



In search of lost style, with painted paper



A Belgian artist revisits the man who dressed Proust's women

By Roderick Conway Morris

Mariano Fortuny — painter, photographer, designer of fabrics and clothes, theatrical scenery and stage lighting — had the rare distinction of appearing under his real name in Marcel Proust's multivolume novel "À la recherche du temps perdu."

Proust's narrator dresses his lover Albertine in Fortuny's creations; his memories of them and their Venetian origins play a key role in this part of the story. The altogether grander character, the Duchesse de Guermantes, who otherwise has little in common with Albertine, also wears Fortuny.

Born in Spain, Fortuny spent over half his life in Venice, and when he died there in 1949 he wished to leave his



studio-residence to the Spanish state. The then government, however, balked at the cost of maintaining this large palazzo — which at one time also accommodated workshops employing scores of artisans manufacturing his products — and it became the property of the Venetian municipality.

For a long time it proved difficult to find a suitable purpose for the palazzo. But after a program of restoration, it has been brought to life again as both a museum dedicated to Fortuny's life and works, and a new space for special shows of modern and contemporary art. There are currently over a dozen pieces on display by "guest artists,"

among them Mark Rothko, Lucio Fontana and Giuseppe Santomaso.

But the main event is "A World of Paper: Isabelle de Borchgrave Meets Mariano Fortuny," a riotously colorful installation of over 80 pieces, including versions of Fortuny's classic, finely pleated "Delphos" dress, robes, accessories, shoes, boots, a stage set, an oriental tent, rugs, cushions, a lute and antique swords, spread over the palazzo's three floors, often intermingling with the master's own works and collection, and all made of painted paper. The show runs until Nov. 30.

Isabelle de Borchgrave was born in Belgium in 1946 and began her studies at

the age of 14 at the Centre des Arts Décoratifs in Brussels. She went on to establish her own studio, designing dresses, scarves, jewelry and accessories. She later specialized in designing fabrics.

A turning point in her career came ten years ago with an exhibition, "Papier à la mode," at Mulhouse, in France. It consisted of thirty lifesize outfits made of painted paper. The show toured France, the United States and Asia. As it traveled, Borchgrave expanded it — with costumes from the wardrobes of Queen Elizabeth I of England, Marie-Anoinette and the Empress Eugénie, consort of Napoleon III, while it was in Japan, and adding Ottoman kaftans in Turkey.

The present encounter with Mariano Fortuny is her most ambitious show to date of this gloriously pointless and impressively skillful art form. Not only does she reproduce in paper Fortuny's dresses, tops and sumptuous, patterned silk-velvet robes and dressing gowns — as worn by Albertine, when "en déshabillé" — but also other items from the period, like the long, white mackintosh and riding boots sported by Fortuny's friend, the flamboyant poet and soldier Gabriele d'Annunzio.

An elaborate trompe l'oeil paper scene in a corner room recreates Fortuny's study. It shows the artist seated at his bureau facing an illusionistic Venetian glass window, with Fortuny-designed desk lamp, hangings and curtains; classical marble busts; bookshelves and a library ladder. There is a Fortuny ceiling lamp based on antique Saracen shields and even a pet hound curled beneath an armchair upholstered with brocaded silk velvet.

An advertisement for Fortuny's fabrics from 1919 was at pains to emphasize that his fabrics were not "imitations of the old," but reinterpretations, "drawing on all epochs and genres," sometimes reflecting ancient textiles, sometimes completely new. In the same way, Fortuny is for Borchgrave at once a vital source of inspiration and also a point of departure for her own fantastic visual journeys.

Fortuny chose different materials for different garments: for example, silk light as feathers for the "Delphos" dresses, inspired by ancient Greek statuary; and heavier velvets for the robes and overgarments, whose forms were drawn from the paintings of

Carpaccio, Bellini and Titian.

Borchgrave's starting point, on the other hand, is always the same: sheets of paper 1 meter by 1.5 meters, or 3.3 feet by 4.9 feet, which she sets to work on with her brushes and colors — more brilliant and varied than even those employed by the Spanish artist — on an enormous linen-covered table, not unlike those on which Fortuny realized his own creations. Her colors, like Fortuny's, are very much inspired by her travels: reds from the roses of Turkey, earth hues from Egypt, blues from Greece.

Like Fortuny, too, even after the painted, gilded and folded "fabrics" have been cut and pasted together to make the "garments," she continues to modify their surfaces and add touches and highlights with her brush.

Borchgrave produces astonishing effects of scintillating color, weight, transparency and texture. Her renderings of diaphanous gauzes are especially astonishing. Borchgrave describes herself as "Fortuny's spiritual daughter," and her response to the Spanish artist's extraordinary personality and exotically eclectic world is at once passionate and engagingly original.

Photographs by Jean-Pierre Gabriel for the IHT

Clockwise from top left: A room at the Fortuny Museum, with original dresses behind glass and a paper version standing on the far left; three "Delphos" dresses by Fortuny, interpreted in paper by Isabelle de Borchgrave; de Borchgrave at her desk; red and gold paper "Fortuny" shoes.