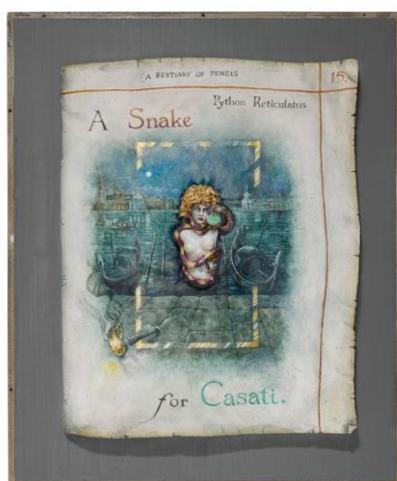


From the 2014 exhibition catalogue for
Kevin Coates: A Bestiary of Jewels
Ashmolean Museum (Oxford University)
Written by the Artist

A Snake for Casati



15. Brooch in wall mount (*left*); Brooch detail (*right*)

18ct. gold, carved and inlaid opal, emeralds, silver, white gold pins
height 79mm width 44mm
signed and dated on cartouche on reverse
Artist's no.463.MB.13B

Image Credit: Mounted brooch, *A Snake for Casati* from the exhibition *A Bestiary of Jewels*
(Ashmolean Museum, 2014) by Kevin Coates; photos Clarissa Bruce

It is strangely fitting that my first knowledge of the society legend which was the Marchesa Luisa Casati should have been absorbed at a grand private dinner in Mayfair, in the mid-1980's. What made the story quite unforgettable was the gentle engrossing charm with which my dining-companion first volunteered, then spun, her tale of enchantment. Thus it was that Lady Moorea Black, Casati's devoted grand-daughter evoked – with unrivalled authority – a further portrait of an irresistible subject: the most painted, the most described, the most reported, woman of her epoch.

Luisa was born in Milan, on the 23rd January 1881, into fabulous wealth derived from the industrial manufacture of cotton textiles. She was the second daughter of Conte and Contessa Alberto Amman, whose early deaths rendered their two teenage girls the wealthiest heiresses in Italy. Too soon, Luisa was trammelled

into a 'suitable' marriage with Marchese Camillo Casati, but the formulaic existence of passive aristocratic wife and mother soon stifled her, no longer keeping in check the darker needs of a suppressed, narcissistic psyche. Even the birth of her only child drove her further into shade: she named her daughter Christina in honour of Christina Trivulzio (La Principessa di Belgiojoso 1808 – 1871), one of the most notoriously *fatale* of all *femmes*, necromancer and, it would seem, necrophiliac, with whom Luisa clearly identified in her growing fascination with the occult.

It was upon such fertile grounds that the high priest of Decadence himself wandered by chance: Gabriele D'Annunzio, Italy's foremost poet, novelist, soldier-statesman, and a notorious and prodigious seducer of women, whose exploits would challenge even Leporello's cataloguing skills. They instantly mesmerised each-other, forming a match not faithful but devoted and life-long, each the egocentric muse for the narcissism of the other – a dangerous, double-sided mirror of perversity, only transcended by the genius it reflected and nurtured.

Now sloughing off the conventions of her former pupal existence, the Marchesa emerged, crucially with the sole control of her vast resources, to become an ever-renewing version of herself – the protean Empress of Decadence. She began this metamorphosis by building on what nature had already given her: a lithe and commanding height, and a long sphinx-mask of a face, not so much illuminated by, as armed with, the potency of emerald eyes primed with *kohl* and ignited by sparks of *belladonna*. Even a basilisk would have shuddered and averted his gaze...

Casati's genius lay in recognising that, in her service, art would be the certain means in a *grimoire* of magic spells to prolong her life in a limelight of notoriety, and grant her legend a sickly immortality. Her manifesto was launched in the Paris Salon of 1909, in the form of a staggering, morbidly erotic, full-length portrait in blacks and violets¹ – by the only man who could out-'swagger' the then equally fashionable Sargent: this was Giovanni Boldini (known as 'The Swordsman' for the energy of his slashing brush-strokes). The Pandora's Box of her myth was released upon the *haut monde*.

Luisa's (and D'Annunzio's) next brilliant stratagem was to launch her vessel of dreams onto that lagoon of unreality which was, and is, Venice – and where now, coincidentally, I am writing this account gazing across to the nearby roof terrace of the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni², to the sound of that same clamour of bells which filled her own Venetian hours. A century ago, that strange truncated palace was the Marchesa's own incandescent crucible, exploding in an endless carnival of masquerades and costume balls, the like of which astonished even

this city of excess. Casati's rule over Venice, in the four or five years before the Great War, was absolute, and her much-quoted wish (a Faustian pact?) "I want to be a living work of art" was fulfilled when the unshockable were not merely shocked, but dumbfounded.

A significant part of the *coup de théâtre* of the Marchesa's appearances – for she was never just 'present' – was her constant and lifelong association with animals, birds, and reptiles of all kinds, the more extreme, dangerous, or perverse, the better. As with her dazzling servants, attending her naked and gilded like exotic slaves, her animals were cannily employed as accessories of metaphor, as with the neurotically sleek black grey-hound in Boldini's 1908 portrait. Her animals, who lived and often travelled with her, clearly recognised, no matter how fierce, odorous, poisonous, or seemingly untameable, something if not of deity, then certainly of ultimate authority, in their mistress's being. They form part of the tales of her nocturnal *passégiatte* through Venice, preceded by a giant black servant exotically costumed and carrying flaming torches, supposedly lighting the path, but actually illuminating the spectacle, of a semi-nude Casati – perhaps 'wearing more perfume than clothing'³ – leading a pair of cheetahs on jewelled leashes.

Like Wilde, both Casati and D'Annunzio were clearly disciples of Huysmans's *Des Esseintes* (whom we have already met within these Bestiary pages), not only borrowing from *À Rebours* interior decoration such as the polar-bear rugs, but also repeating the gilded tortoise. Casati's fascination with snakes, although also central to the sinuous perversities of *Art Nouveau*, to *Decadence*, and to the *Symbolists*, also began in Venice, allegedly in a gondola conversation (her words are so rarely reported) with Fortuny: 'Why don't we buy a serpent, Mariano?'

For Luisa, 'a serpent' would inevitably mean a serpent, and while smaller, frequently venomous, snakes were acquired, to appear against her powdered flesh as necklaces, bracelets, and anklets, unexpectedly moving, or causing social chaos by leaving their wearer altogether, snakes, such as her 10-metre long boa constrictor, became part of her household and even her travelling entourage. Her demands from the staff at the Ritz in Paris for live rabbits to be regularly supplied for its tea, for example, were met with only the slightest arch of a Gallic eye-brow.

Jean Cocteau thought Casati to be '*le beau serpent du Paradis terrestre*⁴'. And while there are a number of images, including photographs, of a be-snaked Luisa, it was the words of another *monstre sacré* (to reassign her husband's words) which led to my jewel: Romola Nijinsky, in her somewhat self-serving 1933 biography of her by then mentally absent spouse, reported of one Casati

event that there were “others who swore that nothing more than a snake made up her costume”.⁵

My Casati, carved from white opal inlaid with emeralds (what else?), with hennaed Medusa hair in patinated gold, wears her snake accordingly: a Boa is a boa. It bears in its maw not an apple, nor even an unfortunate rabbit, but an Ethiopian opal, evoking the oft-depicted blue-crystal ball given to her by D’Annunzio.

A Cleopatra who survived her snakes...

This jewel is dedicated to the memory of Lady Moorea Black (1928 – 2010) and to that of our wonderful hostess and friend, (HE Ambassador) Nelia Barletta de Cates (1932 – 2002).

¹ *La Marchesa Luisa Casati con un levriero* by Giovanni Boldini, 1908 (collection Andrew Lloyd Webber)

² Palazzo Venier dei Leoni, also known as the *Palazzo Non Finito* (‘never finished’), its construction halted at first-floor level by jealous Venetian skulduggery; now the Peggy Guggenheim Collection.

³ Ryersson, Scot D. & Michael Orlando Yaccarino. *Infinite Variety: The Life and Legend of the Marchesa Casati*. London: Pimlico, 2000; see also by the same authors *The Marchesa Casati: Portraits of a Muse*. New York: Abrams, 2009; both essential reading on Casati

⁴ Cocteau, Jean. *Lettres à sa Mère, Vol.1, 1898-1918*. Paris: Gallimard, 1989.

⁵ Nijinsky, Romola. *Nijinsky*. London: Penguin, 1960.