

Theatre costumes: A look at the collections of the Catalan Museum of Performing Arts (MAE)

by CARME CARREÑO, curator at the MAE,
and LAURA ARS, graduate in Art History

Creating a character

¹ VOLTAS, Jordi,
El vestuario, La Galera,
Barcelona, 1991.

² “Exoticism”, which is a
term belonging to the time
in question, was a product
of an imperialist society and
mindset that we do not share.

³ Tórtola Valencia Bequest
(1882 -1955). Tórtola Valencia
was an ‘exotic’ dancer raised
in London by a Catalan father
and an Andalusian mother.
Her professional career
spanned the period from 1908
to 1930, during which she
became a model of beauty.
She merged oriental dance
with Spanish folklore to create
dances such as *La Tirana*.
The MAE has 108 articles of
clothing out of a total of 1,575
objects including photos,
postcards, oils, albums of
press clippings, etc.

*“To put on a costume is to dress up as a character: one must inhabit the
clothing as one inhabits the character.”*

Lydia Azzopardi¹

When we call to mind a play, it is the actors who appear in the memory. Acting steals the limelight, eclipsing all the behind-the-scenes professions that have made the performance possible, credible and emotionally engaging. By dressing actors, for example, the costume designer plays a hugely active role in the challenging task of creating characters. Through costumes, actors must feel that they are the characters they embody, transforming themselves and becoming someone they are not in order to take on the trappings of another person’s life.

Conveying the message

Every costume designer has an individual methodology when it comes to constructing character, and the MAE collections contain samples that illustrate the full variety. In her quest for exoticism² and colour, the dancer Tórtola Valencia³, for instance, succeeded in turning prêt-à-porter into unique, magnificent articles of clothing, blending fabrics that transported audiences to foreign lands and remote, opulent and sensual worlds. She did not design; she constructed. Experience was her studio and her alterations were pure intuition, enhancing comfort and flexibility through ceaseless trial and error. She not once renounced magnificence, simplicity was unknown to her, and the sight of her fabrics evoked riches, the ecstasy of Greek temples and the thousand and one nights of dreams. Valencia was a master of body language, understood aesthetics, and has left us a major collection of free bodies and corseted figures that span the fashions of the twentieth century.

[illegible]

Designs by Maria Araujo
for *Amadeus*, awarded the Max
Award for Spanish Scenic Arts,
2009.



4 RIUS, Claudia, *Curiositats sobre el vestuari de l'Avar*, Núvol, L'apuntador, 31 January 2017.
<https://goo.gl/uUY1yp>.

“My work is thankless: when it is done well nobody sees it, and when it is done poorly everybody takes note.”

Maria Araujo⁴

The MAE collections conserve nearly half of all the output of another woman who chooses her fabrics meticulously, the designer Maria Araujo. Araujo studies the fashion and reality of the period being represented and works painstakingly on even the most intimate details. The actors are subsumed into the time machine of her costumes. She studies the body, takes its measure, and dresses the character in what will be only one more piece – but, like all the other pieces, a crucial one – in the precise jigsaw puzzle that is the show.



Design by Francesc Soler i Rovirosa and photograph of a costume for the ballerina Pauleta Pàmies, for *Lohókeli* at the Teatre Tívoli, Barcelona, 1882. Photograph: A. Torija.



From role to fabric

5 Francesc Soler i Rovirosa Collection (1836-1900).

Francesc Soler i Rovirosa was one of the foremost set designers of the nineteenth century. He renewed stage machinery in Catalonia. Of his output, 1,400 items are conserved.

