Casanova, a child of actors, was born in Venice and grew up amid its cramped streets and extensive waterways. An avid reader with a poetic mind, he left at a young age to go to school in nearby Padua—receiving his doctorate of law at age sixteen—but he returned to his hometown repeatedly, and ultimately spent more than a quarter of his life in Venice. No matter where he went or how worldly he became, Casanova remained thoroughly Venetian. Venice is a city defined by water, and boats, including the iconic gondola, are critical to its history and way of life. It was in a gondola that Casanova, in his early twenties, had his big break: after playing violin at a wedding, Casanova shared a gondola with a senator, Matteo Bragadin, who suffered a stroke. As legend would have it, Casanova saved his life. In return he received the grateful senator’s patronage, including an invitation to live at Bragadin’s palace, a servant, a gondola, an allowance, and entry into Venice’s finest aristocratic homes.
Inside the Venetian Palace

Visitors to Venetian palazzi arrived by gondola and would climb a large set of stone stairs to reach the grand main hall, called the portego, where they were entertained. Interiors on the upper floor expressed the owner’s wealth and sophistication. They were richly appointed with elaborately carved furnishings, delicately gilded stucco plasterwork, sumptuous damask-lined walls, frescoed ceilings, and paintings by the artistic masters of the day.

The playful Rococo style emerged in France around the 1730s as a reaction against the heavy grandeur of the earlier Baroque style. In the decorative arts, Rococo was inspired by natural forms such as leaves, shells, and rocks and featured graceful curves. Elaborate Rococo decorations were exceedingly popular among the wealthy and quickly spread from France to all of Europe. Interiors often incorporated paintings, furniture, and architecture into a single decorative scheme.

Often hidden behind plain facades, the splendid interiors of Venice’s palaces, or palazzi, must have astounded the modestly born Casanova. There he would have encountered luxurious objects such as those shown in this gallery, which illustrate the activities of the upper classes within such settings. Casanova spent much time in the palaces of his aristocratic protectors, especially Bragadin, the senator who became his patron. Within the city’s complex social environment, these spaces were stages where identity could be invented and performed—where a poor man, like Casanova, might learn how to appear wealthy. As Casanova acquired a taste for life in society’s upper echelons, his unrivaled ability to play to his audience served him well. For this child of the theater, the act of fashioning one’s own role allowed him to rise through the ranks of a city with a rigid social hierarchy, where identities were fixed at birth—and where changing one’s status was all but unthinkable.
In the eighteenth century, young women from elite families were often sent to nunneries to protect their virtue until a suitable marriage could be arranged. Although strict guidelines were in place to control the girls' behavior and social interactions, the rules—like much in Venice—were fluid. Casanova's memoirs show that the barriers between the women cloistered in convents and their visitors were not impervious to mingling or flirting.

Enlightenment Europe was obsessed with mysticism and the occult. Casanova studied the Kabbalah, a Judeo-Christian belief that God could be addressed through the perfection of numbers, and used supposedly Kabbalistic practices to “predict” the future—a technique by which he subly shaped the behavior of others to fit his own needs and desires. These practices were considered immoral and illegal, and his participation in them contributed to the charges leveled against him by the Inquisition.

Casanova used his newly elevated position to engage in behavior that soon got him into trouble, partaking in a variety of forbidden behaviors: duping foreigners in gambling halls, or ridotti; conducting an elaborate affair with a nun, referred to in his memoirs as “M. M.”; and indulging in the occult and making public statements of heresy. The Venetian government kept a close watch on troublemakers. Spies from the Venetian Inquisition—a council tasked with maintaining the social stability—were uncomfortable and suspicious that a lowly “son of a comedian” had risen so far. They followed him around Venice and reported on his gambling, love affairs, and association with cardsharps and courtesans, leading to his arrest on the morning of July 26, 1755. Casanova was taken across the Bridge of Sighs into the Palazzo Ducale to serve a five-year prison sentence.
The story of Casanova's unlikely escape became his "calling card" throughout Europe, earning him lifelong fame. He later published the riveting tale in *The Story of My Escape* (1787), displayed nearby. However, this was not his only instance of imprisonment. Casanova was also held for various periods of time in prisons of Italy, France, and Spain, for sexual deviance, fraud, and once under suspicion of killing a man.

