

# Interview



## Inside My Studio *Isabelle de Borchgrave*

*Internationally known paper costume artist Isabelle de Borchgrave talks about her studio, and how she and her staff work in it.*

Isabelle de Borchgrave is an internationally known artist who creates amazing paper costumes that have been exhibited at museums and in historical settings all over the world, including a large-scale exhibit of her work at San Francisco's Legion of Honor in early 2011. [See "[Pulp Fashion: the Art of Isabelle de Borchgrave](#)", VC vol 9, issue 1].

Her first studio in the 1970s was in a little house in Sablon, in the old area of Brussels, where she gave drawing classes to her friends' children and other neighbor's children. As she rose to prominence as an artist and costumer over the years, her commissions outgrew the the available space. She began to dream of a proper studio with good lighting and adequate storage space where she and her staff would have room to spread out and work on larger-scale exhibits.



Medici gallery from the exhibit "Pulp Fashion: The Art of Isabelle de Borchgrave." Photo courtesy Legion of Honor.

She eventually realized her dream. Working with noted architects Claire Bataille and Paul Ibens, she created a light-filled studio that has numerous windows



Courtyard of Isabelle de Borchgrave's studio. Photo © Jean-Pierre Gabriel.

looking out onto downtown Brussels, surrounded by gardens of Isabelle's own design.

Although her studio is far more spacious than most of us could ever dream of, Isabelle must still organize her work within the space, and deal with some of the same issues that every costumer faces. *The Virtual Costumer* recently talked with Isabelle de Borchgrave about how she uses her studio space, and how she organizes her work and that of her staff. Special thanks to Pauline de Borchgrave for her assistance.

*VC:* What does your studio look like: how large is it, and what kinds of work tables and storage for materials are there?

*de Borchgrave:* My studio is about 1200 square meters [13,000 square feet]. All work tables are set on wheels for flexibility. They can also be raised to various heights.



A portion of Isabelle de Borchgrave's spacious studio workspace.  
Photo © Jean-Pierre Gabriel

There are some storage rooms as well as custom-made furniture meant for storage.

*VC:* How many staff members work with you?

*de Borchgrave:* Four permanent stylists work in the atelier on different projects, such as repairing old costumes, redoing a costume that is too damaged, and working

on new collections or other commissions for museums.

*VC:* How do you and your team divide the tasks, and how do they utilize the studio space as they work?

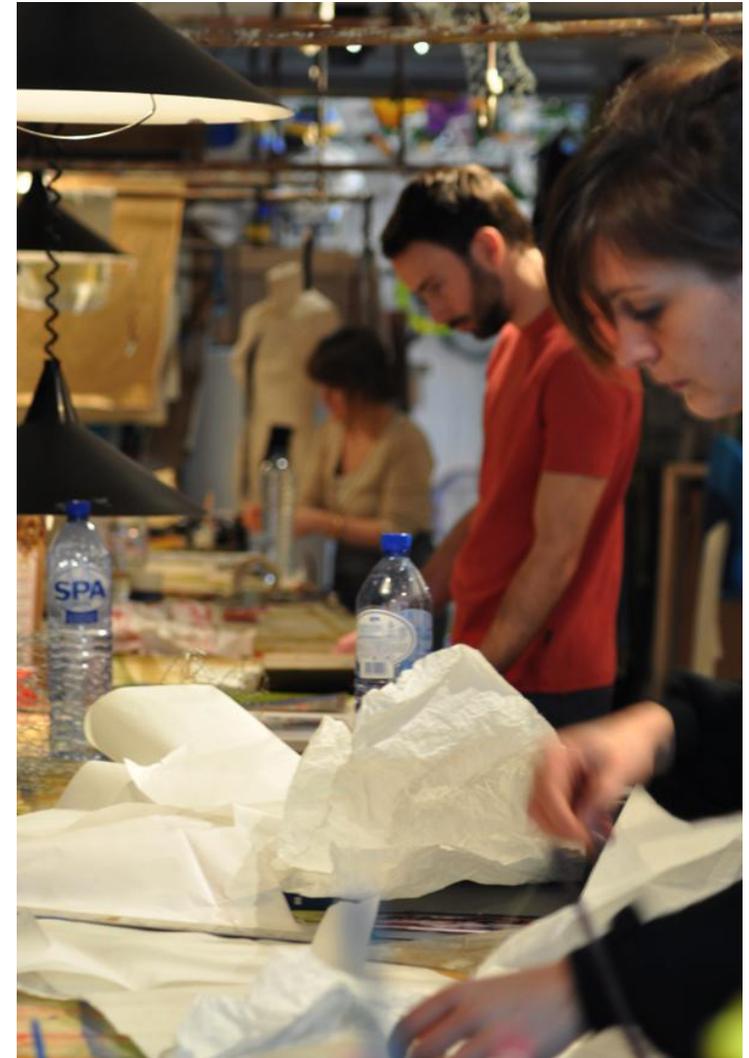
*de Borchgrave:* Four permanent artists (textile designer, sculptors, ...) work with me in the atelier. They mainly make the accessories (wigs, jewels, shoes, ...), the mannequins and the backgrounds. They also work on private commissions we receive for party and house decoration, personal jewels, etc..

During the year we also regularly welcome interns. They work on everything to learn as many things as possible.

The studio is divided in three rows of tables. The first one is used by the textile designers and interns, the second one is used by the stylists, the sculptors and the interns, and the third row, a smaller one, is the one I use to paint the pleated works, the paintings, the papers and so forth.

*VC:* You mentioned creating the wigs, jewels and shoes. Why are those so important?

*de Borchgrave:* All those details make a big part of the costume. They make it alive. It helps to recreate the context where the costume was worn. It is very important. It can also help to add a little fantasy to the costume, or it just helps to make the costume more realistic.



