

Before modern language. Domestic photography and visual experimentation in Mariano Fortuny Madrazo

Antes del lenguaje moderno. Fotografía doméstica y experimentación visual en Mariano Fortuny Madrazo



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Abstract

This article examines the photographic practice of Mariano Fortuny Madrazo through research conducted between 2023 and 2026 in the documentary and photographic collections preserved at the Fortuny Museum in Venice. The analysis of his negatives, glass plates, albums, and travel photographs makes it possible to reconstruct the role that images played within his artistic activity and to understand how domestic photography functioned as a space for documentation and visual experimentation during the first decades of the twentieth century. Through the case of Fortuny, the study argues that several strategies later associated with photographic modernity—such as fragmented framing, attention to detail, serial image construction, the exploration of light, and the narrative organization of photographic albums—were already present in private photographic practices far removed from the theoretical formulations of the historical avant-gardes. The article proposes interpreting these photographs as manifestations of an emerging visual sensibility that, prior to the consolidation of photographic modernity, contributed to the formation of contemporary visual culture.

Keywords: Mariano Fortuny Madrazo; Domestic photography; Avant-garde; Photographic album; Travel photography.

Resumen

Este artículo estudia la práctica fotográfica de Mariano Fortuny Madrazo a partir de la investigación realizada entre 2023 y 2026 en los fondos documentales y fotográficos conservados en el Museo Fortuny de Venecia. El análisis de sus

negativos, placas, álbumes y fotografías de viaje permite reconstruir el papel que la imagen desempeñó dentro de su actividad artística y comprender cómo la fotografía doméstica funcionó como un espacio de documentación y experimentación visual en las primeras décadas del siglo XX. A través del caso de Fortuny, el trabajo plantea que determinadas estrategias asociadas posteriormente a la modernidad fotográfica, como la fragmentación del encuadre, la atención al detalle, la construcción serial de imágenes, la exploración de la luz o la organización narrativa de los álbumes, estaban ya presentes en prácticas privadas alejadas de las formulaciones teóricas de las vanguardias. El estudio propone interpretar estas fotografías como manifestaciones de una sensibilidad que antes de la modernidad contribuyen en la construcción de la cultura visual contemporánea.

Palabras clave: Mariano Fortuny Madrazo; Fotografía doméstica; Vanguardia; Álbum fotográfico; Fotografía de viaje.

1. Introduction

In the early decades of the twentieth century, photography underwent a decisive transformation thanks to the technical simplification of cameras and the industrial expansion of companies such as the Eastman Kodak Company, which made photographic practice accessible to an ever-broader public. This process opened up the new visual territory of domestic and amateur photography. Families, travelers, and enthusiasts recorded their everyday surroundings, their journeys, and their personal relationships through images that, on the surface, made no artistic claims but that were nonetheless part of the processes that transformed the modern gaze. Before the artistic avant-gardes explicitly formulated a new photographic language, we can recognize that many of these photographs were already giving rise to a shift in the way images were produced and thought about. Painters, sculptors, stage designers, and other artists took part in these practices and adopted photography as an auxiliary tool for their work, and although most of these photographs were for private use, they display a formal freedom and spontaneity that intuitively anticipate some of the principles later developed by modern photography.

It is within this context that the case of Mariano Fortuny Madrazo is situated: an eclectic artist, born in Granada, Spain, and settled in Venice, where he developed a broad range of activities as a painter, stage designer, textile designer, inventor, and amateur photographer and filmmaker. Nicolás-Martínez (2001) stresses the importance of situating Fortuny's photographic practice within a broader debate that, from the late nineteenth century onward, defined the relationship between photography and painting. As various historians have noted, photography was then torn between two positions: on one hand, its subordination to pictorial models; on the other, the assertion of a language of its own grounded in its specific qualities. This conflict gave rise to the development of art photography, which sought to legitimize the medium by drawing closer to the traditional values of painting. Yet the potential of photography lay precisely in what set it apart from the earlier arts. Many painters turned to photography as a working tool, finding in it an effective means of studying nature, forms, and, above all, the changing conditions of light. Mariano Fortuny Madrazo occupies a significant place within this framework, developing an intense relationship with photography and cinematic recording throughout his life. He was familiar with the medium from a young age, since his father, the painter Mariano Fortuny y Marsal, had already used photography to support his projects; but in the case of the son, the use of photography became a technical instrument in the service of



his artistic research and, at the same time, a means of recording everyday experience during his travels and within his personal surroundings. The numerous photographs taken by Fortuny and by his wife, Henriette Nigrin, along with the albums that the two of them carefully compiled over the years, allow us to observe the affective record of private life and an incipient exploration of the expressive possibilities of the medium.

This article is based on research carried out at the Fortuny Museum in Venice between 2023 and 2026, during which it was possible to consult all the photographic material preserved by the Fortuny family. It proposes to identify Fortuny's case as that of an artist who used domestic photography to expand his field of visual inquiry. Through his travel images, his portraits, and his photographic archives, one can discern a way of looking situated at a moment of historical transition, prior to modern photography's definition of its own aesthetic principles. It is in his archive of glass plates and negatives, and in his private albums, that we discover how new ways of narrating the world through images were already being tested intuitively.

