

AGNEW'S

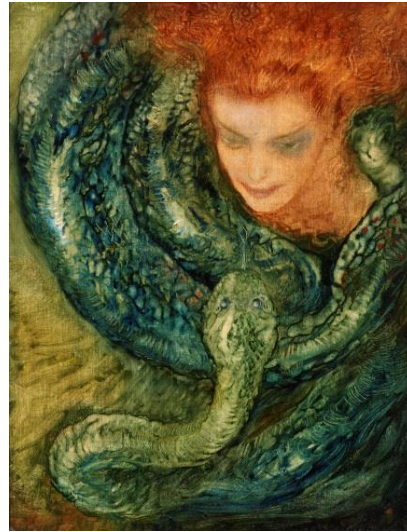
THOS. AGNEW & SONS LTD.
6 ST. JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON, SW1A 1NP
Tel: +44 (0)20 7491 9219.
www.agnewsgallery.com

Continental School, circa 1900

Portrait of the Marchesa Luisa Casati with a Python

Oil on board

67.5 x 52.3cm



Marchesa Luisa Casati was renowned for her eccentricity and hedonistic life style. She married young only to discover that the constraints of it didn't suit her. Luisa returned intermittently to an affair with the wild Italian poet Gabriele d'Annunzio, while numbering both men and women among her other lovers. She was often seen promenading Paris and the Venetian canals around the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, on the Grand Canal (later also the home of Peggy Guggenheim; it today houses her collection) in only a fur coat, accompanied by two cheetahs, or wearing live snakes as jewellery, as in the present painting. In an effort to make herself a 'living work of art' she commissioned portraits from, among others, Boldini, Kees Van Dongen, Jacques-Emile Blanche, Man Ray, Cecil Beaton, Baron de Mayer, Fernand Knopff, Federico Beltrán-Masses and Augustus John, who famously said of her "Luisa Casati should be shot, stuffed and displayed in a glass case". His 1919 portrait of her hangs in the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, and is one of their most popular paintings.

At six feet and cadaverously skinny, Casati was not considered a beauty, but she made herself unforgettable all the same. Her hair was cut and dyed a fiery red, her skin bleached white with

AGNEW'S

THOS. AGNEW & SONS LTD.
6 ST. JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON, SW1A 1NP
Tel: +44 (0)20 7491 9219.
www.agnewsgallery.com

powder. She kept her pupils dark with doses of belladonna, and rimmed their lids in thick black kohl, adding false eyelashes and strips of glued black velvet when the mood took her. It was not uncommon to see her prowling Venice with her cheetahs after dark, dressed in a cloak of silk velvet, mother-of-pearl heels and little else. As recorded in a 1920s article:

She is seen walking through the snow with her red silk gloves like the blood-stained hands of Lady Macbeth, her guests at dinner are attended by servants whose naked bodies glisten with gold-leaf just as she scatters gold powder around her garden. Her Venetian Palazzo resembled a pink marble tomb, covered in wisteria in the spring, where she once gave a legendary ball.. the walls were hung with black velvet and her servants dressed in costumes designed for the occasion by Leon Bakst. When she entered the ballroom leading a panther on a diamond-studded leash her shivering pet fawn urinated in fear... Her palazzo suddenly overrun by the underworld, her diamond-laden guests feared for their jewels and their lives, terrified and shocked...." (Arsène Alexandre in 'La vie artistique, exposition Beltran', in *Figaro*, Paris, 18 November, 1921).

Photographs of Casati taken not long after her marriage to Count Camillo Casati Stampa di Soncino show a doe-eyed, typically Edwardian-looking girl. Everything changed when she met the poet Gabriele d'Annunzio at one of the hunts. The famously louche, debt-ridden lothario, who bedded most of Europe's great beauties, made Casati his muse and lover. The two wrote cryptic notes to each other and christened themselves as Ariel and Core/Persephone. The count ignored their affair, leaving Casati to transform herself from petulant, rule-abiding heiress into a devastating femme fatale – "To Core, destroyer of mediocrity" read one of d'Annunzio's dedications. Supplicants at her Venice, Rome and later Paris courts included many of the avant-garde. Diaghilev, Picasso, Man Ray, Proust, Erté – all of them danced to her tune. She

AGNEW'S

THOS. AGNEW & SONS LTD.
6 ST. JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON, SW1A 1NP
Tel: +44 (0)20 7491 9219.
www.agnewsgallery.com

patronised the Futurists and the Ballets Russes and counted Kaiser Wilhelm II as one of her most dedicated admirers.

