

THE MERCHANT'S OF VENICE

Join us on a tour of Italy's Favourite Fabrics



Rubelli has an illustrious history of silk weaving dating back to the 18th century: but their combined ancestry dates back to the 17th century dye makers who created the oxblood red 'rubia tinctorum' which coloured the sails of the Venetian vessels that lined the harbours of the lagoon.

Located at the Renaissance palazzo Ca' Corner Spinelli, the Rubelli historical archive has a collection of over 6000 textile records dating back to the end of the 15th century. The archive was founded in the late 19th century when Lorenzo Rubelli took over Giacomo Panciera which had for over a century produced mock gold and silver textiles, galloons and fringes.

G. B. Trapolin had been renowned for their 'soprarizzo' velvets since the late 18th century. 'Soprarizzo' or 'cesellato' velvets, with their deeply textured surface combining looped and cut velvet piles often in a brocaded design accented with threads of gold or silver, had been the pride of Venice since the Renaissance. The rich velvets had started to become more popular for interiors by the middle of the 19th century, but as the century progressed so did the taste for historically inspired textile designs created using traditional techniques. Rubelli became increasingly successful as they were uniquely placed to draw inspiration from their historical archive, or to re-create designs that they had created throughout the centuries. They were also quick to embrace the principles of Art Nouveau, and later Art Deco, and produced sumptuous velvets and luminous silks in a perfect combination of contemporary design and traditional technique. ♦♦♦ SJD
www.rubelli.com

From the earliest days the Venetians adorned themselves and their homes with wonderful fabrics. In the beginning these were imported from the east: but from about the 12th century, the canny Venetians realised that it would make economic sense to undertake their own production and – beginning with samite silks, inspired by Byzantium, used mainly for vestments, and with the later help of an influx of refugee weavers from Lucca in the 13th century – they didn't take long to become masters of the art.

The joy now for anyone interested in fabrics is that there are numerous places in Venice where truly exquisite silks, brocades, velvets and lace can be seen, mostly free of charge. Anyone can drop into the Fortuny showrooms (www.fortuny.com) on the isle of Guidecca and on our visit we revelled in the glorious display of furnishing fabrics and cloth-covered items. The fabric made by Fortuny today is basically composed of the same long-staple Egyptian cotton employed by the founder Mariano Fortuny Madrazo (see *Selvedge* Issue 50) in the 1920s. Now, the adjacent factory, using organic dyes in antique colours with the addition of gold and silver threads, produces the fabric by a secret process in a myriad of textured, embossed and iridescent designs, some original to Mariano Fortuny but many modern.

This factory is out of bounds to visitors but at the Tessitura Luigi Bevilacqua (www.luigibevilacqua.com) at the top of the Grand Canal, visitors are welcome by appointment. There, in an atmosphere redolent with history and tradition, we saw the old wooden ▶





hand looms producing luxurious brocades, damasks, lampas and velvets just as they have been doing since 1875 – although the family have silk connections going back to 1700. These sumptuous fabrics found today not only decorate such eminent buildings as The Vatican, The White House and the Kremlin but also theatres, ocean going liners and a royal train.

We watched entranced as the CEO Alberto Bevilacqua unrolled piece after piece of gloriously rich velvet, some woven so that the colours changed completely according to the fall of the light, many based on historic archival designs but others, including crocodile and leopard prints, were up to the minute. A smart black and white design we particularly admired was, we learned, inspired by a gateway on Madison Avenue.

This sort of soprarizzo cut velvet can only be produced on hand looms after many hours of work. "60-70cm a day is a weaver's output," Dott. Bevilacqua explained. "For a complex pattern maybe only 20cm a day... and setting up a loom can take 3 weavers two weeks." Hardly surprising then that these fabrics can cost up to €1000 a metre. One tiny top made up by Dolce & Gabanna from a fabric using the 13th century Bevilacqua signature icon of the tree of life, flanked by two protective lions, retailed at €4,000.

Later in our stay we came across Bevilacqua velvets in some unexpected places – we found pillars upholstered with tapestry bearing the giardino motif which depicts baskets rich with fruit and flowers in

the Churches of San Zulian and Santa Maria del Giglio. Opposite the latter is the Bevilacqua shop run by Mario Bevilacqua, while also in San Marco a second shop run by Paola Bevilacqua is to be found in Fondamenta Canonica – both are overflowing treasure chests.

The firm of Rubelli (www.rubelli.com) is equally prestigious. Although the looms are now at Como, having made an appointment we were welcomed equally warmly at their archive and showroom in the sumptuous Palazzo Corner Spinelli on the Grand Canal. Here, shallow drawers containing some fabric fragments referred to as 'documents' were slid open for us to examine. The fabrics, which divide into historic pieces and pieces produced by the firm itself, date from the 15th to 20th centuries. We saw damasks of ciselé silk embellished with gilt loops, sumptuous Renaissance baroque brocatelles, fanciful 'bizarres' and the figured silks popular in the late 17th to early 18th century depicting stylized flowers, as well as exotic pieces of chinoiserie. We learned that some of these fabrics were so valuable that often garments made from them were unpicked and remade several times over the centuries.

In the showroom we also saw today's fabrics used as wall panels, upholstered furniture, fashion accessories, even shoes. The influence of the city of Venice is apparent: even the famous fish market has provided inspiration for a range of colours, and we were bowled over by ethereal drifting voiles sketched with the architecture of Venice. Rubelli fabrics can be seen all over the world – and all over ▶

The beautiful lace that came to be one of the most important aspects of 16th and 17th century dress has its origins in the lagoons of Venice during the mid 15th century. It is here that cutwork was developed into needle-lace, which as its original Italian name 'punto in aria' suggests, was formed from stitches in the air without fabric support. It is thought that the delicate art was first formed by aristocratic hands seeking creativity in a life that was deeply restrictive for women. Inspired by the art and architecture of the burgeoning renaissance city, their creations were amazingly intricate combining points and wheels with curling fronds and floral motifs.