2. Domestic Photography and the New Visual Culture of the Early Twentieth Century

Returning to the changes in photographic practice at the end of the nineteenth century, and to how photography ceased to be an activity reserved for professionals and specialists and became an everyday experience instead, we find that the portable camera made it possible to record scenes that had not previously formed part of the visual tradition, gradually shaping a new relationship between image and life. This spread of amateur photography perhaps also generated new forms of organizing images, as can be seen in the photographic album. Albums brought together family pictures, travel images, portraits of friends, and everyday scenes, containing a visual narrative of private life. Although these were, on the surface, intimate objects with no artistic pretension, they gradually became an instrument for constructing family and social memory.

These domestic processes also played a significant role among artists, who discovered in the camera a supporting instrument for composition, for the documentary recording of settings, or as a way of studying movement or light. Between 2019 and 2020, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum presented an exhibition curated by Paloma Alarcó on the relationship between photography and Impressionist painting. It highlighted how photography provided these young artists with technical inspiration, both in the scientific observation of light and in the representation of asymmetrical, truncated space, as well as in the exploration of spontaneity and visual ambiguity (<https://www.museothyssen.org/exposiciones/impresionistas-fotografia>). They saw in photography a means of expression and a language that connected directly with their own understanding of artistic creation, because photography partook of the instantaneous vision of reality, captured the expression of the social chronicle of its time, and imposed a modern, scientific labor, through technique, upon the traditional handcrafted forms of art. Aided by the camera, they achieved pictorial effects by defocusing the lens or moving the tripod, and even by using glass smeared with petroleum jelly as a filter to reduce clarity. In turn, photography benefited from Impressionist production, especially in the printing process and in complex reproduction procedures that gave it an ethereal or blurred character, seemingly bringing it closer to painting. A paradigmatic case is that of Edgar Degas, who experimented with photography in the last decades of the nineteenth century to study the composition and lighting of his scenes. Later, in a similar vein, artists such as Pierre Bonnard and Edvard Munch also produced numerous private photographs that today allow us to better understand the relationship between photographic practice and the transformation of the modern gaze. In these images, often made in domestic settings or while traveling, one observes a formal freedom and spontaneity that would have been difficult

to achieve within the academic conventions of painting. This phenomenon confirms once again that significant changes in the way reality was visually narrated were already occurring within the evolution of photographic language.

At the same time, travel photography acquired growing prominence within this new visual culture. As travel became more frequent among Europe's well-to-do classes, the camera became the traveler's habitual companion. Photography and tourism are fundamental cultural manifestations of the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The scholar Carmelo Vega states that during this period there took shape a set of

"destinations, regions, landscapes, monuments, and motifs that, little by little, came to swell the basic repertoire of the interesting, the essential catalogue of what had to be visited and seen in each place, eventually defining the identifying commonplaces of the world" (Vega, 2010, p. 26).

Moreover, to photograph was a way of visually appropriating the visited territory and of constructing a personal narrative of the journey through photographic albums, which offered

"a world as tourist construction, as an artificial space in the service of the organized contemplation of reality" (2010, p. 38).

This new domestic photography undoubtedly responded to a desire for memory and a will to narrate an experience. Recording a place with the camera implied observing, isolating certain details, and choosing a specific point of view, generating a way of looking at reality on the part of whoever took the photograph, one that would gradually become systematized and shared. It is J. Berger (2015) who systematizes this idea of photography as the result of a conscious or unconscious human decision, in which it is the photographer who chooses what to include and exclude from the image, where to stand, and what moment to capture—confirming that the decision to look at something entails a narrative and organizational dimension at the very moment of the recording. Along similar lines, the historian Clément Chéroux (2014) states that

"it must be understood that if most utilitarian or domestic photographs were produced without artistic intent, this does not necessarily mean that all of them are entirely devoid of aesthetic qualities" (Chéroux, 2014, p. 16),

and that many of the visual innovations later associated with modern photography were, in some form, already present within amateur photography at the turn of the twentieth century.

Unusual framings, unexpected perspectives, risky compositions, and the capture of spontaneous moments were common features of domestic images long before they were claimed by the avant-gardes, produced by amateur photographers exploring the possibilities of the medium without necessarily worrying about technical correctness or aesthetic orthodoxy. That freedom may have generated a broad repertoire of visual solutions that would later be reinterpreted within artistic contexts.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, most artists owned cameras and shared a certain curiosity about, and fascination with, technology and the search for new forms of representation. It is precisely within this context that the case of Mariano Fortuny Madrazo takes on meaning. His photographic practice is inscribed within this emerging visual culture. The images he made, as well as the albums he collected, fully partake of this tradition of domestic and travel photography that characterized the early decades of the twentieth century, with a particularly intellectual dimension. His library still preserves books by Muybridge (*Animals in Motion* and *The Human Figure in Motion*), alongside manuals on photographic and photo-mechanical processes—indicators of Fortuny's interest in technique and science. Likewise, his activity as a textile designer, stage designer, painter, and inventor reveals a constant curiosity about the technical mechanisms capable of transforming perception, such as stage lighting systems or printing procedures.

