, he might have been able to present himself.¹⁷

“This wealth,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “was for him a vicissitude and not the cause of comfort.”¹⁸

Morgan’s *Sturm und Drang*, in fact, concealed an isolated, shy, and quiet man, prone to depression but having an uncompromising sense of integrity. “One nod of the massive head was security for fifty million,” Edmund Morris, Theodore Roosevelt’s biographer, writes.¹⁹ In the era before the Federal Reserve, when the United States had no central bank, J. P. Morgan twice found himself on the hook to rescue the national economy, forced to raise tens of millions of dollars on the spur of the moment and to make decisions that could ruin thousands of lives.²⁰ During the Panic of 1907, when investors made a run on the Knickerbocker Trust, one of New York’s most reliable old-money banks, Morgan decided enough was enough, and he let it collapse. “I can’t go on being everybody’s goat,” he said.²¹

“I wonder how many other people know, as I do, of the utter *loneliness* of his life?” Belle da Costa Greene, his librarian, wrote. She knew Morgan perhaps better than anyone:

It seems to me that he is bound to a perpetuity of pain . . . the ever-recurring bitterness of knowing that his kindness, friendship, and rare affection [have] met with a base or at best a poor return. He gives *all* and gets what? Only a sickening realization of his money and the world-power it brings him.²²

A member of Morgan’s staff laid the books out for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the viewing tables.²³ When he was finished, he wrote and signed a short note in Morgan’s

¹⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Lunt, Lunt Papers; We do not know which financial matters had detained Morgan. There are only two entries for May 18, 1912, in the engagement book in the Pierpont Morgan Library Archives. They are for meetings with committees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art—of which Morgan was president from 1904 until his death in 1913—at 3 p.m. and 4 p.m. The 3 p.m. meeting with the Purchasing Committee is listed second in the appointment book, below the 4 p.m. meeting with the Executive Committee. *Excelsior Daily Journal for 1912*, manuscript engagement book, Box 29, folder 4, J. Pierpont Morgan Papers, ARC 1196, Pierpont Morgan Library Archives, New York [appointment entries]; Maria Molestina Triviño, Morgan Library Reading Room, e-mail message to author, February 24, 2015 [order of entries].

¹⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Lunt, Lunt Papers.

¹⁹ Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House, 2001), 29.

²⁰ In 1895 and 1907. Strouse, *Morgan: American Financier*, 339–349, 573–596.

²¹ Morgan, quoted in Morris, *Theodore Rex*, 498.

²² Belle da Costa Greene to Bernard Berenson, 15 June 1909, quoted in Strouse, *Morgan: American Financier*, 631. Emphasis in original; “For all her hyperbole, Belle accurately saw Morgan’s isolation, depression, and soreness at being used for what he could give.” Strouse, *Morgan: American Financier*, 631.

²³ Three members of staff worked at the Library: the librarian Belle Greene, her secretary, and Mr. Morgan’s secretary. Any one of the three would have retrieved and laid out the books. Maria Molestina Triviño, Morgan Library Reading Room, telephone conversation with author, February 24, 2015.

guestbook, a prayer for blessings upon the tycoon:

O Thou Generous Lord!

Verily this famous personage has done considerable philanthropy, render him great and dear in Thy Kingdom;—make him happy and joyous in both worlds, confirm him in serving the Oneness of the world of humanity, and submerge him in the sea of Thy favours.²⁴

An *Associated Press* reporter on the scene thought the whole business made a fine little spectacle. He twisted ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s sentiments into a spiffy opening lead, and came up with a catchy headline, which AP dispatched over those same Morgan copper wires the next day.²⁵

“Persian Highbrow Dubs Morgan ‘Some Philanthropist,’” the headline read. “J. P. Morgan was written down yesterday as one who had done ‘considerable philanthropy’ when his library in East 36th street was visited by Abdul Baha.”²⁶

²⁴ Inscription by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, November 18, 1912, trans. Ameen Fareed, in “J.P. Morgan et amicorum: Manuscript Guest Book of Visitors to Pierpont Morgan’s Library: New York,” Pierpont Morgan Library Archives, New York. The passage was translated on the spot by Fareed. I have edited it lightly for clarity. Morgan died only four months later, in Rome.

²⁵ I am assuming the reporter was a man, hence my use of the male pronoun. It is extremely unlikely that AP employed any female reporters in New York, but, since I do not know for certain, it is not, to my knowledge, altogether impossible.

²⁶ “Persian Highbrow,” *Buffalo News*.

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FOOTNOTE/ENDNOTE:

Jonathan Menon, “The Trouble With J. P. Morgan’s Millions,” *239 Days in America*, ed. Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett, November 19, 2012, <http://239days.com/2012/11/19/the-trouble-with-j-p-morgans-millions/>.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Menon, Jonathan. “The Trouble With J. P. Morgan’s Millions.” *239 Days in America*. Edited by Jonathan Menon and Robert Sockett. November 19, 2012. <http://239days.com/2012/11/19/the-trouble-with-j-p-morgans-millions/>.

HOW TO CITE THE 239 Days in America WEBSITE IN A BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Menon, Jonathan, and Robert Sockett, eds. *239 Days in America*. <http://239days.com/>.

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