Taken in 1912, this image of the Marchesa Casati by de Meyer was described by one critic as “perhaps the most remarkable photograph in existence.”
EVEN THE JAZZ AGE HABITUÉS OF CAPRI, who prided themselves on being shocked at nothing, must have had a hard time maintaining their sang-froid at the spectacle of the Marchesa Luisa Casati’s arrival on the island in the summer of 1920. Casati’s season-defying black garments contrasted vividly with her vermilion dyed hair. Wafting veils covered a face so heavily made-up—Kabuki white foundation, black raccoon-ringed eye shadow and scarlet-red lipstick—that according to Roger Peyrefitte who described the scene in The Exile of Capri, the cosmetics melted in the heat and “ran in streams down to her dusty shoes…” The Marchesa was trailed by servants who struggled with luggage, a leashed leopard, two mauve-powdered greyhounds, a caged owl, parrots and a boa constrictor. “In many ways she was a performance artist,” remarks Michael Orlando Yaccarino who, with Scot D. Ryersson, was recently interviewed by Primo Magazine. Ryersson and Yaccarino are the authors of Infinite Variety: The Life and Legend of the Marchesa Casati (The Definitive Edition)—the only English biography of Casati, an eccentric Milanese multi-millionaire. The meticulously researched biography—released September 2004 by the University of Minnesota Press—vividly details Luisa Casati’s extravagant life.

During the Belle Époque and Roaring ’20s, the Marchesa’s extreme appearance, orchestrated public promenades, over-the-top costume parties and menagerie of exotic pets—tigers, ocelots, monkeys, albinno blackbirds, peacocks and snakes—were the gleeful talk of European café society. She befriended the leading artists of the day—Man Ray, Boldini, Van Dongen, Augustus John, Jacob Epstein—and with charm, flattery, bullying and cold hard cash made sure they immortalized her joli laid image in photographs, paintings and sculpture. She could well afford to pay any price they asked.

Born in 1881 to an entrepreneurial textile magnate and his wife, young Luisa Amman—thin, plain and introspective—had a conventional childhood typical of the European upper classes. Upon the death of both parents, Luisa and her only sibling—both still in their teens—became the richest heiresses in Italy.

For a few years Luisa’s life followed an unremarkable trajectory: in 1900 she married the Marchese Camillo Casati—a nobleman with a long lineage, short bank account and a fixation for horses, hounds and hunting. A year later she gave birth to their only child, Cristina, and the young wife busied herself with home decoration, tennis and occult parlor games.

Soon bored with the strictures of Milan’s haute bour-
geoisie, Luisa was more than primed for intellectual—and other—stimulation when in 1903 she met Gabriele D’Annunzio, Italy’s favorite poet, playwright and future fascist. Their shared passions for art, literature and the paranormal sparked a long-term love affair and sustained a friendship that—despite infidelity—lasted a lifetime.

“The affair with D’Annunzio,” says Yaccarino “was really the catalyst” for the metamorphosis of Luisa Amman Casati, a transformation broadcast by Casati’s radical physical makeover. Like many style icons, Luisa defined her look early—and kept it for a lifetime.

She chopped off her mousy hair and dyed it hallucinogenic red—later she experimented with vivid green, gilded gold and even striped coiffures. The morbid aesthetics of the Symbolists likely influenced Casati’s cosmetic palette and her blithe indifference to the make-up’s toxicity: lead-white foundation, sooty eyes enhanced with kohl—often containing ground metals—India ink, strips of court plaster, bands of black velvet and two-inch long false eye lashes. Belladonna drops, tincture of deadly nightshade, dilated her pupils and added reptilian glitter. The Marchesa’s lips were painted blood red.

Under this theatrical mask, the Marchesa—consistently described by those who knew her as “shy”—felt liberated.