3. The Case of Mariano Fortuny Madrazo

As we have just seen, the figure of Mariano Fortuny Madrazo proves especially significant for understanding the role that domestic photography played in the transformation of the artistic gaze during the early decades of the twentieth century. His profile escapes any closed classification; he was a tireless experimenter, habitually described as a “total artist” because all the disciplines he practiced interrelate without hierarchy, from a nineteenth-century tradition projected toward modernity. This is clearly visible in his use of photography as a transversal tool and in his fascination with technology and with devices capable of expanding the artist’s perceptual and productive capacities. Fusso describes Fortuny’s photography as strangely adult, free of theoretical preconceptions or reflections on its own specific language, something that

“has given rise to the idea of its secondary use, almost as if Fortuny had relegated it to the realm of documentation or, at most, to the private recording of people and life’s events” (Fusso, 2004, p. 10). [Original: “La fotografia di Fortuny mi è sempre sembrata stranamente ‘adulta,’ non condizionata da pregiudizi teorici o da riflessioni sul suo linguaggio specifico, da questo spesso è nata l’idea di un suo uso secondario quasi che il nostro l’avesse relegata nel campo della documentazione o, al più, della registrazione privata di persone ed eventi della vita.”]

Likewise, as the historian Italo Zannier has noted, Fortuny uses the camera as an expression of scientific curiosity toward modern instruments. Through photography, he is able to quickly construct images of people and settings, verify the effectiveness of fabrics and garments, or document the various stages in the elaboration of his complex stage-design projects. Zannier also states that

“photography offers Mariano Fortuny much less, and at the same time much more, than painting; through it, he manages to free himself from the idea of the ‘great,’ the ‘permanent,’ the ‘sacred,’ in favor of the ‘everyday’” (Zannier, 1978, p. 34). [Original: “La fotografia offre anche a Mariano Fortuny assai di meno, ma molto di più della pittura; suo tramite, egli è in grado di liberarsi dall’idea del ‘grande,’ del ‘permanente,’ del ‘sacro,’ in favore del ‘quotidiano.’”]

Fortuny photographs what surprises him and what might become a future reference for his work as a visual artist. In her laurea thesis, Didoni (2009) states, with regard to Fortuny’s panoramic photographs, that they do not aim to be a perfect imitation of nature or of the urban landscape; rather, she understands them as a foundation from which to study and understand the perception of space within the theatrical environment—that is, a simulacrum of reality. This pragmatic dimension reveals a profoundly modern conception of photography as an artistic tool.

But in Fortuny’s case, his relationship with the image also stems from a love of collecting inherited from his family, from a desire to produce his own images while simultaneously acquiring others—postcards, reproductions, commercial photographs, and so on—which expanded his personal archive and which, according to M. M. Nicolás,

“would lead him to build a photographic library at the Palazzo Orfei with more than 11,000 photographic plates, constituting an impressive documentary collection on the history of photography” (Nicolás-Martínez, 2001, p. 187).

The family albums he organized together with Henriette Nigrin clearly reflect this dual dimension. Images were kept both for their visual potential and for their experiential testimony, and this hybrid character becomes especially evident in his travel photographs. We have already

noted how, during the early decades of the twentieth century, cultural tourism had undergone notable development among the European elites, and cities such as Rome, Venice, and Paris became established as privileged destinations for artists and intellectuals. Fortuny's way of traveling, however, is closer to the tradition of the erudite nineteenth-century traveler, moving through destinations with an investigative curiosity, attentive both to major monuments and to the seemingly secondary details of a place, and driven by a total fascination with visual technology that led him to carry several devices with him on his travels and to experiment with techniques and cameras such as panoramic photography, stereoscopy, autochromes, and, very significantly, film. This helps us understand that Fortuny engages with the technical novelties of his time because he is interested in everything that expands his perception.

Taken together, his practices are situated at a point of convergence between scientific curiosity and artistic sensibility, materially investigating everything related to graphic reproduction—a subject that Benjamin would later analyze in his well-known 1936 essay on how modern reproduction technologies transformed the nature, function, and perception of art (Benjamin, 2003). One example of this is the fact that Fortuny invented and patented a photographic paper with a certain engraving-like effect, with which he sought to modify the texture and final appearance of his shots. The look and texture provided by this paper responds to pictorialist assumptions, in keeping with the desire to bring photography closer to painting, although, as Francisco Sotomayor notes, Fortuny moves rather within a Symbolist sensibility, interested above all in endowing his images with a poetic, atmospheric density (Sotomayor, 2023). On other occasions he experimented with processes that alter the surface of the image in search of an expanded range of expressive photographic possibilities, within a more modern conception of the image.

