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Isabelle de Borchgrave's 'Pulp Fashion' in S.F.

ART Retrospective showcases looks re-created from paintings

By **Carolyn Zinko**, *Chronicle Staff Writer*

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The artist at work on a piece based on Massimo Stanzione's *Woman in Neapolitan Costume*, 2010.

Créations Isabelle de Borchgrave

Part of the fun at an art museum is gazing at portraits of people long gone and wondering about their lives, the clothes they wore, and what the clothes might look like today if they leapt out of the painting and into real life.

Belgian artist Isabelle de Borchgrave was curious about that, too, and 17 years ago, she decided to bring the two-dimensional into the third by creating the gowns she saw in museum paintings, with a twist.

Instead of sewing them from fabric, she makes them out of paper – and not just any paper. In a method that curators and gallery owners say is unique to her, De Borchgrave meticulously hand-paints rag paper in intricately detailed patterns and muted hues that mimic the faded colors of old paintings. The "fabric" is sculpted and assembled into clothing by a team working with de Borchgrave, each piece taking more than a month to create. None of the garments are wearable, but with crumpling, pleating, braiding and feathering techniques employed, they are a signature brand of haute couture.

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Renowned in Europe, de Borchgrave may soon gain an American following, thanks to the first retrospective of her work to be staged in the United States. "Pulp Fashion," a

show of what museum officials describe as "trompe l'oeil masterpieces," opened Saturday and is on display at the Palace of the Legion of Honor through June 5. The 60 sculptures range from the finery of the Medici family and Marie Antoinette to gowns by couturiers Frederick Worth and Christian Dior to the works of 20th century pleating expert Mariano Fortuny.

The timing for de Borchgrave couldn't be better, as the museum gains an international reputation for costume exhibition with the Nan Kempner and Vivienne Westwood retrospectives in 2007, the blockbuster Yves Saint Laurent retrospective in 2008 and the "Balenciaga and Spain" retrospective opening March 24.

De Borchgrave, trained as a painter at the Centre des Arts Décoratifs and the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels, will be in town for the opening and hopes that visitors to the exhibition will let their minds roam.

"I would like to make them dreamy," she said in a telephone interview from Brussels last month. "And next, after they dream, I hope they will want to know more about history, and will want to draw, cut and paint. I don't want to give people inspiration to do paper clothing, but to do something themselves with their own hands."

Fine Arts Museums Director John Buchanan learned of de Borchgrave through an exhibition she had done at the Museo Fortuny in Venice ("Un mondo di carta" or "A World of Paper") and began working to bring an exhibition here not long afterward. De Borchgrave's resume also included time spent as a clothing and home accessories designer; her wares were sold at her own boutique in Brussels. She began a sartorial sculpture career of sorts in 1994 after a trip to New York City.

In a catalog that accompanies the exhibition, museums curator Jill D'Alessandro writes that the 1994 trip to New York allowed de Borchgrave to meet costume historian and theatrical designer Rita Brown and historical costume clothing collector Martin Kamer, and to handle some of his collection of museum-quality dresses from the 18th and 19th centuries. That experience inspired de Borchgrave to bring the gowns she had seen in historical paintings to life – from one canvas to another – working with Brown for several years on a collection called "Papier a la Mode."

De Borchgrave's works are easy to describe, D'Alessandro said in an interview, but difficult to categorize.

"Where do they fit?" D'Alessandro asked. "They're not costumes, they're sculpture. She's a painter by training, so she moves between these areas of study, from paper to sculpture and from painting to costume history. I was trying to look at her as a contemporary artist, and I see her as emerging out of the post-modernist

movement, related to the pattern and decorative art movement. But she's very much on her own. As a contemporary artist, there's an innocent allure to her work. It's a bit of a history lesson but shown through a magical, playful eye."

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De Borchgrave's visit may prove inspirational, but it is also expected to be productive. The museum asked her to create works of clothing sculpture, inspired by four paintings of her choice at the museum, as part of its "Collection Connection" series, sponsored by the Annenberg Foundation. The five garments she has made premiere in the show.

Later this spring, local fans might see another side of de Borchgrave's work. The Serge Sorokko Gallery in San Francisco is working to mount an exhibition of her watercolors and mixed media on paper. The expressionistic works will include still lifes with fruit and objects, in ethnic Moroccan colors, and reproductions of Oriental rugs on paper.

In the meantime, her museum retrospective should give people plenty to ponder. Said D'Alessandro: "I want people to engage in her world, to think about history, to enjoy the fantasy."

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By **Carolyn Zinko**



Carolyn Zinko, a native of Wisconsin, joined The San Francisco Chronicle in 1993 as a news reporter covering Peninsula crime, city government and political races. She worked as the paper's society columnist from 2000 to 2004, when she wrote about the lifestyles of the rich but not necessarily famous. Since then, she has worked for the Sunday Style and Datebook sections, covering gala night openings and writing trend pieces. Her profiles of personalities have included fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg, Twitter co-founder Biz Stone and Emanuel Ungaro fashion house owner Asim Abdullah, to name a few. In a six-month project with The Chronicle's investigative team, she recently revealed the misleading practices of a San Francisco fashion charity that took donations from wealthy philanthropists but donated little to the stated cause of helping the developmentally disabled. On the lifestyle front, her duties also including writing about cannabis culture for The Chronicle and its cannabis website, www.GreenState.com website.

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