

Preface

Almost ten years ago, in 2014, Goldsmiths organized a conference entitled ‘Decadence and the Senses’, which aimed to explore the decadent sensorium and its representation in literature and visual culture from classical to modern times. Decadent studies was an emerging field then, defining itself principally around literary studies, but a number of the conference papers were richly interdisciplinary. One such paper was Liz Renes’ on John Singer Sargent’s 1884 painting *Madame X* and the ‘aesthetics of sculptural corporeality’. She tantalized us with a discussion of how the decadent aesthetics of clothes and cosmetics disrupted Victorian conventions. Since then, however, despite the provocations of the 2014 conference and with the exception of a few interventions (including most recently Catherine Spooner’s essay on ‘Fashion: Decadent Stylings’ in the *Oxford Handbook of Decadence*), the worlds of decadence studies and fashion have seldom collided. It is with enormous and long-awaited pleasure therefore that *Volupté* is the platform for a selection of new critical and creative explorations on decadence, aestheticism, fashion, textiles, accessories, and cosmetics.

This issue weaves together a wide range of contributions that explore the connections between aestheticism and decadence and fashion and textiles. Contributions look at the influence of the House Beautiful aesthetics of Pater and Wilde on Edith Wharton’s writing (Boyd), Sarah Grand’s use of textiles in her narrative fiction, where they appear ‘not only as elements of dress but also in descriptions of interiors, artworks, and atmospheres’ (John, p. 28), and the symbolism and signifying function of clothing from grey waistcoats to green satin dresses to white wedding gowns and feathered headdresses (Chapot, Doherty, Bouley, Wingrove). Decadent clothing is performative and transformative, bringing contrasting realms of experience into play. As Wingrove comments about Eurydice’s gown in the film *Mascara* (1987): ‘the upper world of the opera and the underworld of drag impersonation – fuse and blend into one’ (p. 128).

This issue is full of textural/textual analysis and chromaticism, but although the colours of red, black, green, grey, gold, blue, yellow are threaded throughout, it is the shade of white that dominates, reminding us perhaps of Whistler’s ‘white girls’ and signifying and synthesizing purity, cruelty, and celestial transcendence. We include four creative pieces in this issue: four extracts from a sequence of poems about Marchesa Casati by Andrew Nightingale, Azadeh Monzavi’s ‘Yellow Art Piece’, crafted from upcycled materials, a series of fashion photographs inspired by Pre-Raphaelite artworks by Jade Starmore, Rebecca Wyman, and Deniz Uster, and a short story by Catherine Spooner which takes us back to the corporeal whiteness that Renes highlighted almost a decade ago. Recalling perhaps Angela Carter’s ‘Black Venus’ (1985), Spooner’s ‘Arrangements in White and Red’ is written from the point of view of Whistler’s muse, Joanna Hiffernan, ‘us[ing] fiction as an alternative means of thinking through cultural constructions of whiteness’ (p. 143).

We are proud to announce two BADS Prizewinners. Lucinda Janson wins the Essay Prize for an essay on Ronald Firbank, judged to be ‘a fascinating look at the topography and geographies of his London cityscapes. [...] argu[ing] for the importance of this work, [and] [...] weav[ing] together context and text, providing parallels between Firbank and the more canonical decadents and Modernists’. And Di Cotofan Wu wins the BADS Translation Prize for a translation of Park Young-hee’s ‘월광 (月光) 으로 짠 병실 (病室)’ [‘A Ward Woven with Moonlight’] (1923) and an historical and critical overview of Korean decadence, applauded for its ‘triangulation between European decadence, Japan, and Korea’ and deemed ‘particularly fruitful and well thought-through’.

With our grateful thanks to Guest Editors, Robyne Calvert and Veronica Isaac, and to all of our contributors. Wishing our readers a peaceful 2024 from all of us on the *Volupté* team.

Jane Desmarais
Editor-in-Chief
11 December 2023