There is an unshakable linkage between wardrobe and the text from which the actors – though not solely the actors – draw great benefit. Design sketches and illustrations are a means of expression that seeks to translate the director's idea faithfully into fabric, even if the reality of what is ultimately made often differs. A costume fulfils two related missions: one is obviously to shape a character by dressing the actor, but the other is to show or convey the director's message to the audience. It is not necessary to honour the historical time of the text, nor is it unforgivable to decontextualise the period. The aim is to enable the codes of communication to flow with delicacy and skill. Roles, however, do not share the physical and financial limitations of costume-making, which requires seeking out textures, colours and volumes that are not always within reach, are sometimes merely the product of the artist's imagination, and yet must be turned into a real article of clothing. Fine examples are offered by the designs of Francesc Soler i Rovirosa.⁵

6 ECHARRI, Marisa, SAN MIGUEL, Eva, *Vestuario teatral*, Naque Editora, 1998.

7 Enric Borràs Collection (1863–1957). Enric Borràs was a legendary actor remembered for playing the role of Manelic in *Terra Baixa*. He took Catalan theatre to Spain and the New World. He formed a theatre company with Margarida Xirgu that created synergies from their mutual involvement. The MAE has roughly a hundred items, including the actor's own costumes.

8 Fabià Puigserver (1938–1991). Set designer, costume designer, theatre actor and director, and founder of the theatre Teatre Lliure, Fabià Puigserver is considered to be a significant force for renewal in Catalan theatre. The MAE collections house over a thousand pieces of costume design produced throughout his professional career.

As Marisa Echarri and Eva San Miguel show in their book *El Vestuario teatral*,⁶ all staging calls for planning, a production schedule and management; that is, a ceaseless battle against the threat of a deadline and the terror of a budget. In light of all this, it is clearly necessary to achieve perfect coordination among a team whose members have different profiles. Costume design must be broken down into the artistic team (designer) and the technical team (the costume workshop and the theatre's tailor, who is a member of the stage production staff). The designer is an artist who develops the overall idea, starts work when a text is put forward and finishes when the play opens. Similarly, the costume workshop – usually a private firm – finishes on the opening day, but cannot start work until the designs or illustrations are received. Lastly, the tailor is concerned with day-to-day performance, assisting on stage in costume changes and so on. The tailor's work begins when the costumes reach the theatre and continues throughout the run of the show.

The value of theatre costumes

Theatre costuming on a proscenium stage has two major allies in distance and lighting, which can transform the way a body is ultimately perceived. Traditionally, theatre costumes have not been valued as textiles because they are quickly resolved or constructed over the body, created without pretensions of excellence of production or precision in the cut or treatment of the fabric. The earliest actors in major companies, such as the company of Enric Borràs,⁷ had their own wardrobe, reflecting the quality standards of that period. As the twentieth century progressed, however, quality gave way to effect. Technological advances, such as those of lighting, made it possible to create characters and costumes without putting so much effort into individual items of apparel, but instead drawing on grand visual effects that had once relied on fabrics. Over time, spotlights on stage gained in importance over the preceding century's embroidery and lace, illuminating new, cheaper and simpler materials that were much less extraordinary.

Not until the arrival of the director, set designer and costume designer Fabià Puigserver⁸ in the nineteen-seventies was a taste for textile production, detail and quality revived. Because of the new proximity of the audience, costuming overtook set design, going beyond its own particular function of dressing the actor and now playing a role in the creation of an atmosphere and the evocation of a time and space.



Design by Fabià Puigserver
for *Lorenzaccio* and photograph
of Juanjo Puigcorbè at the Teatre
Lliure, Barcelona, 1987.
Photograph: Ros Ribas.





Photograph: Ros Ribas.

Dance and the plastic arts

9 SERRA, Laura, *Vestuari de dansa, peça de museu*, *Diari Ara*, 21 December 2013. <http://goo.gl/9Y56YW>.

10 Gelabert-Azzopardi Company Collection. The company, under the direction of Cesc Gelabert and Lydia Azzopardi, has been the recipient of several awards, such as the Spanish National Prize for Dance in 1997 and the Butaca Award in 2011 for its performance of *Belmonte*. The collection contains 275 objects from costumes to accessories, the majority made by Lydia Azzopardi herself.

