

A VELVET HAND

Mirella Spinella puts her very personal stamp on sumptuous fabrics and brings new life to a venerable Venetian tradition

By Martin Filler

Not far from the touristic hordes trooping between San Marco and the Rialto lies a little-known but very charming quarter of Venice: Canareggio. It is a quiet working-class neighborhood that provides a welcome respite from the splendors of the greatest urban stage set ever devised by Western man. But this being Venice, not even a by-way is without its quota of architectural grandeur. In Canareggio stands the Palazzo Lezze, and tucked away behind this imposing seventeenth-century landmark by Baldassare Longhena is the kind of picturesque surprise one often discovers in that city: the palazzo's small but nobly proportioned *barbessa* (boathouse), which has been converted into the Venetian Baroque equivalent of a mews house. But it has links other than architecture to a glorious past, for it is both home and workshop for a remarkable



young woman who is continuing an important tradition in Venetian design.

She is the euphoniouly named Mirella Spinella, a 33-year-old fabric designer who for the past seven years has been making textiles in an ancient technique that she taught herself through patient trial and error. Starting with pure-white velvet, she hand-

Working alone in her Canareggio studio, Mirella Spinella dyes velvets in rich hues and prints them with patterns evoking the complex design heritage of Venice.

dyes the material in tones worthy of a Tintoretto, deeply saturated yet delicate, giving it the panne texture that allows it to be used as an upholstery and drapery fabric. Next she prints the velvet with her own embossed designs, which are based on a broad spectrum of sources reflecting the numerous influences on the polymorphous culture of Venice during its thirteen-hundred-year history.

Spinella's fabrics summon up all the romantic mystique of La Serenissima; they bring to mind the deeply glinting gold-shot brocade vestments of the patriarch of Venice at Easter mass in the Basilica of San Marco, the gently faded damask in the background of one of Pietro Longhi's incomparable aristocratic genre scenes, or the voluminous velvet skirt of a masked Carnival reveler being robbed of a kiss by Don Giovanni Giacomo Casanova, chevalier de Seingalt.

FINE WORK



But the fabrics refer to much else besides Venice. Impressed into the lustrous nap of Spinella's velvets are the flattened palmettes and acanthus leaves of the ancient Minoans, paired doves by way of the early Christian mosaics of Ravenna, and the concentric whorls of the Vienna Secession direct from the paintings of Gustav Klimt. Her designs appear to be specifically historical at first glance but take on a theatrical generality the more one looks at them. And for the all-absorbing aesthetic of Venice, nothing could be more appropriate.

Ever since the island city-state was founded, in 697, textiles have figured significantly in its economic life. As gateway of trade between East and West, Venice was port of entry for the silks of the Orient as well as outlet for the wools of Lombardy and Tuscany. Not surprisingly, the weaving industry flourished in Venice, which produced some of Europe's most opulent stuffs during the several centuries when fabrics were among the most prized personal assets. In our own century the Venetian standard of luxury was given new definition by Mariano Fortuny, the protean couturier and fabric and

furniture designer whose signature materials—especially his famous plissé silks and metallic-printed velvets—singlehandedly revived the reputation of Venice as a world center for cloth of the highest quality.

Although the Fortuny factory on the island of Giudecca still operates under the direction of the great founder's redoubtable successor, Countess Elsie McNeill Lee Gozzi, there is now a legitimate spiritual descendant—if also a would-be competitor—in Mirella Spinella. Since 1982 visitors to Venice have been snapping up her luxurious accessories (especially pillows, table covers, and wall hangings) at Antichità Emme, a treasure-crammed antiques

shop just off the Frezzeria, the fashionable shopping street close to San Marco. By word of mouth her discriminating clientele has made her fabrics a sensation, and with good reason. Not only are they and the things made from them perfect souvenirs of Venice, but they are very much in harmony with the recently renewed interest in classic Italian decorating, exemplified by the work of such interior designers as Renzo Mongardino of Milan and such craftsmen as Lucrezia Moroni of New York.

Spinella already has a considerable following in Venice because, as she says of her fabrics, "I could put them on the walls of the city and they would



Above: A corner of the artist's living room, with chair, pillows, and curtains in her fabrics. Above the sofa, a document of Fortuny printed velvet. *Right:* The adjacent studio where Spinella works.

FINE WORK

be right." Her clients have included the decorator Piero Pinto (whose own quarters in a tiny converted chapel just off the Grand Canal contain a number of her pieces) and the Hotel Cipriani (whose exceptionally luxurious new rooms, designed by Gerard Gallet, combine Fortuny wall fabrics with Spinella bedspreads and curtains). The Cipriani project is perhaps the ultimate accolade for her: she reveres the work of the Granada-born Fortuny and preserves several documentary examples of his original fabrics in her *barbessa* as treasured relics.

Her atelier in the Longhena boat-house is swathed in her shimmering yard goods and is as infused with a sense of history and theater as the city she takes her inspiration from. It looks like the studio of a Baroque painter awaiting princely portrait sitters to pose before those voluptuous cloth cascades. The main workroom is dominated by a large rectangular table on which the dyed velvets are stretched,



Across the canal from her home and studio—the former boathouse of the Palazzo Lezze—Spinella models a dress made from her gold-printed black velvet.

ready for the imprint of stencils and woodblocks. Because Spinella works in slow increments, completing only a foot or two at a time, the fabrics do not have the telltale uniformity of machine-printed designs but take on irregularities of pressure and variations of pigment, which give them the worn dignity of heirloom textiles. These creations, however, have the advantage of not being threadbare, accounting for an appearance that is at once stately and fresh.

Above Spinella as she labors is a shelf with jars of the pigments she mixes herself. There are *oro ricco pallido* (rich pale gold), *oro ducato* (ducat gold), and *oro zecchino* (sequin gold) and powders in chrysoprase green, lapis blue, rhodochrosite pink, aluminum for simulating silver, and *terra mordente* (mordant earth) to fix the colors in the dyeing process. Both the composition of those colors and their application to fabric are secrets that Spinella discovered through research into old craft treatises, virtually the only way she could learn those arcane methods, given the jealous care with which they are guarded by practitioners who consider them a sacred heritage of family businesses, not to be idly disclosed to strangers.

As delightful as it has been for Americans to discover Mirella Spinella's sumptuous interior enrichments in her native city, the trip is no longer a necessary part of the experience. Her fabrics are now a major attraction of Portantina, a new shop at 886 Madison Avenue in New York, which has been handsomely transformed by the Boston-based architects Rodolfo Machado and Jorge Silvetti. That tiny but captivating interior conveys all the glamour and intrigue of Venice. In the soft subaqueous light the piles of panne emit a glow both muted and intense. The same can be said for Signorina Spinella herself, whose attitude toward her new success is far from expansionist. "Maybe in the future the best way is to produce less than now and better than now," she wonders. When reminded that this seems to fly in the face of all commercial wisdom, she answers calmly, "Not for my life." □

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Mirella Spinella, who also works on commission, can be contacted through *Antichità Emme, Piscina de Frezzeria 1651, Venice, Italy, tel. 011-39-41-523-5666.*