What these practices contribute is a particular way of understanding the relationship between art and technology, and, in particular, the ways of archiving and collecting images within modern visual culture. Fortuny habitually worked on projects of great technical complexity, especially in the fields of theatrical stage design, textile design, and lighting experimentation, all of which required meticulous control of materials and structures. In these cases, photographs were necessary to record many of the processes he carried out, and they also served him later for analyzing results and for preserving a visual memory of everything accomplished. In his albums and working notebooks we find photographs of fabrics, of garments (figure 1), of forms of drapery, textures, or lighting systems, used to study their behavior under light—its fall, its density, its capacity to generate volume; likewise, he recorded the working and design processes of a stage set, allowing him to understand its spatial organization and visual impact. Photography clearly provided him with an effective material for the observation and evaluation of his various artistic projects.

Figure 1

Mariano Fortuny Madrazo. Photograph of a dress. Palazzo Fortuny, Venice. © Museo Fortuny – Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia.



In numerous photographs taken in his studio, female models appear dressed in his fabrics or in the celebrated Delphos gowns. These are often photographs of neutral interiors, alongside curtains, columns, or plain backgrounds. These images bear a clear relation to the fashion and society photography of the early twentieth century. In those same years, photographers such as Baron de Meyer, Edward Steichen, and the contributors to illustrated magazines like *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar* were developing a refined Art Deco aesthetic, based on a taste for fabrics, transparency, elegance of pose, and diffused light. Fortuny was undoubtedly familiar with that visual universe. He lived between Paris and Venice, two fundamental centers of the era's cosmopolitan culture, and he paid close attention to fashion as well as to the decorative arts and to new reproduction techniques. However, his photographs of his dress designs do not follow exactly the logic of commercial fashion. He is interested in highlighting the physical characteristics of the fabric, how the design transforms the body, and how it responds to different types of lighting. He often replaced models with motionless mannequins. On other occasions, he used nude or semi-nude models for anatomical studies, for later compositions, or for decorative projects.

Fortuny expands the documentary practice of photography by systematically integrating it into his own working method. What distinguishes his case is the scope and ambition with which he develops this use of the image, based on an extensive system of visual accumulation and organization that leads him to build a vast archive of references combining his own images with acquired ones—postcards, reproductions of works of art, prints, clippings, and so on.

He organizes this heterogeneous set into thematic albums covering a great variety of subjects, such as architecture, ornamental motifs, fabrics, sculptures, landscapes, painting schools, or decorative details. These albums could be understood as the creation of a visual encyclopedia for reference in his work. At a historical moment prior to the existence of digital databases, Fortuny devised this system of access to visual knowledge, which functions in a way surpri-

singly close to what we today identify as an image search engine. Moreover, this accumulative impulse responds to a deeply structured mode of thought, since the images are stored in an organized manner, selected and grouped according to formal or thematic affinities, in beautiful albums handcrafted by Fortuny himself and arranged on shelving specially designed and built so that they could be worked with, unfolded, and opened with ease (figure 2).

Figure 2

Study and library of Mariano Fortuny. Palazzo Fortuny, Venice. Worktable and shelving with thematic albums of organized photographs and images. © F. J. Sánchez Montalbán



Alongside this technical dimension, Mariano Fortuny Madrazo shows a clear predilection for materially preserving his life experiences, travels, and scenes of everyday life. His entire domestic photography seems to be elevated by a certain collector's impulse that, as we have just noted, leads him both to produce his own images and to acquire the photographs, postcards, and reproductions of others, expanding his visual archive and iconographic repertoire.

His travel photographs and the albums he made together with his partner, Henriette Nigrin, reflect this dual dimension. During his travels, Fortuny purchased images of all kinds and, fundamentally, recorded landscapes, monuments, streets, architectural details, and everyday scenes that largely respond to his curiosity about cultural forms and about the unknown. His gaze lingers as much on the monumental as on the incidental, on whatever provokes in him the impulse to generate or construct a new referential imaginary of what he is experiencing.

This aspect proves especially significant when situated within a context in which the photographic act ceases to be a solemn, prepared gesture and becomes instead a practice integrated into the ritual of travel—a moment, too, when tourism was not yet the mass, accelerated experience that characterizes contemporary tourism, but was rather a cultural practice tied to the educated classes, partly inherited from the nineteenth-century formative journey, in which travel represented a form of bourgeois leisure, “a differentiating social and cultural incentive and an expression of a dominant economic elite” (Vega, 2010, p. 7). This eminently modern conception of the tourist journey had already begun to be structured through itineraries, guides, prior images, and visual expectations, and postcards, commercial photographs, and illustrations performed a fundamental pedagogical function, indicating what should be seen, from where, and how it should be viewed. Fortuny's study still preserves the prospectuses and brochures for some of his journeys to Greece or Egypt, which specify in detail the places, mo-