The Palazzo Ducale complex held three prisons; the Leads (I Piombi)—where Casanova was held—were under the palace's lead-plated roof. Upon arriving there, Casanova resolved to maintain his sanity by focusing on a way to escape. Perhaps not surprisingly, the ever-resourceful Casanova succeeded, on October 31, 1756. Sharpening a spike from an iron bar, he and a fellow prisoner used it to penetrate the ceilings and walls. After prying away a lead plate from the roof, they clambered onto it, lowered themselves through a dormer into rooms on the top floor, and made their way to the lower floors, where the main door was locked. Casanova—who had saved his fine clothing from the day of his capture—changed into it, assuming the guise of an aristocrat shut inside the palace by mistake, and persuaded a guard to unlock the great door. The two then walked right out through the main portal of the palazzo. Running to the water’s edge, they hired a gondola to take them to the mainland and immediately left for France. Casanova had escaped prison, but in doing so, he had forsaken Venice—at least for a while. He would not return for eighteen years.
Amorous Pursuits

Love—whether romantic, carnal, or both—seems always to have been on Casanova’s mind. In that regard, he was very much a man of his moment; love was a prevailing theme in eighteenth-century art and literature, which gave expression to Europe’s evolving views on sexuality. The era witnessed the birth of libertinism, a movement advocating the abandonment of polite society’s conventions regarding love and sex. Libertines rejected the constraints of marriage, the condemnation of adultery, and the cultivation of female virtue—views that often centered exclusively on male desire, irrespective of the consequences to women.

More than any other city, Paris symbolized the libertine spirit, and amorous works were a specialty of French painters, particularly François Boucher and Jean-Honoré Fragonard, favorites among the pleasure-loving members of the court. It was here that Casanova met and fell in love with Manon Balletti, the one woman he seems to have seriously regretted not taking as his wife.
Casanova arrived in Paris, the cultural capital of Europe, in August 1750, at the age of thirty-one, with his only goal “to enjoy life.” He arrived on the doorstep of Italian actress Silvia Balletti, who became a close, lifelong friend and helped him gain entry to the circle of King Louis XV and his famous paramour, Madame de Pompadour (who, besides the king, was one of the most powerful people at the French court at Versailles). This initial visit was brief, just two years, but Casanova returned for a second stay after his escape from prison in Venice, from 1757 to 1759. Reconnecting with his former associates, he quickly capitalized on a number of opportunities to amass significant wealth: he ran a silk manufactory, organized a national lottery, and became an agent of the crown, completing secret missions for the government for financial gain. As he elevated his own status, Casanova was able to call on members of the court, charming the powerful and gaining their trust and protection. Casanova’s strategic social alliances granted him access to some of the most privileged spaces in Paris, many of which were sumptuously decorated in the height of Rococo excess.
In London, Casanova’s opportunities were limited by his deficient English, compounded by the average Londoner’s lack of fluency in French and Italian. For one so gregarious and witty, navigating daily life without being able to resort to his familiar tongues must have been a constant reminder of his outsider status. This handicap extended to seduction: for Casanova, the pursuit of pleasure had to involve verbal sparring between equals.

Eighteenth-century Londoners enjoyed a variety of entertainments, from theaters and pleasure gardens to taverns and luxurious private clubs. Gambling was a standard diversion in elegant card rooms that attracted both men and women. The popularity of betting extended to every level of English society—from private social gatherings and public sporting events to government-sanctioned lotteries. In this regard, at least, London was a place where Casanova could feel right at home.

