Marchesa Casati Installation

Anna Bergman Jurell and Nils Harning, curators
Stefano Gargiulo - Kaos Produzioni, video art
Sara Lupoli, perfomer
The Casati Archives
Il Vittoriale degli Italiani
Studio Lisa Bengtsson
Edward Shepp, sound and graphics
Villa San Michele staff

Thank you to Conni and Birgitta Jonsson

Photos Courtesy of: Alamy, Archivio GBB, Archivio Villa San Michele, The Casati Archives, Heritage Images, Michael Mclain, Stefano Gargiulio

Opening Hours

January and February	09.00-15.30
March	09.00-16.30
April and October	09.00-17.00
May - September	09.00-18.00
November and December	09.00-15.30

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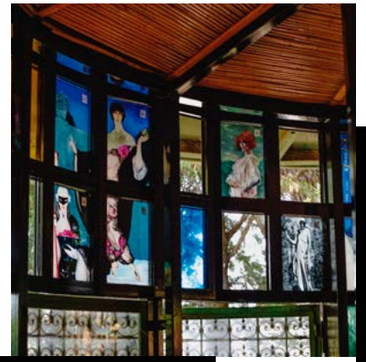

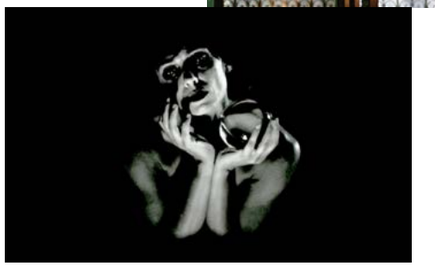

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The installation

In the middle of the pavilion stands a table with a sphinx at the bottom, the only object on show which belonged to Luisa Casati. It becomes the centerpiece of a cabinet of curiosities which reflects La Marchesa's eccentric life.
Mannequins are showing phases of Casati's life and most famous costumes, such as the Queen of the Night and Fountain Dresses. The figures refer to Luisa Casati's recurrent use of a wax effigy in natural size, doubling her in different social situations.
The installation includes reproductions of a selection of paintings and photographs of Luisa Casati, among them celebrated portraits by Augustus John, Giovanni Boldini, Man Ray, and Adolph de Meyer, which are printed on glass. Luisa comes to life in a video work projected inside a cylinder that symbolizes and reveals her as a prisoner of her own myth. Luisa Casati's strong bond with Gabriele D'Annunzio is revealed in their correspondence, of which the installation shows various copies. In one letter Luisa begs her lover to help her keep renting Villa San Michele: "You must imagine the beauty, the silence, the allure of this residence."

Villa San Michele

The *Marchesa Casati Installation* embodies Villa San Michele's commitment to women's history. With this installation, we aim to bring the story of one of the strongest women connected to the Villa – that of Marchesa Luisa Casati – to life. As an icon of art, fashion and queer culture, she left an indelible mark.
By bringing Luisa Casati's story to life, we seek to create a space where her memory can endure – as a living, evolving work in progress. In doing so, it is our wish to pay tribute to other creative women of her era whose influence has been forgotten or ignored.

"I want to be a living work of art."

This was the motto of Luisa Casati Stampa (1881–1957), the eccentric Marchesa who rented Villa San Michele from Axel Munthe in the 1920s.

Born Luisa Amman, she was only 18 when she inherited a vast fortune from her father's cotton industries. She married the Marquis Camillo Casati Stampa di Soncino and had a daughter, Cristina. However, domestic life didn't interest her.
Instead, Luisa was attracted to, and sought a place in the international jet set. One step in that direction was the celebrated portrait by high society painter Giovanni Boldini. Another, was her fatal encounter with the eclectic Italian writer Gabriele D'Annunzio, who became her life long lover and encouraged her rebellion against bourgeois norms. D'Annunzio was a foreground figure in the Decadent movement but also a source of inspiration for Futurism and Fascism.

Drawn to Venice and Paris, Luisa lived in grand palaces, hosted extravagant masquerade balls, and stunned guests with her flamboyant costumes. One of the most portrayed women of her era, she also turned her own body into a living canvas or sculpture, becoming a performance artist before the term existed.

In 1920, she arrived in Capri, still determined to amaze. At the time, the island attracted international artists, writers and intellectuals, who enjoyed living without restrictions. To Villa San Michele, Luisa brought her tame cheetah and pet boa, draped the villa in black velvet, holding séances in darkened rooms and parties in the garden. Axel Munthe tried to evict her, but she left on her own terms. Luisa squandered her fortune, staging her life as an endless, limitless performance. She died in London, poor but unbroken, never surrendering to a "normal" life. Her grave at Brompton Cemetery bears the words from Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra: "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety."