



J. Paul Getty Museum

Above: Louis Jean François Lagrenée's "Mars and Venus, Allegory of Peace." Below: A boar's head tureen.

Casanova's lusty excess echoes in #MeToo era

Tribute to womanizer shows sensibilities of 18th century elite have analogues today

By Charles Desmarais

The 18th century was materially a vastly different age from ours, as evidenced by the exhibition "Casanova: The Seduction of Europe," opening this week at the Legion of Honor. Transported to parties in gilded sedan chairs, resplendent in elaborate costumes, the rich of that day ate luxurious meals from masterpieces of handcrafted tableware, as they enacted rituals of seduction in rooms hung with provocative images in sumptuous colors.

Well, different in materials, perhaps, but not in proportion. The art and decoration of Casanova's time betray a hunger so insatiable it powered a culture and identifies an era. It is a craving we might recognize as being much like our own lust for stuff, our addictions to the sensual. They are

Casanova continues on E2





Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona

Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo's "The Charlatan" (1756) in the "Casanova: The Seduction of Europe" show depicts the era's penchant for masquerade and deception.

Casanova's seduction in #MeToo era

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dependencies so powerful they have made us fat and perpetually horny, our eyes bedazzled by garish images of epic scale and enthralling miniature, our ears ever flooded with the sound of ... us.

The Legion and its museum partners in Boston and Fort Worth started planning the exhibition, which runs through May 28, several years ago. The curators could not have known that their tribute to the most famous womanizer of all time would open at the crescendo of a women's empowerment movement to be called #MeToo.

Nor could they have foreseen an ormolu presidency of regal pretension, its occupant yearning for the emoluments of a reign like Louis XVI's (though not, we can be sure, for an end like that of the last king of France). Given that they are so prescient, do they predict a revolution soon as bloody as the one that followed the period covered by "Seduction of Europe"?

Giacomo Girolamo Casanova (1725-98) was born in Venice to an actress mother and, according to the show's accompanying book, maybe her actor husband, maybe one of the members of "the aristocratic Grimani family, proprietors of a theater and protectors of Casanova's family." One might wonder at the meaning of "protector" in this context but, nevertheless, the biographical facts provide a structure for the exhibition.

The show opens with scenes of Casanova's home city, by the

"Casanova: The Seduction of Europe": 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m., Tuesdays-Sundays. Saturday, Feb. 10-May 28. \$13-\$28. Legion of Honor, Lincoln Park, 100 34th Ave., S.F. (415) 750-3600.

<http://legionofhonor.famsf.org>

At a time of heightened awareness to the problems posed by 18th century art and attitudes, the Legion of Honor has added programs that promise to take up such questions. All will be held in the museum's Gunn Theater and all are free after museum general admission. See the museum website for details.

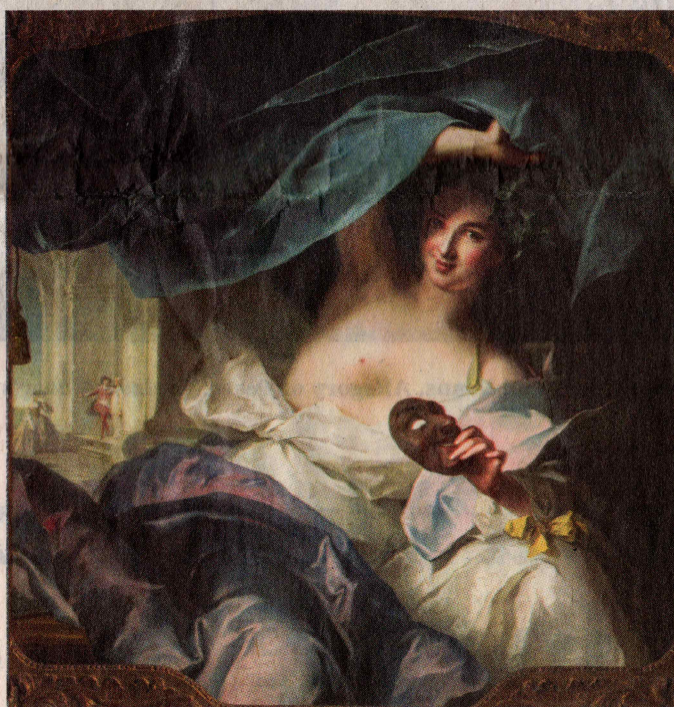
► "The Artistic World of Giacomo Casanova": A conversation with Frederick Ilchman and C. D. Dickerson III. 2 p.m., Saturday, Feb. 10.

► "Female Agency in the Age of Casanova": With Charlotte Gordon and Fara Dabhoiwala. 10:30 a.m., Sunday, April 8.

► "Reckoning with the Past: A Forum": Led by Julia Bryan-Wilson. Saturday, May 12.

most famous recorder of such views, Canaletto. Having already adopted the approach of comparing America today to Europe 200-plus years ago, one is struck by how little change there is to be seen in Venice. It is, of course, a city that is itself a museum, dedicated to its own preservation, and with the recent ban from the Grand Canal of those giant cruise ships, Canaletto's pinpoint precision and evocative effects of light might almost be fine photographs of the place last summer.

Like his autobiography, Casa-



Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Jean-Marc Nattier, "Thalia, Muse of Comedy" (1739) is part of the "Casanova" exhibition at the Legion of Honor.

nova's infamous love life — he claimed to have had more than 100 liaisons with women across Europe — is both evidence and reflection of the mores of his society. As with "The Story of My Life," as well, the depiction of love and sex in the art of the era is likely highly embellished.

The curators wisely include a dozen tiny, pornographic "Amorous Drawings," the size of small playing cards, that depict a far seamier version of carnal interaction than the florid works of François Boucher and Jean-Honoré Fragonard, which are all innuendo. Still, for those

who can get past the frippery — and the suspicion that seduction was a male prerogative — they are irresistible as painterly enticements.

A dazzlingly titillating "Mars and Venus, Allegory of Peace" (1770) by Louis Jean François Lagrenée goes well beyond insinuation, despite its coy title. Lesbian love makes its voyeuristic pitch, as well, with Boucher's sultry "Companions of Diana" (1745).

Even Casanova's stints in jail provide an excuse to exhibit selections from Giovanni Battista Piranesi's great, proto-

Surrealist print series, the "Carceri d'Invenzione" (Imaginary Prisons), produced in the mid-century.

If you were a curator who wished to refer to the period's penchant for masquerade and trickery, you would die to land the loan of Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo's "The Charlatan" (1756), a festival scene that says it all, by one of the period's best-known artists.

Period settings that show off fashionable costumes, and an extensive display of decorative art throughout the galleries reinforce the themes. Some of it looks like filler to me, but it's hard to imagine a better representation of decadence than the deliciously diabolical "tureen in the form of a boar's head," prominently displayed among the rococo mealtime implements.

Casanova was a world-class name-dropper, and a gallery of portraits of the rich and famous he claimed to have met is engaging enough. For an exhibition that deals with wealth and celebrity throughout, though, the best inclusion may be a curatorial comment on the similarities between our time and his.

In the very first gallery, among the views of Venice, a wooden box in the form of a gondola is on loan from a local private collection. Its owners? Ann and Gordon Getty.

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