
A FAMILY

FOR
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STORY

A FAMILY

FOR
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STORY

FORTUNY

A FAMILY STORY —



Exhibition produced and organised by the Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia in collaboration with the Axel & May Vervoordt Foundation

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Curated by

Daniela Ferretti
with Cristina Da Roit

Exhibition Design

Daniela Ferretti

"Homage to Fortuny"

Wabi Space Design

Axel Vervoordt
Tatsuro Miki

Technical Coordination

Francesca Boni
Georg Malfertheiner

Organisation

Tiziana Alvisi
Garance Laporte
in collaboration with
Dario Dalla Lana

Exhibition Office and Registrar

Giulia Biscontin
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Paola Vinaccia

Photographic Archives of Palazzo Fortuny

Cristina Da Roit
Marcello Venturini

Condition Reports

Marianna Fonzo
Mariella Gnani

Exhibition Graphic Design

Tomomot

Catalogue

Edited by

Daniela Ferretti
with Cristina Da Roit

Texts by

Javier Barón
Paolo Bolpagni
Ilaria Caloi
Emiliano Cano Díaz
Cristina Da Roit
Dario Dalla Lana
Doretta Davanzo Poli
Daniela Ferretti
Claudio Franzini
Silvio Fuso
Sophie Grossiord
Ana Gutiérrez Márquez
Marzia Maino
Sergio Polano
Giandomenico Romanelli
Chiara Squarcina
Rosa Vives
Cecilia Zanin

Editorial Coordination

Davide Daninos
Massimo Zanella

Copy Editing

Valentina Rossini

Translations

Kieren Bailey
Lucian Comoy
Ottavio Janni
Luisa Sanjust

Graphic Design

Tomomot

The sound composition "Blue Veil"
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Mireille Capelle

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Lenders

Archivio Eleonora Duse,
Istituto per il teatro e il
melodramma, Fondazione
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Emanuela Carpani
Soprintendente
Soprintendenza Archeologia,
belle arti e paesaggio
per il Comune di Venezia
e Laguna

Devis Valenti
Direttore
Ufficio Esportazione
Soprintendenza Archeologia,
belle arti e paesaggio
per il Comune di Venezia
e Laguna

Antonio Andrea Borgesi
Vice-direttore
Ufficio Esportazioni
Soprintendenza Archeologia,
belle arti e paesaggio
per il Comune di Venezia
e Laguna

Gino Famiglietti
Direttore Generale
Ministero dei Beni
e delle Attività Culturali
e del Turismo
Direzione Generale
Archeologia, Belle Arti
e Paesaggio
Servizio IV - Circolazione

Luciano Maria Provenzano
Ministero dei Beni
e delle Attività Culturali
e del Turismo
Direzione Generale
Archeologia, Belle Arti
e Paesaggio
Servizio IV - Circolazione

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With the exhibition *Fortuny. A Family Story* we are paying tribute to a dynasty and to events that seem to have dropped straight out of the pages of a novel: a young man of humble origins makes a name for himself thanks solely to the ingenuity and perseverance with which he cultivates his talent as a painter.

As an adult, Mariano Fortuny y Marsal is welcomed into the most important family of Spanish painters of his time by marrying Cecilia de Madrazo; he achieves success in nineteenth-century Europe, where he becomes one of the most sought-after and highly-paid painters of his time. But he dies at a very young age, when his second-born son is only three years old. This son would prove to be an heir worthy of his father's artistic legacy, thanks in part to the culturally stimulating environment he grew up in; indeed, Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo's maternal grandfather and uncles were successful artists and within this milieu, Mariano would develop multiple talents and a unique personality.

Finally, an exhibition showcasing this family story and European saga encompassing Barcelona, Rome, Madrid, Granada, Paris and Venice, in the very building, Palazzo Fortuny, which preserves a wealth of symbols, ideas, grandeur, images and stories that are unmatched anywhere in the world – and that continue to live here.

I would like to thank the Axel & May Vervoordt Foundation that provided generous support for carrying out this important project.

Mariacristina Gribaudo

President of the Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia



Defined by many as the Leonardo da Vinci of the twentieth century, Mariano Fortuny breathed and fed on art even before he was born. This exhibition aims to pay tribute to his boundless creativity by highlighting both the family context in which he grew up and the passion for collecting art that distinguished the Fortuny and Madrazo families.

A representative part of the heterogeneous collections has been reunited following the dispersals that succeeded each other over a period of less than a century: the works were sometimes sold out of necessity, but in many cases were also generously donated to European museums and public institutions.

Putting together an exhibition project is a laborious and complex business, requiring constant attention and care, in order to arrive at completion. The variables that determine the final outcome are endless, involving many organisational aspects; they are not always positive, but thanks to a passionate working group all difficulties and moments of despondency have been overcome.

I express my gratitude to Cristina Da Roit, who shared the curatorship of the exhibition and the editing of the catalogue with me. A sincere thanks to Javier Barón for the fundamental advice and support he has given to the project.

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The architecture of Palazzo Fortuny inspired Mireille Capelle's sound composition "Blue Veil": my thanks go also to her.