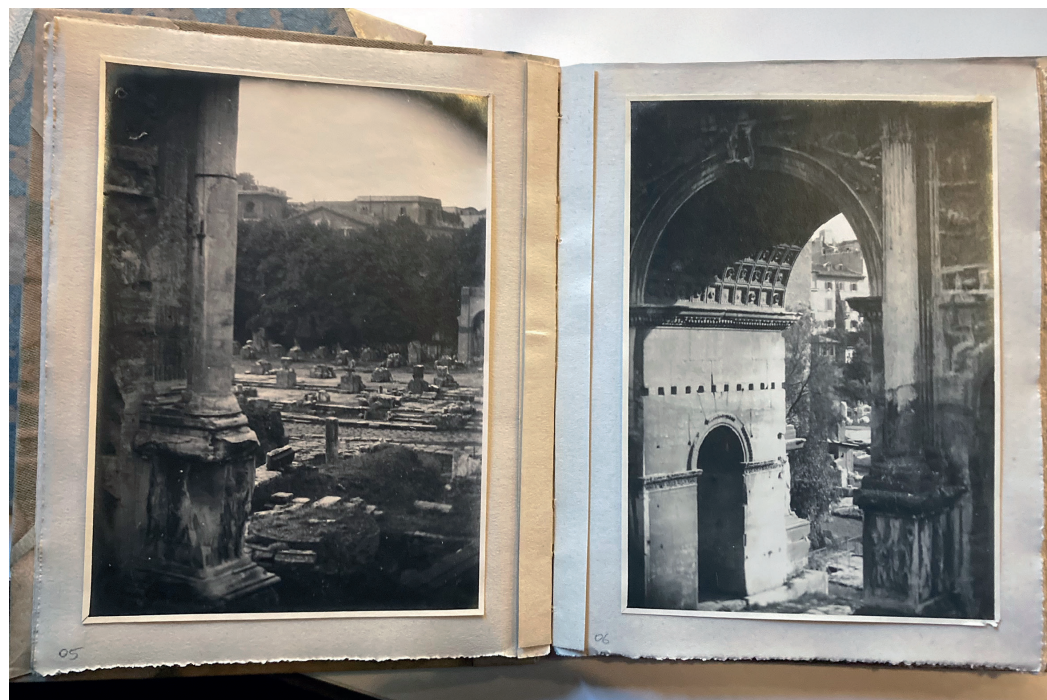
numents, landscapes, and picturesque activities that could be visited. Fortuny's photographs of these journeys show how he adopts certain codified points of view, but also how he allows himself to depart from them through freer framings or unexpected elements.

It is precisely in these departures from convention that his photographic practice acquires its greatest interest and distinctiveness. Let us recall once again how the great revolution set in motion by the commercialization of Kodak cameras entailed the emergence of a new attitude, a different way of understanding image-making based fundamentally on the loss of the primacy of composition or of perfect execution in favor of the instantaneous and the casual. This coexistence between the immediate and the elaborate is also situated at a midpoint between cultural tourism and visual research, and the subsequent process of constructing a narrative within the albums further constitutes an example of how to organize and narrate reality, prolonging the journey beyond its temporal duration and transforming it into a system of images.

Fortuny's albums are the place where this experience is organized and takes shape, constructing narrative itineraries linked to place and lived experience. In many cases, images are grouped by city or theme, but without a rigid temporal linearity; what prevails is the construction of a coherent visual memory rather than fidelity to the order of events. In the earliest albums, this organization is more open and flexible, with even repeated images appearing, sometimes with different densities or tonalities, as if the interest also lay in exploring the variations of the image. Over time, especially in the journeys to Egypt or Greece, the albums acquire a more systematic and ordered structure, consistent with more carefully planned journeys as well. Even in these cases, however, the organization always seems to respond to a will to construct a narrative. To contemplate these albums is to ask oneself what it meant for Fortuny to take photographs, because, beyond memory, his collection configures a parallel world, an archive in which memory has been constructed in a beautiful and organized way.

Figure 3

Album *Roma Mts.* 1. Fortuny Museum, Venice. © F. J. Sánchez Montalbán



But Mariano Fortuny Madrazo's photography also contains a dimension of visual experimentation that proves fundamental to understanding its modernity. Although he never presents

himself publicly as a photographer, nor develops a body of work intended for exhibition, his photographs and films reveal a clear inquiry into visual language, closely tied to the rest of his disciplines. Many of his images also function as working material for other disciplines, as support for drawing, engraving, or design. Certain poses, plays of light, or spatial configurations are captured photographically only to be later reinterpreted in other media (figures 4 and 5).

Figures 4 and 5

Mariano Fortuny Madrazo. Film still (Córdoba) and engraving (Fortuny Museum, Venice). © Museo Fortuny – Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia.



In this instrumental use we also see how new formal possibilities are generated, some of which may never come to be realized in other works. His photographs are always part of a process or a possibility. As Italo Zannier notes, his photographic images

“are almost never definitive or exhaustive; they are notes (sketches, a painter would say) suggesting further clarification, ..., almost as if there were an intention to later decontextualize the figure, cutting out its outline in order to transfer it onto the canvas” (Zannier, 1978, p. 35). [Original: “Le immagini fotografiche di Fortuny non sono quasi mai definitive, esaurienti; sono appunti (schizzi, direbbe un pittore) che suggeriscono un’ul-

teriore precisazione: nella posa del soggetto, ..., quasi ci fosse l'intenzione di decontestualizzare successivamente la figura, ritagliandone la sagoma, da riportare sulla tela.”]