Working on a project in the studio. Photo: All rights reserved.



Isabelle de Borchgrave at her work table, applying acrylic color to primed pattern paper. Photo: © CidB.

*VC:* What size and type of paper you use?

*de Borchgrave:* The paper I use is the common pattern paper that the stylists use in their atelier. I just don't buy sheets of paper, but huge rolls because I need a lot of paper to make a dress, several meters. This paper is really amazing because it is very malleable and reacts very well to the paint I use. The width of

the paper is always the same as I use the same roll for all the dresses: 150 cm [60 inches]. The length will depend on what I am going to do.

*VC:* What special tools have you devised to help you create and assemble your pieces? Do you use commercial tools in unique or unexpected ways?

*de Borchgrave:* Each dress is a new challenge. They are all different. So for each costume my team and I have to find new ways to recreate the effects we want to have. All the stencils are made in the atelier after I choose or create a design.

The tools used are most of all scissors, paper, cutters, glues, acrylic colors, inks, adhesive, stencils and of course, brushes. We also use old irons as weights to squash the



Tools of the trade: acrylic paints, brushes, and stencils to create patterns. Photos by Philip Gust during a special 2011 Legion of Honor demonstration by Isabelle de Borchgrave.

paper. Huge sticks are hanging from the ceiling to dry the painted papers. But we do not really use “special” tools.

*VC:* What steps do you follow when you create a new costume?

*de Borchgrave:* The first step, and one of the most important parts of the work, is research. I have to be very careful not to make a mistake ... I have to study the period of the costume, the history of the character if it is a portrait ... Research can take weeks.

After the choice of the model of the dress, one of the stylists working in my atelier creates a white pattern that will be fixed on a mannequin to see how to recreate the dress. When the white patterns suits, we paint the background on to the huge pieces of paper. When it is finished I paint the details, the trompe l’oeil, ... Sometimes we rumple the paper to give it some volume.

When the paper is prepared, we cut it and we put together all the pieces on the mannequin. At this time we begin to create all the accessories and details: wigs, laces, collars, bags, jewels, shoes, gloves.

*VC:* The ornate paper lace collars for your Medici pieces are truly incredible: how do you go about creating such detailed pieces and what kinds of tools do you use?

*de Borchgrave:* The lace collars for the Medici pieces were indeed a big challenge. Each one of them took nearly 6 weeks to produce. It required interpreting period collars with a variety of paper material like



Lace collar of Marie de' Medici dress made of lens paper by Isabelle de Borchgrave based on a Pietro Facchetti portrait. Photo: © Andreas von Einsiedel.

simple plain or corrugated cardboard as well as various paint media.

*VC:* How are finished pieces kept as they are completed, how are they prepared for shipment to an exhibit, and how are they stored once they return from the exhibit until they are required for the next one?

*de Borchgrave:* Each costume has its own boxes. The first one is in cardboard that is made to measure. The second box is in wood and covers the first box. It is used principally for the boat trips and sometimes

also when costumes travel by planes. When the costumes are not exhibited we store them in a warehouse which has specialized in storing art pieces. When we put the dresses in their box, we fix them with cardboard blanks to be sure the costume doesn't move too much during travel. We sometimes also use frigolite [styrofoam] to protect the most delicate art pieces.

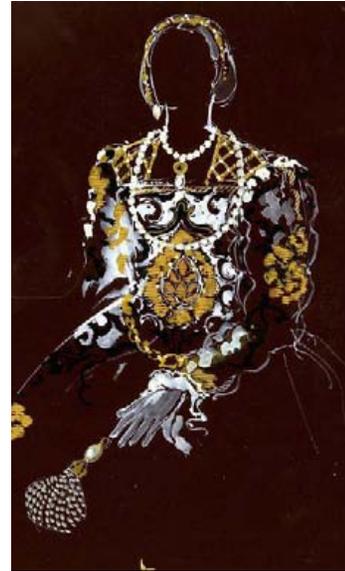
*VC:* Thank you very much for talking to us about your studio and how you work.

***Countess Isabelle de Borchgrave d'Altena*** graduated from the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, worked in advertising for less than a year, and then made clothes for her friends before branching out into interior design. She later established her own studio specializing in designing fabrics. She dreamed up her paper costumes following a visit to the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1994. Over the years, her paper creations have ranged from an elaborate headdress in the shape of a caravel in full sail, worn by Marie Antoinette, to a delicate, painted paper dress that Queen Fabiola of Belgium wore at her wedding to Prince Felipe of Spain in Madrid. In 2011, a large-scale exhibit entitled "Pulp Fashion: The Art of Isabelle de Borchgrave" opened to great acclaim at the Legion of Honor Museum in San Francisco. Her work has been widely collected by major museums and private collectors worldwide. She resides in Brussels, Belgium. Visit her [website](#) to learn more about her work.

## Steps in Recreating a Masterpiece: Eleanor of Toledo

*The real dress of Eleanor of Toledo doesn't exist anymore. The only thing remaining is a little piece of fabric with the black and gold stencil that you can see on the dress that I recreated. We had to work with only with the painting. I had to be very careful to respect as much as possible the design of the stencil that I recreate in my studio because that was the only thing remaining, "a kind of homage".*

– Isabelle de Borchgrave



Above:: Eleanor of Toledo with her son Giovanni de' Medici Bronzino in 1545; Costume sketch by Isabelle de Borchgrave; studio staff painting fabric design on pattern paper. Below (right-to-left): detail of painted pattern; finished paper dress by Isabelle de Borchgrave; and detail of pleating on skirt. Photos of staff working above and paper detail below right © CidB: Photo left and center below by Andreas von Einsiedel.

