

La Goulue and La Casati: Studies in the Performance of Belle Epoque Decadentism

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Louise Weber "La Goulue" (1866-1929): A laundress and dancer on the Montmartre café-concert circuit, she became the star of the Moulin Rouge before embarking on careers as a sideshow performer, animal tamer and bellydancer.

Marchesa Luisa Casati (née Amman, 1881-1957): An heiress who spent her fortune on lavish parties and maintaining a salon including the Futurists, Jean Cocteau, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Robert de Montesquiou, Isadora Duncan and Tamara de Lempicka.

Outline

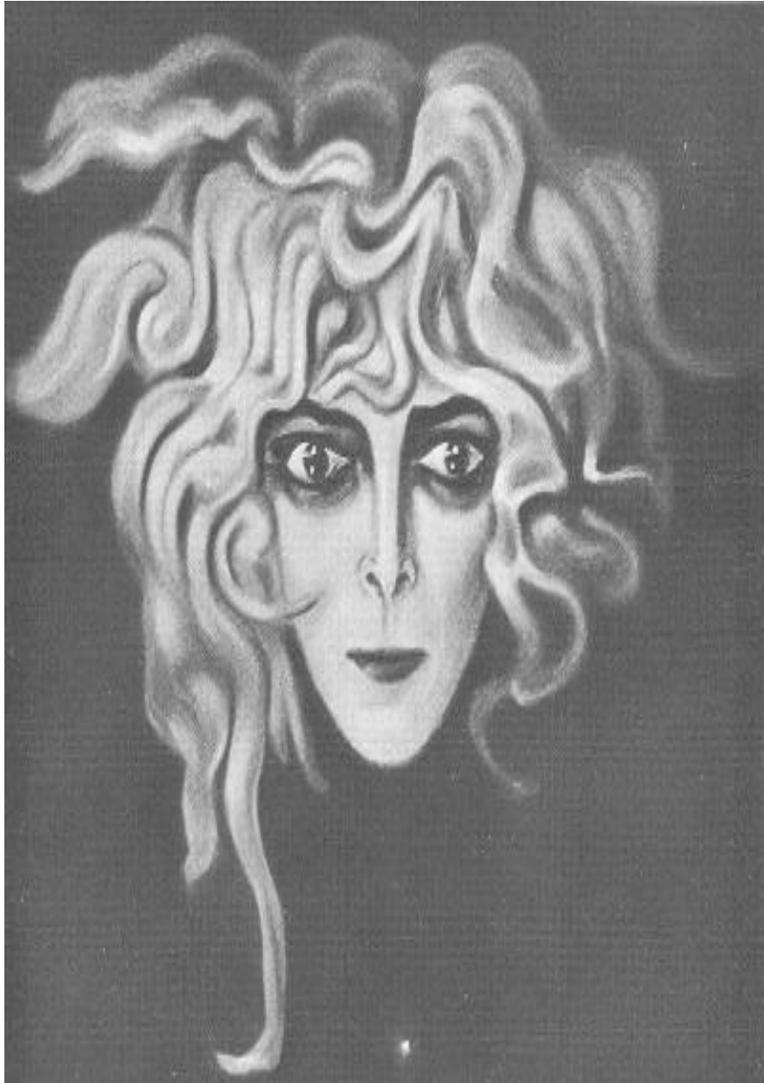
My PhD thesis examines the lives and legacies of the dancer La Goulue (Louise Weber) and the Marchesa Luisa Casati, who embodied Decadentism not as an artistic or a literary movement, but as a performed lifestyle which inspired those around them. Ultimately, this proved the cause of their downfall, when both women became trapped (and rendered destitute) by their own constructed personae.

Louise and Luisa were socially, sexually and financially independent of the men around them and formed part of the sexual and artistic avant-garde from the fin-de-siècle to the 1920s and 1930s; however little remains of their voices, and their memory is filtered through and linked to the men around them (for instance, Toulouse-Lautrec and Gabriele D'Annunzio), and other people's representations of them.

My thesis deals with the interplay of four primary aspects: modernity and embodiment, representation (by themselves and others), sexuality (be it explicit or performed); and their legacy.

Methodology

- Interviews with descendants where possible, or individuals who still cite La Goulue or the Marchesa as muses in their work (e.g. designers, photographers, performers)
- Consultation of primary sources related to La Goulue and La Casati (journals, newspapers, artworks, extant documents)



Theoretical Framework

My theoretical approach to my research is a mixture of art theory, textual analysis (media articles, fiction, poetry), performance theory and cultural history and historiography with a basis in feminist theory. Some of the key theorists whose work is relevant to my own:

- Simone de Beauvoir (the construction of sex and gender)
- Griselda Pollock (the Gaze and the interplay of control and motivation for looking/being looked at)
- Elizabeth Grosz (enunciation)
- Pierre Bourdieu (cultural capital, habitus and patronage)

Key ideas to be addressed within the thesis are the relationship between embodiment, performance and performativity, gender, sexuality, representation, control and the Image; as well as concepts linked to memory and diachronic representation.

Alberto Martini. **Ritratto della Marchesa Casati come Maschera di Medusa.** Pastel, 1912. Vanished work.

Photographer unknown. **La Goulue.** Photograph, c.1886 -1889. Property of the Musée de Montmartre, Paris, France.