This condition brings them close to the sketch or the visual note, that is, to forms of thought in process. And perhaps it is precisely these visual solutions that allow us to recognize in his work an anticipation of some of the devices that modern photography would later define. Without explicitly intending to, Fortuny tests out a relationship with the image that moves away from classical representation and approaches an avant-garde conception.

In many of his images, one can perceive creative strategies such as a clear compositional intent involving plays of light and shadow, careful attention to architectural lines, or a certain interest in the repetition of forms or the organization of space—features corresponding to the academic conventions of the nineteenth-century tradition. But alongside these images we also find a great number of more casual photographs displaying an evident formal freedom. Examples of this include slightly tilted horizons, unstable compositions, abrupt cuts, or framings that seem to respond to the urgency of the moment rather than to prior planning. Far from being interpreted as mere imperfections, these features can be understood as manifestations of a new relationship with the image, one in which Fortuny appears to discover that the camera allows him to see in another way.

This way of working clearly anticipates a photographic language based on the rupture of closed classical composition, the elimination of a clear center of interest, or the distribution of elements without an apparent hierarchy—elements we today recognize as an opening toward new forms of representation, and which would later be developed by the artists of the avant-garde movements.

Through the observation and study of his albums, it becomes clear that the constant presence of the still and motion-picture camera during his travels shapes a particular attitude toward travel itself. Although it is at times difficult to distinguish who took a given shot, both Fortuny and Henriette Nigrin carried their devices in a complementary way—sometimes he films while she photographs, and vice versa. Fortuny's film footage is brief, lasting only a few seconds, showing a greater interest in the photographic than in the sequential unfolding of the event before him. Henriette's photographs seem more interested in the event itself, while Fortuny's seem more concerned with visual and cultural expressions; but regardless of this possible difference, this demonstrates a shared awareness of building an archive, or a visual memory organized into albums. In this activity, walking itself acquires a methodological dimension and an aesthetic relationship with space. They move through itineraries partly codified by the tourist culture of their time, combined with moments of freer drifting toward the unexpected. This way of moving through the city anticipates some of the practices later developed by the historical avant-gardes around the *dérive*, understood as a strategy for accessing new forms of perception and aesthetic experience.

4. A Modern Sensibility in the Photography of Mariano Fortuny Madrazo

At this point it becomes easy to understand that Fortuny's photographic practice reveals, as a whole, a broad and complex conception of the use and creation of the image, especially significant when situated within the historical context in which it develops. His case allows us to understand how domestic photography became a privileged space of artistic research, with a sensibility that anticipates the centrality of the image in contemporary visual culture. We have already noted that Mariano Fortuny Madrazo's photographs were not conceived for exhibition, nor did they form part of a theoretical program, nor did they respond to an

explicit will to break with the imminent modes of thought of the historical avant-gardes; and although they remain photographs tied to the workshop, to domestic life, and to the private archive, seen today they possess an extraordinary anticipatory capacity, one that—perhaps still intuitively—contributes many of the visual devices that would later become part of the photographic languages of the entire twentieth century.

We can observe many of these creative devices in his framings, in camera movement and intentional blur, as well as in his interest in detail, his taste for geometric structures, or the construction of small serial visual narratives with which Fortuny works, allowing us to confirm how certain transformations of the gaze begin to occur within his processes of documentation and research for artistic production.

Read through the categories proposed by Renato Poggioli in *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia* [Theory of the Avant-Garde] (1964), some of his visual operations can even be thought of as avant-garde impulses, because his images display, in an embryonic state, certain tensions that Poggioli identifies as constitutive of modern sensibility, such as experimentalism, fragmentation, the agonism between tradition and invention, and even a tendency toward the autonomy of visual language, in which

“the departure from the norm is such a regular and normal occurrence that it becomes a canon no less exceptional than predictable. Disorder becomes the rule when it is deliberately and symmetrically opposed to a pre-established order” (Poggioli, 1964, p. 69).

Experimentalism is perhaps his most evident trait. Poggioli understands the avant-garde as a practice animated by a cult of procedure and by a close relationship between art and technical research. Fortuny's fascination with modern devices—the camera, the cinematograph, stereoscopy, autochromes, the panoramic camera, or even his own photosensitive papers—together with his research into lighting, seems to respond to this desire to explore what new forms of vision these instruments allow, and how they generate attitudes and positions toward the image. This experimentalist approach is also apparent in the inconclusive character of many of his images. As Italo Zannier noted, his photographs seem like sketches, open notations rather than definitive images (Zannier, 1978). Fortuny repeats motifs, produces variants, tries out different framings of the same subject, or produces prints of varying densities, in which we discover a serial, processual logic that displaces the idea of the unique work toward that of the work understood as process.

