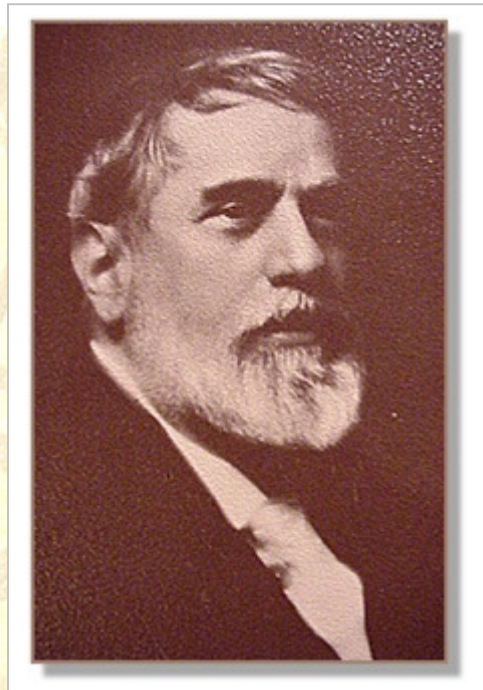


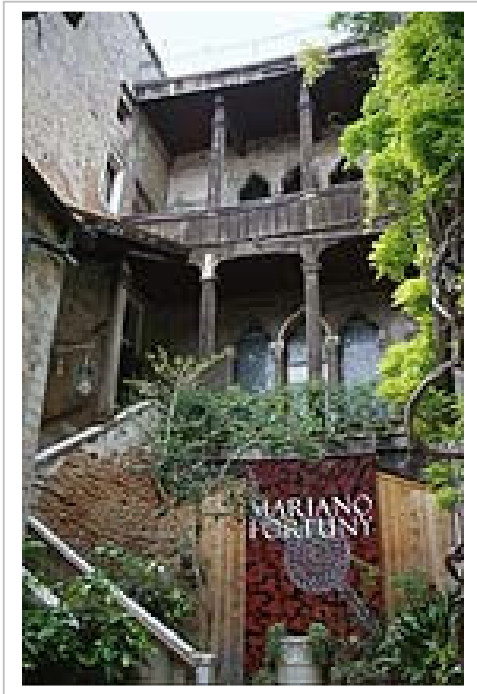
**designer/artist/inventor/genius all round 'Renaissance Man'
that was Mariano Fortuny... the magician of Venice**

It is now almost exactly a year since I was in Venice. I had heard from various friends about the beauty of the city but nothing can really prepare you for seeing it for yourself for the first time. John and I had paid to be included on a college trip and I was allowed the time away from my normal classes so that I could go with the proviso that I take the Textile Students to the Island of Burano and talk to them about lace. However, what I was really excited about was finally getting to see the home (now a museum) of the fabulous designer/artist/inventor/genius all round 'Renaissance Man' that was Mariano Fortuny.

Mariano Fortuny was born in 1871 in Granada, Spain to a successful artistic family. It therefore seems only natural that he should have become an artist, and while he always considered his profession to be that of an artist, he also excelled at numerous interests. These included stage lighting and stage design, architecture, photography and fabulous dresses (including the Delphos dress, which he also patented!) and textiles. These were not separate interests but must be seen as connected through his thorough knowledge of physics and chemistry. His ability to invent and create (he registered over twenty inventions) was so marked that he was variously described as a 'magician, an alchemist and a dreamer' (De Osma, 1980, p.13).



The Palazzo Fortuny, his home and studio from 1899 can be found on Campo San Benedetto. It is described by the Everyman Venice guide as 'more of a secret garden than a traditional museum' (2004, p.273) and it was easy to see what they meant as upon entering the courtyard, one of my initial memories is of the whole host of plants that filled the area. We went up the somewhat ramshackle stairs to the first floor (which was the entrance) and entered the salon (Portego). It was this dark cavernous room and sadly only this room that was open to the public but within it were riches for the eyes as every wall was hung floor to ceiling with sumptuous Fortuny fabrics, velvets, silks and cottons, all gorgeously printed with patterns inspired by motifs from the Renaissance, Arabic script, India, China and Japan. In the corner was one of Fortuny's easels set up as if the owner was to return at any moment. A sombre glass panelled dark wood cabinet contained items that had belonged to Fortuny stood in another corner and here and there were Fortuny silk lamps, giving out just a little light to enable us (when our eyes became accustomed to the gloom) to see the wealth of objects collected by Fortuny but without presenting too much possible long term damage to the items.