“I want to be a living work of art,” she declared and D’Annunzio wrote that she experienced herself “… joyously imprinting her image in the air, as if a retentive material, leaving behind her a succession of impressions that would perpetuate her…”

Soon she separated from Camillo—they divorced in 1924—and parked 9-year old Cristina at a convent in France. During the two decades that book-ended World War I, the Marchesa was at the vortex of a stream of parties, receptions, recitals, plays and masquerade balls hosted at her homes in Rome, Venice, Capri and Paris.

Eager to be more than a dilettante in art, theatre, literature, politics and occultism, Casati gathered together cultural luminaries like Diaghilev, Najinsky, Massine, Ravel, Bartok, Picasso, Arthur Rubenstein, and Ezra Pound who mingled with Fauvist and Futurist up-and-comers, Russian princes and European...
pretenders at her legendary fetes. Yet this same intellectually voracious woman might be seen walking naked in San Marco Square with her pet panther, chatting on the rue Royale while live marmosets romped on her shoulders—or passed out cold on a ballroom floor after her metallic Saint Sebastian costume, complete with electric arrows, short-circuited.

Over the years, the Marchesa’s compulsion for artful exhibitionism took its toll. Little has been written of her inner life, but it seems she had few intimate friendships and little maternal feeling for her daughter whom she seldom visited over the years. Financial costs for Casati’s homes, personal zoo, servants and fantastic spectacles were ruinous.

By 1931 she had depleted her inheritance and owed 300,000 francs in France and almost 20 billion lire in Italy—the equivalent today of $25 million. In 1932 her homes, artwork and other possessions were sold at auction to pay her debts.

In the late 1930’s Casati drifted to England, perhaps to be at least geographically close to Cristina who had moved there, married and given birth to a baby girl, Moorea. Dependent on friends and family, the Marchesa’s descent continued through rented houses and flats until she landed—with her collection of occult spell books, stuffed lion’s head and pack of beloved Pekinese dogs—in a one room apartment in London. Here the Marchesa’s courage and humanity shone.

She remained glamorous—in mangy leopard skin gloves, eyes made up with Cherry Blossom Boot Polish—and oblivious to the value of money: Casati was known to trade artwork and jewels to pay tradesmen’s bills or hush a harping cabbie.

She took her granddaughter on
adventures in London’s subways—Moorea remembers the trips were “magical”—and invited her immigrant and working-class neighbors in for séances. It was after one such psychic tête-à-tête on an afternoon in 1957 that the 76-year old Marchesa peacefully passed over.

Casati’s enigmatic persona and luxe macabre sensibility continue to reverberate into the 21st century. An inspiration to writers as diverse as Evelyn Waugh, Jack Kerouac and Tennessee Williams, Casati’s spirit also vivifies the fashion world. In 1998, John Galliano based his Dior Spring line on Casati and in 2004 Tom Ford told Ryersson and Yaccarino
that he “…was thinking about the Marchesa Casati…” when he created his Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche Spring/Summer collection.

“Was she aware of her continual metamorphosis, or was she impenetrable to herself, excluded from her own mystery?” wondered D’Annunzio.

“She knew,” asserts Yaccarino who is convinced that Casati was a conscious “collaborator” in the performance art that was her life. “She wanted to be immortal and she achieved it.”

For more information on the Marchesa Luisa Casati, visit www.marchesacasati.com

New Release of
Infinite Variety: The Definitive Edition

Fashionistas, art history buffs, aficionados of Belle Époque and Jazz Age culture—and general readers—will be pleased to learn that Infinite Variety: The Life and Legend of the Marchesa Casati (The Definitive Edition), (University of Minnesota Press) is available again as of September 2004. The critically acclaimed biography by Scot D. Ryerson and Michael Orlando Yaccarino, first published in 1999 and since out-of-print, has been updated with new documents, illustrations and revelations about the Marchesa.

Friends and neighbors who knew Casati during her declining years in England, “came out of the woodwork,” say her biographers, after the publicity generated by the first edition of Infinite Variety. The memories of these now-elderly London acquaintances provide emotional filler for Casati who—though always outrageously entertaining—in her exhibitionist heyday sometimes seemed less than fully human.

—LORRAINE THOMPSON

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