Another particularly significant aspect is the fragmentation of the visual field. Certain photographs of staircases, walls, vegetation, shadows, or architectural details reveal a will to isolate structures or formal relations above mere description of the subject. The frame is organized without classical hierarchies, with full expressive freedom—something that decades later would be systematized by the New Vision and by figures such as László Moholy-Nagy. We might even speak of a certain modern obscurity (Poggioli, 1964). In some Venetian views, or in certain studies of shadow, we can find this almost abstract, even poetic condition, which exceeds the conventional domestic use of photography. All of this intensifies in his treatment of light, where reflections, cast shadows, vibrant surfaces, or architectural masses modeled by the sun construct what Poggioli would understand as a search for formal purity, materialized in an interest in isolating elemental visual qualities such as rhythm, contrast, texture, or luminosity. Here it is worth noting the particularly revealing tension between tradition and invention that Poggioli calls agonism, in which the work remains within the limits of an inherited tradition. Few figures respond better to this condition than Fortuny. A Symbolist and an inventor, fascinated by historical textiles and by modern machines, heir to nineteenth-century painting yet attentive to procedures that herald other languages, he occupied a watchful position toward modernity, having intuited that the camera could be a tool for thinking visually, and that in

his travel photographs, his studies of models, his domestic sequences, or his seemingly casual images, ways of looking were being tested that did not yet have a name, but that prefigured central questions of photographic modernity.

One of the elements capable of unifying Fortuny's entire visual production may be his fascination with lighting, which runs through his whole activity as stage designer, inventor, and designer, and which materializes especially in his scenographic innovations, which even led him to invent and develop lighting systems. In contrast to the hard, frontal lighting of nineteenth-century theater, for example, he sought an indirect, reflected, diffuse light capable of modeling forms without doing them violence. Marzia Maino has noted that in her research on stage lighting three major lighting systems can be distinguished: indirect light, reflected light, and diffuse light. The latter, later known as the "Fortuny System," was the most innovative, and consisted of projecting light onto curved or reflective surfaces so that it would spread smoothly and evenly through the theatrical space (Maino, 2023). Through these effects, he sought an aesthetic conception close to Richard Wagner's theatrical research, especially in the idea of a total work of art in which lighting contributes to the creation of enveloping atmospheres and to the unification of the different artistic languages. Likewise, his sensitivity to light finds affinities with Symbolist artists such as Rogelio de Egusquiza, whose painting explores a lighting charged with emotional and spiritual resonance, also linked to the Wagnerian universe (Jiménez-Fernández, 2023). What is interesting about all of this is that this conception of light also appears in his photographs.

Through the camera, Fortuny studies how light generates atmosphere or transforms the perception of objects. His practice approaches that which allowed Impressionist painters to explore the light variations of nature, although in his case this interest shifts toward a more technical and applied inquiry (Nicolás-Martínez, 2001), in which his inventions and patents respond to a constant obsession with achieving a light capable of enveloping space in a natural, atmospheric way. It seems evident that Fortuny's light has much to do with his life and artistic experience, and it is perhaps for this reason that we can highlight two major lighting models that would profoundly mark both his technical research and his visual sensibility: on the one hand, the diffuse light of Venice, and on the other, a contrasted light, perhaps inspired by his travels through Mediterranean countries.

In Venice he finds a light especially attuned to his scenographic sensibility. Humidity, the constant presence of water, and mist produce a soft, vibrant, enveloping illumination. It is a diffuse light, without sharp contours, which eliminates excessive contrasts and makes objects appear to slowly merge with space (figure 6). This atmospheric quality, so characteristic of the city, coincides with his stage-lighting research and explains why so many of his Venetian photographs possess a hushed tone, offering an aesthetic experience in which forms soften, and the city or landscape appears as an almost pictorial representation, very close to the Wagnerian atmospheric experience.

Figure 6

Mariano Fortuny Madrazo. Panorama. Venice. © Museo Fortuny – Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia.



On the other hand, his numerous travels allowed him to discover other visual systems. In contrast to that enveloping light, Fortuny's journeys through the Mediterranean—to Spain, Greece, Egypt, or Morocco—confronted him with a radically different lighting regime, in which light is hard, direct, almost sculptural, with pronounced shadows and contrasts, and architectural forms emerge with forceful clarity. In these images, light defines an almost tactile presence of matter through contrast, and the scene acquires a more geometric structure (figure 7).

Figura 7

Mariano Fortuny Madrazo. Greece, view from the Parthenon. © Museo Fortuny – Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia.



A close observation of Mariano Fortuny Madrazo's images reveals a specific interest in recording variations of light. This insistence suggests that, for Fortuny, light is a phenomenon deserving of observation and understanding. This is because Fortuny belongs to a visual culture already profoundly transformed by the legacy of Impressionist painting, in which light was the true subject of representation, and photography and film, moreover, made it possible for that interpreted light to also be physically recorded. For an artist like Fortuny, deeply interested in technology and in processes of creation, this possibility proves especially stimulating, because the camera allowed him to compare different lights and to build an archive of lighting behaviors.

