

*Audio Guide Excerpt: Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo: Delphos Dress  
from the Italian Arts & Design: The 20th Century exhibition*

**narrated by: Mark Rittinger**

**Director, Development**

**ROM Governors**

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*[Audio ROM sound sting]*

The Delphos dress epitomises the notion of simple elegance. Mariano Fortuny, an artist and designer, first designed it in 1907, using the tunics of Ancient Greece as a source of inspiration. The gowns, made individually by hand, are in a fine, permanently pleated silk, and came in a variety of rich and unusual colours. Fortuny, well aware of the commercial value of his designs, kept his pleating technique a carefully guarded secret during his lifetime. Have you noticed the tiny glass beads? They were manufactured in Murano, and serve not only a decorative purpose but also a functional one. They weigh down the light silk and hold it in place. In an age where corsets and restrictive clothing were the norm, the gown was innovative and timeless in its style. The sensuous fabric flowed loosely and comfortably over the wearer's body and spread over her feet. Imagine how the colour must have shifted and changed with the light, as well as with the movements of the person wearing it. Not surprisingly, numerous avant-garde women owned a Delphos dress, including theatre legends Isadora Duncan and Sarah Bernhardt.

Mariano Fortuny lived and worked in Venice in the family palace, the Palazzo Orfei. His mother was a collector of renaissance fabrics, so his keen interest in textiles started at a young age. His multiple interests, in addition to his work in haute couture and fabric design, included painting, sculpture, photography, furniture design, set design and lighting techniques. Versatile and eccentric, he had a foot both in the past and in the future. This duality can be seen with his interest in the revival of craftsmanship and the use of models from the past. At the same time he invented and made use of modern printing and production techniques to achieve the qualities he desired in his sumptuous fabrics.

This example, from the textile collection of the Royal Ontario Museum, belonged to international socialite Rita Halle Kleeman, and she loved it so much that she wore it into her eighties.

*[Audio ends with ROM sound sting]*