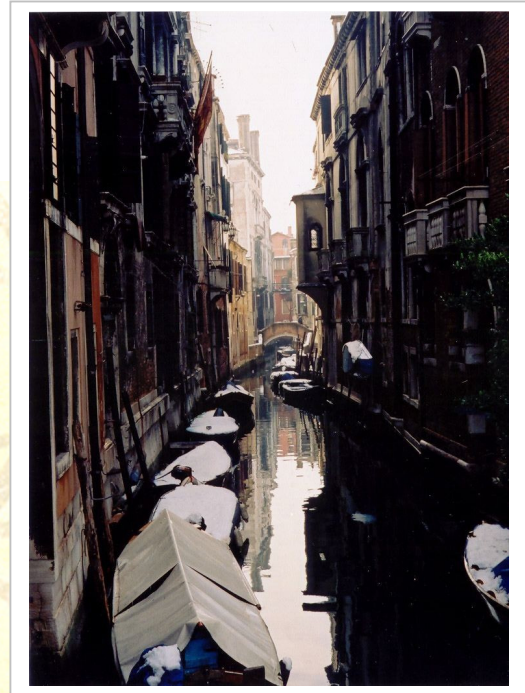
It was not long after this visit to the Palazzo that we made another discovery; while wandering along the myriad of tiny streets through Venice we came upon a tiny shop whose windows were piled high with bolts of Fortuny printed cotton. However, it was shut for lunch. We gazed longingly at the windows, tried to see if there was a price on display and decided to come back. On our return, we found that the shop had opened and on entering discovered that it was run by a little old lady who had worked there selling Fortuny fabrics for around the last forty years. The fabric was produced at the Fortuny Fabric Factory on the island of Giudecca, to Fortuny's own designs and with his original unique techniques. John always the 'design – engineer' was fascinated with how it was produced and asked if we could visit the workshop to see the production... the look of horror on the lady's face was something to be seen. "No, No, No, it is a secret process, no one is allowed to see". She explained that the designs were hand-printed and hand finished, we were then told the price per metre (which I now can't remember – or possibly have blocked it out of my memory!) and we said that we needed to think about it... After another bit of a walk and a delicious spinach calzone, which was lunch and a method of warming our hands, we worked out a design for how we could best utilise the fabric and a possible costing for the cushions and decided that as we adored the fabric we just had to go with it!

Fortuny was a master with pattern and printing techniques and the design that we chose was his 'Granada' pattern (named after the place of his birth), as it was a beautifully undulating design of flowering tendrils, hand-block printed in a gentle gold onto a soft yellow dyed cotton. Guillermo De Osma's book '*Fortuny: The Life and Work of Mariano Fortuny*' describes the different types of processes that he researched and mastered including woodblocks and Japanese stencils and tantalisingly mentions an 'original invention patented in 1909' (1980, p.115) but gives no more detail. The lady in the shop carefully cut and wrapped the fabric in tissue and placed it in a bag which I clutched like the precious object that it was on our walk back to the hotel.



This was a trip that was to see John became as enamoured as myself with the work of Fortuny, the spending of a considerable amount of our holiday money on a mere metre of Fortuny hand-printed fabric and John and I getting engaged! An excellent first visit to Venice.

But what happened to the Fortuny fabric? Well, as any person who sews will tell you, there are some fabrics that you buy that you take a while to cut up. The nerves as you take the scissors to it... do I really want to cut it there? What if I make a mistake? Maybe I should just enjoy it a while longer as a full piece, etc, etc. However, cut and sew it we did (see the Wares page for the results) and it has sold steadily, generally to people who adore very fine textiles. We sold six at The Textile Society's Annual Antique Textile Fair (last Sunday 5th March 2006). So now we are in the happy position of needing to revisit Venice in order to buy more of these beautiful fabrics....



Recommended reading:

Guillermo De Osma. *Fortuny: The Life and Work of Mariano Fortuny* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980).

Anne-Marie Deschodt & Doretta Davanzo Poli. *Fortuny* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000).

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