In many of his photographs, one can appreciate the difference between the simple act of looking and that of consciously photographing; although this may also stem from the coexistence, within the same archives and albums, of images made by Fortuny and by Henriette Nigrin. We recognize an everyday gaze that tends to identify objects and situations, but also an artist-photographer's gaze in which different relations and interests are perceived—for example, how light strikes a surface, how it constructs volumes, how it decomposes or unifies space, and so on. Capturing light, as the Impressionists also believed, is part of the transformation that the artist exerts upon whatever he contemplates or expresses. This awareness also manifests itself in the difference in attitude between his photographic shots and his films. With the movie camera, Fortuny seems to display a freer, less analytical will to record, in which movement and experience prevail over control. Photography, by contrast, involves a more precise decision,

often pausing to frame, wait, and measure the light. On many occasions, one senses how he sharpens his gaze and seems especially interested in effects produced by contrasts, shadows, or reflections that require more concentrated attention.

Together with this passion for lighting, we also find a clear interest in humble, secondary motifs, often set apart from the monumental or apparently lacking narrative importance, frequently focusing on staircases, roofs, walls, windows, plants, branches, shadows, or textures. He is interested in the visual structure of things, which is why he sometimes fills the frame with a wall, a cluster of leaves, or a repetition of architectural forms. His photographs of plants and leaves are especially revealing of this mode of selection, one that approaches detail and repetition. What exactly is he looking for? He seems interested in the internal organization of forms, in their rhythm and texture, and even in their ornamental capacity—something directly related to his work in textile printing (figure 8). The plant motifs, geometries, and rhythms he discovers in nature reappear later in his printed fabrics and designs.

Figure 8

Mariano Fortuny Madrazo. Ivy leaves. © Museo Fortuny – Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia..



Something similar happens with architecture. Fortuny looks at buildings as assemblages of volumes and surfaces. He is drawn to the effects of light upon forms and their textures. The result is images in which architecture seems to break down into rhythms and planes. These visual solutions clearly anticipate devices that would later become common in the New Vision and in the aesthetic principles of the Bauhaus, such as the use of high or low viewpoints, diagonal framings, or an interest in urban geometry.

Another trait that brings his work close to later sensibilities is the organization of images into series. Fortuny rarely conceives of a photograph in isolation. His albums construct sequences and narratives in which several images of the same place, the same person, or the same object are observed from different angles. This serial tendency reorders, in an almost cinematic way, his and Henriette's wanderings and walks, and the manner of moving through space, thinking

it visually, or narrating it in series and photographic albums does not seem incidental—something we will also see in the later drifts of Surrealism and Dadaism, which discovered in walking and in the chance of moving through the city a way of activating the imagination. Before the avant-garde theoretically formulated many of these positions and attitudes toward artistic and visual creation, we can see how Fortuny, and other artists like him, were already exploring them from a quieter territory, in their studios, their albums, and their private spheres. Perhaps this condition would allow us to formulate a general thesis about the latent modernity in Fortuny's photography; but rather than seeking in his images an avant-garde aesthetic ahead of its time, it seems more revealing to observe how these visual procedures may have anticipated ways of thinking about the image that would later receive theoretical formulation.

We have seen how some of these aspects prove especially indicative and allow us to approach, with greater precision, this proto-modern dimension and the complexity of a practice in which documentation and artistic research appear deeply intertwined.

5. Final Conclusion

Domestic photography reveals itself as a fundamental process for understanding the transformations of the gaze in the early decades of the twentieth century. From the private record, new relationships with the image were tested, apart from the theoretical formulations that would later define photographic modernity. The portability of cameras, the immediacy of the recording, and the relative absence of compositional norms favored a creative freedom in which the everyday and the spontaneous shaped a new visual sensibility.

The case of Mariano Fortuny Madrazo allows us to clearly recognize this anticipatory dimension. His photographic practice, situated between the private archive, the documentation of his projects, and technical and artistic experimentation, reveals a broad conception of the image, deeply tied to his aesthetic thought. In his photographs and albums, aspects such as technical research, collecting, and the construction of narratives about experience and family memory converge.

One of the most significant findings of this study has been to confirm that, within this system of images, devices appear—still in an intuitive rather than programmatic way—that would later become central to modern photography, such as the fragmentation of the frame, the mobility of the gaze, attention to detail, the serial organization of images, or the exploration of light as a visual structure, showing how some of the problems associated with photographic modernity, sustained by a passion for technological and instrumental experimentation, were already taking shape earlier within domestic and experimental practices.

We can affirm, then, that Fortuny's contribution lies in having developed, from the private sphere, a modern sensibility in which the artistic aptitudes of the nineteenth-century tradition and later, more innovative positions coexisted in a particularly fertile way within his projects, his albums, his travel photographs, and his research into light—intuiting that photographic modernity has scattered, perhaps also silent, antecedents that deserve to be incorporated into its genealogy. For this reason, the historical value of early domestic photography should be understood as the phenomenon in which some of the foundations of contemporary visual culture began to take shape, in an anticipatory and intuitive way.

6. Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise, that could have influenced the results or the interpretation of the findings presented in this article.

7. Ethical Compliance

The research underlying this article is theoretical-documentary in nature and does not involve experimentation with human subjects, collection of personal data, or intervention with participants. It therefore did not require evaluation by an institutional ethics committee. The work was carried out in accordance with the general ethical principles of academic research, including respect for authorship rights and the correct attribution of the sources consulted.

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9. Open Science Objects

The article does not generate primary datasets, as it is a theoretical-documentary review.

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