

The Met Fifth Ave

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The Countess da Castiglione





Virginia Oldoini (1837–1899), born to an aristocratic family from La Spezia, entered into an arranged and loveless marriage at age seventeen to Count Francesco Verasis da Castiglione. Widely considered to be the most beautiful woman of her day, the countess was sent to Paris in 1856 to bolster the interest of Napoleon III in the cause of Italian unification. She was instructed by her cousin, the minister Camillo Cavour, to “succeed by whatever means you wish—but succeed!” She caused a sensation at the French court and quickly—if briefly—became the emperor’s mistress. Separated from the husband she had bankrupted by her extravagances, she retreated to Italy in self-imposed exile in 1858. She returned to Paris in 1861, however, and once more became a glamorous and influential fixture of Parisian society, forming numerous liaisons with notable aristocrats, financiers, and politicians, while cultivating an image of a mysterious *femme fatale*.

In July 1856, the countess made her first visit to the studio of Mayer & Pierson, one of the most sought-after portrait studios of the Second Empire. Her meeting with Pierre-Louis Pierson led to a collaboration that would produce more than 400 portraits concentrated into three distinct periods—her triumphal entry into French society, 1856–57; her reentry into Parisian life, from 1861 to 1867; and toward the end of her life, from 1893 to 1895.

Fascinated by her own beauty, the countess would attempt to capture all its facets and re-create for the camera the defining moments of her life. Far from being merely a passive subject, it was she who decided the expressive content of the images and assumed the art director’s role, even to the point of choosing the camera angle. She also gave precise directions

on the enlargement and repainting of her images in order to transform the simple photographic documents into imaginary visions—taking up the paintbrush herself at times. Her painted photographs are among the most beautiful examples of the genre.

While many of the portraits record the countess' triumphant moments in Parisian society, wearing the extravagant gowns and costumes in which she appeared at soirées and masked balls, in others she assumes roles drawn from the theater, [opera](#), literature, and her own imagination. Functioning as a means of self-advertisement as well as self-expression, they show the countess, by turns, as a mysterious seductress, a virginal innocent, and a charming coquette. Provided with titles of her own choosing, and often elaborately painted under her direction, these images were frequently sent to lovers and admirers as tokens of her favor. Unique in the annals of nineteenth-century photography, these works have been seen as forerunners to the self-portrait photography of later artists such as Claude Cahun, Pierre Molinier, and [Cindy Sherman](#).

Pierson's earliest photograph of the countess, *The Black Dress* (Martini di Cigala Collection, San Giusto a Rentennano, Siena), dates from 1856, a few months after her arrival in Paris, and shows her demurely posed before the camera, wearing a black velvet evening gown with her hair in ringlets. Soon, however, the images began to take on the elements of fantasy and personal display that would become hallmarks of her collaboration with Pierson. In a photograph of 1856–57, for example, she appears pale and solemn in the white garb of a nun. In [The Queen of Hearts](#) (1861–63; Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris), re-creating her appearance at a masked ball, she is a personification of love in a voluminous

gown and veil festooned with roses and hearts. In *The Queen of Etruria* (1863; private collection), also reprising one of her costumes for a ball, she is an exotic and imperious ruler from antiquity.

After the fall of the Second Empire in 1870, the countess lived an increasingly reclusive and eccentric life in an apartment on the Place Vendôme, venturing out only at night, shrouded in veils. Toward the end of her life, following a hiatus of some twenty-five years, the Countess da Castiglione resumed her sessions with Pierson. The pictures reveal her mental instability and loss of all critical sense. Conscious of the earlier work she had accomplished with Pierson, she dreamed of showing their oeuvre at the Exposition Universelle of 1900 in a retrospective titled “The Most Beautiful Woman of the Century.” This was not to be. The Countess da Castiglione died on November 28, 1899, at the age of sixty-two.

Following her death, her reputation as a woman of mystery and “divine beauty” endured, thanks in large part to the legacy of her photographic oeuvre. Among the aesthetes of fin-de-siècle Paris, her life was the subject of admiring and often obsessive curiosity. Prominent among them was Robert de Montesquiou, who spent thirteen years writing her biography, *La Divine Comtesse* (published in 1913), and who assembled a large collection of her photographs, 275 of which were acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 1975. Her life has also been the subject of numerous subsequent biographies and a 1955 film, *La Castiglione*, starring Yvonne De Carlo.