11 “El estilo ecléctico de Lydia Azzopardi”, *El País*, 29 October 2011. <http://goo.gl/L8gZRa>.

“Nowadays, you don’t do costume design, you do fashion design, unless you’re a major opera or classical ballet company [...]. You get items here and there, at Mango, at Zara.”

Lydia Azzopardi⁹

One of the most recent costume collections to be acquired by the MAE is the collection of the contemporary dance company Gelabert-Azzopardi.¹⁰ Its creator, Lydia Azzopardi,¹¹ maintains that the exploration of fabrics was a constant feature of her travels; she mixed them and was unable to discard any of their unique qualities. In her tireless pursuit of comfort in movement, she came upon new flexible fabrics that were being promoted by the European textile industry as replacements for cotton and linen and yet were unknown in Barcelona at the time. These were polyester, elastane and synthetic fibres, which have changed our approach to costumes and which the young dance company adopted in the nineteen-eighties to enhance the fluidity of its productions.

Gelabert-Azzopardi also took an important decision to collaborate with artists of varying kinds, giving the company’s work a unique synergistic value. A fine example is the enriching and fantastical creation of the “traje de luces” in *Belmonte*, a work of marine inspiration from the painter Frederic Amat.

Bodice made by Cesc Gelabert for *La Belmonte*, created with the painter Frederic Amat, Teatre Lliure, 1988. Photograph: Jesús Atienza.



12 Victòria dels Àngels Collection (1923-2005). An internationally renowned soprano, Victòria dels Àngels won a radio contest called “Concursos viventes” in 1940. Her prize was to perform *La Bohème* on stage at the Teatre Victòria in a performance that would launch her on her way to singing opera in the leading theatres of the world. In the nineteen-sixties, she began focusing more on concert performances, particularly lieder recitals. The MAE houses a total of 100 items of costume.

A creation of one's own

Returning to our starting point, the legend surrounding the dancer Tòrtola Valencia lacked nothing in textile design, creation and production. Like many other artists, we know that she drew inspiration from her travels and the places she explored and that she rapidly incorporated these in her costumes and accessories. In the same way, the soprano Victòria dels Àngels,¹² who has left us all of her costumes, particularly those from her concerts, created her garments with her own hands out of a clear-cut, minimalist pattern, making a striking impression because of the quality of the fabrics and the intention of the colours that she herself selected.

From the stage to history

The task of the MAE is to preserve the memory of the performing arts, but performances of plays and dance cannot be kept in conservation boxes. This is why collections like the one on stage costumes are an indispensable part of theatre memory, enabling us to rediscover, restore and relive unique experiences from past lives. ●

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- CUBEIRO RODRÍGUEZ, Ana, *Vestir el cuerpo en escena: reflexiones sobre el vestuario teatral*, XIX Jornadas de Investigación Teatral, CePia Facultad de Artes de la Universidad de Córdoba, 15 September 2015.
- ECHARRI, Marisa, SAN MIGUEL, Eva, *Vestuario teatral*, Ñaque Editora, 1998.
- FERNÁNDEZ, Diana, *El vestuario en la historia y en la ficción escénica*, Madrid, 2015.
- GUTMAN, Laura, *Habitar el traje. Una reflexión sobre el vestuario teatral*, Cuaderno 39, Centro de Estudios y Comunicación, Buenos Aires, 2012.
- NADOOLMAN LANDIS, Deborah, *Diseño de vestuario*, Blume, 2014.
- VOLTAS, Jordi, *El vestuario*, La Galera, Barcelona, 1991.

Related links

- Escena Digital – Digital Repository of the MAE Collections
(<http://colleccions.cdmae.cat/>)
- Catalan Museum of Performing Arts
(<http://www.cdmae.cat/>)
- Theatre Institute
(<http://www.institutdelteatre.cat/>)