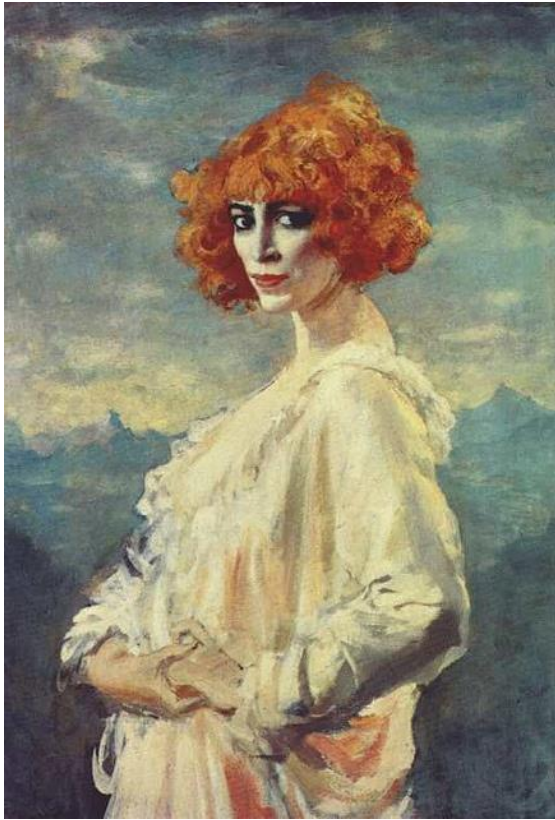
By 1930 Casati had not only worked her way through her family's fortune, but had supposedly accrued tens of millions of pounds in debt. She wrote to d'Annunzio imploring him to wire her money, but her telegram was met with silence. She moved to the flat in London soon afterwards, and, having never been a big eater, spent the pittance earned selling her remaining effects on gin and occult trappings. Ever the fashionista, she was sometimes seen rummaging through bins for scraps of fabric, dressed in threadbare clothes, a mangy fur hat and a scarf made of newspaper. "It took all of the dignity of the English," wrote the French author Druon, who used her as the model for his 1954 novel *La Volupté d'Étre*, "not to just gawk at this phantom." She died virtually penniless and is buried in Brompton cemetery.

A recent show at Palazzo Fortuny, Venice titled "*The Divine Marchesa. The art and life of Luisa Casati from the Belle Époque to the Roaring Twenties*", featured more than a hundred paintings, sculptures, photographs, costumes and jewelry by the great artists of the time, loaned from museums and collections around the world.

Her influence on fashion continues to be felt, and John Galiano based the 1998 Spring/Summer Christian Dior collection on Casati, and gowns from this collection have been displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Fashion Institute. One of Alexander McQueen's most unashamedly romantic shows, his Spring/Summer 2007 collection was also inspired by Casati.

AGNEW'S

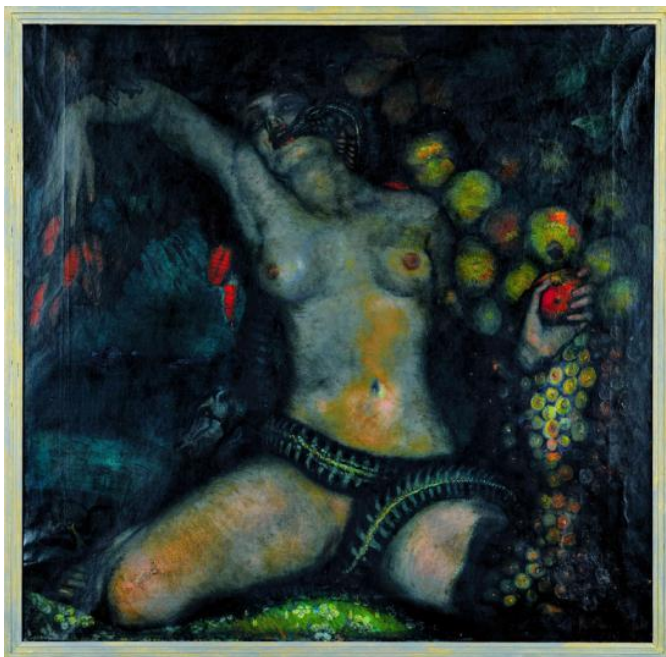
THOS. AGNEW & SONS LTD.
6 ST. JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON, SW1A 1NP
Tel: +44 (0)20 7491 9219.
www.agnewsgallery.com



Augustus John's 1919 portrait of Casati



Man Ray photograph of Casati, 1922



Thos Agnew & Sons Ltd, registered in England No 00267436 at 21 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8LP
VAT Registration No 911 4479 34

AGNEW'S

THOS. AGNEW & SONS LTD.
6 ST. JAMES'S PLACE, LONDON, SW1A 1NP
Tel: +44 (0)20 7491 9219.
www.agnewsgallery.com



(ABOVE) Pastel of Luisa Casati by Gustav Adolf Mossa, 1915

Luisa was on holiday in Nice when she chanced across the work of Gustav Adolf Mossa. This French symbolist dedicated his craft to rendering fantastical creatures of myth – many of them in ghoulish feminine forms with bloodied lips and nightmarish eyes. His unsettling pastel vision of Luisa reduces her to a shrieking, nonhuman elemental force. At least in part, Mossa perhaps meant the almost perceptible scream from his siren-like subject to echo the horror and indignation expressed by so many at the recent start of the First World War.

Thos Agnew & Sons Ltd, registered in England No 00267436 at 21 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8LP
VAT Registration No 911 4479 34