

Event Report



Pulp Fashion: The Art of Isabelle de Borchgrave *Kathe Gust*

An exhibit at the Legion of Honor Fine Arts Museums in San Francisco, California features astounding costumes of paper from a world-renowned master artist.

The intricately handcrafted trompe l'œil paper fashions of Belgian artist Isabelle de Borchgrave will astound viewers of the exhibit with their artistry, creativity and resemblance to the finest couture designs. This show has something for everyone, from the foyer with Asian inspired coats to the exquisite “lace” ruffs on the wall of the Medici room.

De Borchgrave's impressive paper dresses evoke fashions from the courts of

the Medici to the legendary Mariano Fortuny of the early 20th century, who is both a major source of inspiration to de Borchgrave and a kindred spirit. When I asked, “How do you make all those pleats?” She responded, “With PASSION!” She said she has always wanted to own a Fortuny gown, and this is her way of having not only one – but all she desires.

Most of the exhibit is presented in sections supplemented with items from the Legion's collection:

- **In White** showcases the artist's craftsmanship and the shape of fashion in a selection of dresses in white, ivory or a breath of pink.
- **Papiers à la Mode** features iconic designs from key periods in fashion history; from Elizabeth I to Chanel. I loved the Gibson Girl.

- **Fortuny** is assembled under a gossamer paper tent with recreations of Fortuny's closet, shoes and clothing. So atmospheric. The closet is amazing!
- **The Medici** is the artist's most extravagant series, transforming the gowns and luminous jewels of Renaissance Italy into paper sculpture.
- **Inspiration**—During a visit to the Legion of Honor in the summer of 2010, the artist selected four paintings as the inspiration for her latest body of work, enabling viewers to compare the inspiration with the creation.

Check out the artist's [web site](#) for more information regarding her works, as well as custom-made garments for clients.

On opening day, a limited number of observers watched the artist create “a little 18th century petticoat” in 1 hour. Normally a paper dress takes her 30 to 45 days, but with the help of several willing assistants, a little advance preparation, and a hair dryer, she carried it off. The photos on the following pages that illustrate the process were taken with special permission of the artist.

Here are the basic steps. She uses 100% rag paper – matte on one side, shiny on the other – always the same. If pieces require a pattern, (the bodice in this example) it is cut out. All the pieces are



primed with a layer of white acrylic paint. She said, "That part is not interesting. I did it already."



Then she began to paint the skirt – flowers, stems, leaves – continuing to paint and overpaint (right top), before making a final pass with several stencils in more colors (right bottom). She has thousands of stencils, mostly of her own design. The layering gives the "garment" depth and realism. She brought with her white, red, green and yellow acrylic paints, and her use of them was very free and instinctive. She said, "You must stand up to do this, you need to see the big picture while you work."



The ruching was painted, then folded and crushed before being glued on the skirt with a glue stick. The skirt was gathered by pulling threads, just as for cloth, the paper having been prepared by folding and taping the top edge before priming and sewing.



The bodice was stenciled then darts were folded on the mannequin and glued in to shape



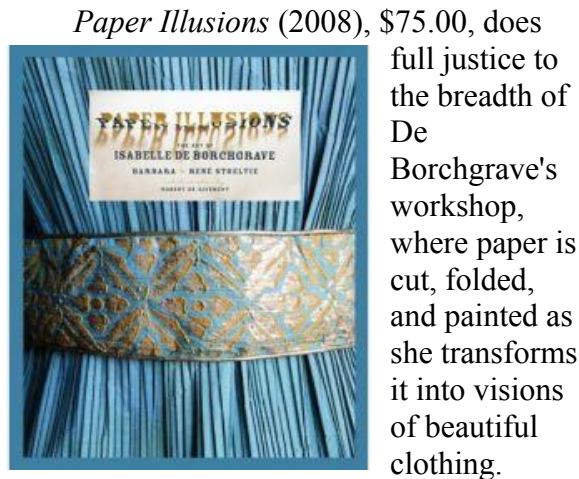
And “Voila!” a little 18th century petticoat in 1 hour.



Watching Isabelle de Borchgrave turn ordinary paper and paints into extraordinary

art so quickly was an astounding experience that I won't soon forget. At the end of her demonstration, she announced that she intended to allow the museum to auction the dress to benefit children's art programs.

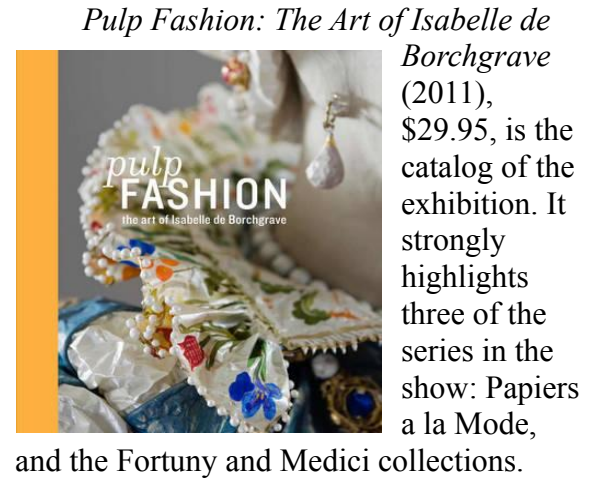
Two books are available in the gift shop with full color photos. Prices listed are the gift shop prices. The books are also available from many sources at varying prices, including used bookstores for the 2008 publication.



Paper Illusions (2008), \$75.00, does full justice to the breadth of De Borchgrave's workshop, where paper is cut, folded, and painted as she transforms it into visions of beautiful clothing.

Rene Stoeltie's photographs show figures from history placed in beautiful rooms and gardens, while details of color, pattern, and form leap off the page. Some of the items in the show are included, others are not, but additional items are in the book, which are not in this show.

The book showcases not only her clothing recreations, but also other forms of her art, such as her pottery. It is a wonderful coffee table book of extraordinary art. (hardcover with dust jacket)



Pulp Fashion: The Art of Isabelle de Borchgrave (2011), \$29.95, is the catalog of the exhibition. It strongly highlights three of the series in the show: *Papiers a la Mode*, and the Fortuny and Medici collections.

A special section focuses on the making of one of the new works inspired by a portrait of a Neapolitan woman in the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Full-color close-ups of selected works reveal the painstaking detail that goes into each piece. (hardcover with printed boards)

If you love fashion, color, and craftsmanship, this is an exhibit you won't want to miss. Curated by Jill D'Alessandro, the show runs now through June 5, 2011 at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. I know that I'm planning to go again *at least* once more before it leaves!

Kathe Gust enjoys creating clothing for many historical periods, and for various sci-fi and fantasy genre. Visit her [web site](#) to read articles and see photos for some of her costuming projects.

Build photos by Kathe and Phil Gust.