My heartfelt gratitude goes to the authors of the essays that enrich the fine volume accompanying the exhibition and to Davide Daninos, Massimo Zanella, Valentina Rossini and the Tomomot Studio who have produced it with dedication and competence.

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Daniela Ferretti
Director of Palazzo Fortuny



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The Knossos Scarves: Minoan Inspiration and Oriental Fascination

Ilaria Caloi

The Knossos scarf created by Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo in 1906 is a large silk taffeta garment, rectangular in form (4 × 1 m), printed with a variety of coloured motifs inspired by Minoan Crete. These decorative elements were reproduced in the academic books and journals written by those archaeologists of various nationalities who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, were bringing to light the Minoan civilisation.¹

The notebooks still preserved in the Museo Fortuny in Venice are of considerable importance, as they enable us to admire the sketches of Minoan motifs that Fortuny meticulously copied from vases and *larnakes* published in *The Prehistoric Tombs of Knossos* (1906) by Arthur Evans, who excavated the Palace of Knossos.² Furthermore, in the notebook entitled *Descriptions et Illustrations*, Fortuny reports that the book by Angelo Mosso, *Escursioni nel Mediterraneo e gli scavi di Creta* (1907),³ was also a source of inspiration for his scarves, which he himself called Knossos scarves because they were decorated with “fiori e alghe che avvolgono i vasi molto antichi trovati nell’isola di Candia”.

For his Knossos scarves, Fortuny used abstract, floral, and marine Minoan motifs, which reflected the fascination of the early twentieth-century Art Nouveau artists with natural world in all its forms. The paradoxical analogies between Minoan art and Art Nouveau indeed stimulated Fortuny and other contemporary artists to adopt Cretan decorations to produce modern creations.

The modernity that the archaeologists found in the elaborate decoration of Minoan artefacts was also recognised in depictions of women in Cretan frescoes and figurines. In 1902, the art historian and critic Edmond Pottier commented on the woman portrayed in the fresco at Knossos, whom he dubbed *La Parisienne*, as follows: “un mélange d’archaïsme naïf et de modernisme pimenté”.⁴ This feminine figure, with her pronounced eroticism, as indicated by her exposed breasts, reflected the concept of modern woman elaborated in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, which in some way coincided with the image that Europeans had of Oriental women: a mixture of spirituality and seduction, of mysticism and sensuality.

The Fortuny’s creation of the Knossos scarf follows this *Zeitgeist*, both in the use of Minoan motifs recalling Art Nouveau decorations, and in the choice of the model, much influenced by the fascination of the time with the Oriental fashion.

The choice to produce large and multi-purpose scarves reflects the fascination with Oriental veils and cloaks shared by many contemporary artists. Fortuny’s interest in Oriental clothes is well-known: he not only increased his already rich father’s collection of mostly Arabic costumes with Moroccan, Japanese and generically Oriental clothes, but also transformed these garments into a fundamental source of inspiration and imitation for his textile productions. Examples are represented by his creations of Japanese kimonos, Arabic abayas and burnouses, as well as Turkish dolmans.

The Knossos scarves are also reminiscent of the large silk veils used by the American pioneers of modern dance who were performing at that time in Berlin and Paris, such as Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis



437. Unknown
The Dancer Ruth St. Denis
Wearing a Knossos Scarf, 1907
Venice, Museo Fortuny



438. Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo
Henriette Wearing a Knossos Scarf, circa 1910
Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana,
Fondo Mariutti-Fortuny



and Loïe Fuller. It is therefore no coincidence that Fortuny chose Ruth St. Denis to wear his Knossos scarves during their official presentation in Berlin in 1907.⁵ The dancer, considered the responsible for the introduction of orientalism into modern dance in Europe, found in the East new responses for her needs, namely the exaltation of a ritual, at once mystical and sensual. Her Oriental dances in which she interpreted female figures such as the goddess Egypta or the Indian princess Radha, were particularly famous in Germany.

Hence, the Knossos scarf worn by Ruth St. Denis seems to represent the interpretation that Fortuny offered not only of Minoan art, but especially of the Minoan woman. To present his Knossos scarves, he chose an “oriental” woman able to symbolise a modern blend of spirituality and seduction.

There is no doubt that the Fortuny’s fascination with the Oriental world was inherited from his father, but in him it emerges from an entirely twentieth-century stance. First of all, it appears to be filtered by the Minoan culture to which the artist so much – and intentionally – turned for his creations from the outset of their production; secondly, his Knossos scarves represent all the revolutions that he experienced at the turn of the twentieth century, such as the reforms of theatre, costume and dance. He not only created an innovative model in terms of form and decoration, but also conceived a new and modern way of dressing the twentieth century European women, following a double thread: the inspiration from the ancient Mediterranean world, here represented by the Minoan culture of Crete, and the fascination with the Oriental world, in its broadest sense.



- 1 Cf. Caloi 2011.
- 2 Evans 1906.
- 3 Mosso 1907.
- 4 Pottier 1902, pp. 81–94.
- 5 Cf. Caloi 2016, pp. 71–83.

439. Manifattura Fortuny

Knossos Scarf, circa 1910

Private collection

Minoan motifs used by Fortuny
to print his Knossos scarves