Quickly in demand, workshops were set up by the city's religious and welfare institutions to teach the skills to spinsters, orphans and penitents to provide them with a valuable way of supporting themselves. Burano lace was widely worn in Venice and the 'Bavaro' – a lace tucker that filled the low neckline of the gown and created a beautiful fan shaped collar behind the head – became particularly fashionable. The lace was keenly sought after throughout Europe and became one of the most important aspects of the Venetian economy. By the mid 18th century the industry was in severe decline, causing it to require a complete revival a century later. The Burano Lace School was opened in March 1872 under the patronage of Princess Margherita of Saxony. Assisted by an elderly Master Lace-maker and a group of noble ladies who gave access to their family collections of lace, they were able to unlock the secrets of the art before it descended into obscurity. In 1878 they exhibited work at the Universal Exposition in Paris to international acclaim. *** SJD www.isoladiburano.it





Venice was once the portal between East and West, where the age-old traditions of Europe were greeted by all the unknown promise of the Orient. Mariano Fortuny infused his textiles with this intoxicating combination. He took motifs that had in earlier centuries formed the surface structure of a fabric, and instead printed them onto the crinkled surface of the silk or floated them on a diaphanous layer of silk gauze above the body of a gown.

His *Delphos Gown* was revolutionary and worn by Sarah Bernhardt, Lilian Gish and Eleanora Duse, it was even referenced in works by Proust. Inspired by Greek classicism, the *Delphos Gown* was a column pleated from neck to hem. The tiny vertical pleats, like the gills of a mushroom, allowed flexibility in the narrow cut of the column which had the benefit of sensuously clinging to every curve. The light fabric was counter-weighted by strategically placed handmade Murano glass beads, stitched at the hem and at intervals along the seams to allow the fabric to flare prettily around the feet, and to keep the pleated curves in line with the woman within. It had historical and political credentials to please the intelligentsia of the day, but more importantly it provided the wearer with an elegant gown that could be worn with little underneath, providing daring release from strict Edwardian underpinnings.

As an artist and technically adept designer, Mariano Fortuny lodged 22 patents in his career for a variety of dyes, methods, and techniques devised in his work, including his 1910 patent for the process that created the mushroom pleated silks that became his signature. ***

SJD www.fortuny.com.it

Venice; in the La Fenice Opera House, the famous Florian café and many palazzi. In fact many of the grand old buildings which were decorated by Rubelli in their heyday have now become hotels for which special flame-resistant fabrics have been developed. We were able to appreciate some of these sumptuous wall coverings ourselves when we dined at the Aman Canal Grande Hotel, the meticulously restored new incarnation of Palazzo Papadopoli. The Bauer Il Palladio Hotel & Spa in which we stayed on Guidecca was originally a convent, and here too Rubelli silks decorate not only on the walls of the rooms but surprisingly, also the Spa. "Silk is in fact a very strong material," the CEO Francesca Bortolotto Possati told me. "And Rubelli has such perfect designs..."

Theatres and films have also made good use of Rubelli fabrics for costumes. One of the loveliest is *Fragole*, a Rubelli design in silk liseré based on an 18th century embroidered waistcoat. It has been worn by the actress Kirsten Dunst in the film *Marie Antoinette* as well as Uma Thurman in *Dangerous Liaisons*.

As well as these big players, however, there are several more modest textile establishments worth visiting. In fact after all the riches, Chiarastella Cattana (www.chiarastellacattana.com) in Salizada Samuele is a tiny haven of quiet and subtle colour. Her bed linens, pillows, towels and other domestic goods, all made from natural fibres, are woven on jacquard looms in artisan workshops. Arras (www.arras.com) in Campo Squelini is a co-operative where woollen goods are hand woven by people with learning difficulties. These light, warm

tweedy fabrics are made up into clothing which sells for a reasonable price.

There are also skilled individual artists working with fabric in the city. One of the most exciting is Helene Ferruzzi (www.heleneferuzzi.com) whose hand-painted silks and velvets vibrate and shimmer with colour. Inspired by oriental scripts, geometry, and above all by the light and movement of the Venetian lagoon, she spends the summers painting the fabric in her open air studio in the Alpago mountains and sells the results in her attractive shop near the Guggenheim. For antique textiles a visit to Trios in Campo San Maurizio is a must. Better still if the owner Alberto Anfodillo is there, as he is a fabric specialist with profound knowledge of the subject. Occasionally he even has original Fortuny pieces for sale. If not, Venetia Studium (www.venetiastudium.com) holds a stock of attractive Fortuny-style items, any of which make very charming Venetian souvenirs or gifts.

Before leaving the city, however, the fabric enthusiast can obtain an extra burst of pleasure by visiting both the Fortuny Museum (www.fortuny.visitmuve.it) housed in the Palazzo where the master lived in the Campo San Beneto, and the newly renovated Museum of Textiles and Costumes in the Palazzo Mocenigo at San Stae. (www.mocenigo.visitmuve.it) Both are inspiring, enjoyable and full of fabulous fabrics. ♦ ♦ ♦ **Patricia Cleveland-Peck. Patricia travelled courtesy of Kirker Holidays (www.kirkerholidays.com) staying at Il Palladio Hotel & Spa where a 3 night break at Il Palladio Hotel & Spa costs from £635 per person.**