Casanova spent only a brief period of time in London—nine months, from June 1763 to March 1764. He found British society very different from the Venetian and Parisian environments he had become adept at negotiating. In London, there was no glittering court; he arrived at the end of the social season, when the nobility typically left the city to reside for several months in their country houses. Casanova was unfamiliar with English customs and was unimpressed with the taverns. Nevertheless, the London chapters of his memoirs are crowded with accounts of places he visited and people he met. At one end of the social scale is his presentation to the shy and devout King George III and Queen Charlotte; at the other are his numerous encounters with the prostitutes of Covent Garden. The cream of London society converged at the elegantly furnished Carlisle House, a mansion where his childhood friend Teresa Imer-Cornelys hosted grand entertainments that included masked balls, concerts, and banquets for as many as four hundred guests.
Casanova moved in erudite circles, seeking out the great thinkers of his age: Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Samuel Johnson and Benjamin Franklin. He conversed easily with Catherine the Great of Russia, King Louis XV of France, King George III of England, and more than one pope. He is even rumored to have collaborated with Mozart and the librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte on the opera *Don Giovanni*. Stimulated by authors, scientists, philosophers, and politicians, Casanova came to possess a great mind himself. Above all else, he wished to be remembered for his literary contributions. Casanova produced dozens of texts, both fiction and nonfiction, touching upon history, politics, satire, and philosophy. Although few portraits of Casanova himself can be reliably identified, this gallery contains images of many of the famous figures he knew or met, illustrating the world of his social and intellectual ambition and representing the great portrait painters and sculptors of the eighteenth century. These artists and their subjects continue to enrich our understanding of the political, social, cultural, and philosophical landscapes of their place and time—of Casanova’s Europe.
Casanova, though he spent a quarter of his life in his hometown of Venice, logged more than forty thousand miles on the road over six decades. In addition to Italy, France, and England, he journeyed to the Ottoman Empire, Poland, Austria, the Netherlands, Russia, Germany, Flanders, and Spain. He visited many of Europe’s political and intellectual centers, hoping to find fresh adventures, valuable connections, and opportunities to make new fortunes. Voyaging long distances in the eighteenth century could be challenging, uncomfortable, arduously slow, and often dangerous. Aside from general discomfort and motion sickness, the perils of travel might include exposure to the elements (such as the snows of the Alps) and dangers posed by untrustworthy fellow companions and outright thieves. In spite of these difficulties, Casanova was energized by extended travel and eager to see new places across the continent. Aiming to infiltrate local society, he often traveled under a pseudonym and greeted fellow travelers as “comte de Farussi” or “chevalier de Seingalt,” each persona enhanced by costume.
The discovery of exotic foods and spices from distant lands helped expand the pleasures of dining in the eighteenth century. At the same time, the table became more visually interesting, with a variety of serving dishes used to present new recipes. Civilized diners throughout Europe embraced a new style of service: à la française, in which guests helped themselves to dishes served all at once and placed conveniently around the table.

Displayed in this gallery is a wide range of serving dishes and implements from across Europe—from England and France to Italy and Hungary—made in silver and porcelain. Note in particular the tureens in the shape of animals. Such whimsical objects were considered the height of fashion during Casanova’s day. Often a tureen’s appearance might contradict what awaited inside: a turkey-shaped tureen might hold a completely unrelated dish, such as veal ragout.

In the eighteenth century—as still today—dining was a favorite pastime, and enjoying meals was an important part of social life. Travelers who were people of rank or who had letters of introduction were invited to dine at houses of nobility. Casanova frequently traveled with such documents, but his famous escape from prison in Venice elevated him to the status of celebrity dinner guest and opened even more doors. He could entertain fellow diners for hours with his tales. When he had the funds himself, Casanova also enjoyed entertaining; meals he hosted served as opportunities to display his refined personal taste, to bring together his important connections, and sometimes even to practice his skills in seduction. The rules for behavior at the table were considered essential knowledge for gentility, but learning these manners had not always been easy for Casanova. As a young man, he was once asked to carve a turkey and made a mess of it—carving it badly into six large pieces—prompting laughter and his own great embarrassment.