

The Best-Kept Opera-Art Secret in Buenos Aires

by Alexandra York, ISPE Mentor

(photographs by Barrett Randell)

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Set from *Aida*

The Teatro Colón opera house located in the “Paris of the South”—as Buenos Aires is famously called—is well known internationally for its physical beauty and superb productions. What is not and should be well known is its unique warehouse, Colón FABRICA in La Boca barrio of the city, which is in the heart of the gallery and museum area.

The nearly 81,000 square feet of interior space contains the elaborate scenery, props, costumes, jewelry, wigs, etc., that were created for its one ballet and many operatic titles produced at the theater. Here, it is all stored together but arranged in thoughtful, separately staged scenic sections for visitors to enjoy until one or another of its collection will be used in a repeat Colón production or rented out to opera houses all over the world.

In addition to the fascinating artifacts themselves is the fact that all of them were meticulously fabricated in the company's own workshops by a scenotechnical staff who are keeping alive theatrical trades that have been passed down from generation to generation. The Teatro Colón is one of only five factory theaters in the world to craft such objects of artful wonder.

These tasks are carried out in its workshops located in the basement of the theater and in other workshops located in the district of Chacarita. The construction of each title's accoutrements usually takes several weeks, with some of them taking up to four-plus months for completion.



Example of Jewelry and Hat



Set from *Turandot*

The objects—both monumental and minuscule—expand exponentially, season after season, as more titles are added to the company’s repertoire, so the huge space of Colón FABRICA solves both storage and conservation of the set pieces and various other paraphernalia. It’s sobering to remember that, until the establishment of the warehouse in an old French iron-and-steel foundry building called “Descours Cabaud” to secure all of these beauties, after the premiere

and the programmed performances were over, the sets were scrapped due to the difficulties of storing them, which prevented their preservation and possibilities of being reused.

First rented and then purchased in the late 20-teens, the facility was finally filled with production treasures and opened its doors to the public just last year—2021—in November.

Aside from housing the astounding collection, the dimensions of Colón FABRICA also allow extra work areas for tasks requiring a lot of space, such as the painting of curtains (which is done standing on canvases that can exceed 3,000 square feet in size), and provide ample room for massive set pieces—sets, such as those for *Turandot*, *Aida*, and *Rigoletto*, that seem to be made of solid stone or marble but actually are carved from Styrofoam or wood.

The ability to get to know these behind-the-scenes features of the Teatro Colón productions and take a detailed look at the marvels that impress thousands of actual viewing audiences is singular indeed for anyone interested in the arts.

As a former stage performer, this writer wondered, while wandering, how the opera singer-actors suspend disbelief in order to accustom themselves “naturally” to their



Sets Featuring the *Apollo and Daphne* Sculpture by Bernini

overwhelmingly “fake” surroundings and make their characters feel at home in them. In spoken dramatic or popular musical theater, stage sets are usually more intimate or modern or at least familiar, so belief in them can be assumed without difficulty; but then both opera and ballet are exotic-grand art forms requiring grand-exotic backgrounds.

The sets, costumes, and props exhibited belong to productions carried out in recent years, including some of the most popular operas, such as *Turandot*, *La Bohème*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Tales of Hoffmann*, *Don Pasquale*, *Rigoletto*, and *Aida*. The one ballet featured is *The Corsair*.



Costume from *Turandot*



Set Pieces from *Rigoletto*

All in all, preserving the impressive quality of enormous scene sets, the multitude of props, and ornate costumes, right down to the pearls worn on the fingers of singing “kings” and “queens” produced in the Teatro Colón workshops, their reutilization, exhibition, and circulation on other stages is a masterful achievement in and of itself. But the fact that visitors can share a close-up experience of this collection and enjoy the same surroundings as do the opera and ballet performers they admire from afar while seated in the audience is an artistic treat beyond imagining and worthy of every opera and decorative-art lover’s notice as well.

About the Author: Alexandra York is an author and founding president of the American Renaissance for the Twenty-first Century (ART), a New York City–based nonprofit educational arts and culture foundation. She has written for many publications, including *Reader’s Digest* and *The New York Times*. She is the author of *Crosspoints: A Novel of Choice*. Her most recent book is *Soul Celebrations and Spiritual Snacks*.

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