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Young women make their bows at debutante ball

By KAREN MATTHEWS | Associated Press Writer
December 29, 2008

It's a long way from Match.com.

At a time when couples meet online or in bars, 47 young women in long white gowns were making their bows Monday at the International Debutante Ball, a relic from the days when wealthy girls were presented to society before they could meet suitable mates.

The debutantes at The Waldorf- [Astoria](#) hotel included European aristocrats and scions of American families from the Social Register.

There was one daughter of a famous blogger: Christina Sophia Huffington, whose mother, [Arianna Huffington](#), is co-founder of Huffingtonpost.com.

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Arianna Huffington didn't return a telephone call placed through a spokesman for comment.

But Suzanne Tufts, a consultant to nonprofit organizations from Queens whose daughter Abigail Tufts was making her debut, called the event "a beautiful and meaningful coming-of-age ceremony in an increasingly global world."

And Maria Irini Rizos, of Corfu, Greece, who is descended from Venetian nobility that ruled Corfu for 400 years, said she was

participating in the ball because "I want to meet international friends and have contacts with people from different countries."

The International Debutante Ball was founded in 1954 by Beatrice Dinsmore Joyce. Her niece Margaret Stewart Hedberg runs it now.

A debutante's family pays \$14,000 for a table plus thousands of dollars for couture gowns, hairdressers and other expenses.

Each deb is paired with a civilian escort in white tails and a military cadet in a dress uniform. The ball benefits the Soldiers', Sailors', Marines', Coast Guard and Airmen's Club, which helps people who have served the country.

The International Debutante Ball is one of dozens of debutante balls around the country.

Critics question the wisdom of holding such an expensive party at a time when Americans are worried about their jobs and their mortgages.

"All of that excess. It kind of makes me gag a little," said Rachel Weingarten, an expert on marketing and trends and the author of "Career and Corporate Cool: How to Look, Dress and Act the Part at Every Stage of Your Career."

Elayne Rapping, a professor of American Studies at the [State University of New York](#) at Buffalo, said the persistence of debutante balls mirrors the trend of wealthy families throwing lavish bar mitzvahs and Sweet 16 parties.

"The economy is so bad that it seems vulgar," Rapping said. "I guess they live in a bubble."

In the days of [Jane Austen](#) or Edith Wharton, girls from socially prominent families made their debuts and were then officially on the marriage market.

"It used to be that if you weren't at least engaged within the year following your debut you were embarrassed," said Letitia Baldrige, the etiquette author who was [Jacqueline Kennedy's White House](#) social secretary. "Your family sent you abroad to get rid of you for a while."

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Judith Martin, the syndicated columnist known as Miss Manners, said in an e-mail that debutantes today "are not meeting local society but a collection of strangers, and they are probably not looking for husbands while they are in, or barely out of, their teens."

Hedberg, the organizer of the ball, agreed that debs these days are in no hurry to wed.

"They're all so smart and they're in school and they're planning great careers," she said. "They do it to have a happy memory and get out of the sneakers and sweat suits for five minutes."

Hedberg said the 2008 ball was planned well before the current economic downturn. She said no one dropped out because of financial woes but added, "I had some people get a little nervous."

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