

ART

The 19th DUKE OF ALBA

Carlos Fitz-James Stuart y Martínez de Irujo has 40 noble titles, 12 of which make him a Spanish Grandee. He is the 19th duke of Alba, the eldest of six siblings and son of the recently deceased Duchess of Alba, owner of one of the most important art collections in the world. He has just opened his mother's favourite residence in Seville, the Palace of Las Dueñas, to the public. This city was one of Cayetana de Alba's passions, together with flamenco, bullfighting and painting.

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Despite the hot weather, the walls of the Palace of Las Dueñas and the huge expanses of green areas help make the building cool. Just before entering the palace, the first feeling you have is that you are not visiting a “dead” monument, but a living place – a dwelling (the Duke lives in Madrid, but he uses the second floor of this palace), a personal place filled with wonderful corners, gurgling fountains and gardens.

The first impression as soon as you enter, where the stables are on the right, is that of a solid, history-laden palace. Large arches, ample spaces and, on view, a saddle that belonged to the French Empress – Eugenia de Montijo, wife of Napoleon III –, a Mexican poncho, and objects of popular art from that country, which recall the bonds between America and Spain – and, above all, Seville. Next is the courtyard “where the lemon tree matures”, as poet Antonio Machado, who spent his childhood years here, wrote. Just a few steps on, and all of a sudden, the art, the history, the Roman, Visigothic, Muslim pasts, and Spain's identity as a country, and its

culture, can be felt among the geraniums, rosebushes, bougainvillea, palms and box hedges, as well as in the exquisite, completely unostentatious ceramics. The albero colour – yellow – of the sand in these courtyards is also present on the walls. In the Mudejar courtyard – in the centre of the Duke of Alba's Palace – I feel that I am at the centre of the House of Alba: at the centre of titles, marquises, duchies, Spanish Grandees and seignories unmatched in the world. The Duchess appeared in the Guinness Book of World Records for the sheer number of titles she had.

Her estate is priceless, and goes beyond just material value. How much is King Ferdinand the Catholic's original will worth? – a document that marked the birth of Spain as several kingdoms and a single Crown. How much are her paintings by Murillo and Ribera, her drawings by Leonardo and Goya worth? All this is managed by the Foundation of the House of Alba that includes the Liria Palace in Madrid, the Monterrey Palace in Salamanca, and the Dueñas Palace, today open to the public not just for the sake of more efficient management, but also to fulfil the express wish of the Duke of Alba: to open one of the most iconic interiors in Seville to its citizens and to the entire world.



Dueñas is now finally open to the public in Seville, one of the most visited cities in the world. What would your mother have thought of this?

I am not sure that she would have been thrilled, but she would have understood it perfectly. My idea was to show the downstairs part – and not upstairs, the more personal and intimate (not open to the public) section, and my mother would have agreed with this. She had a special regard for Dueñas because of what it meant to her, to her own biography... I was absolutely aware that, when my turn came, “they would come for me” – in the sense of wanting the House to be open to the public. I received a letter from the Council telling me that they would like us to open it – as is specified by current law. But the Council did not force or demand anything from us, and waited until my mother passed away. I promised that at that moment, I would open up the house, and they trusted my word

What is your first memory of the palace?

Look, it happened right there (pointing out towards the courtyard-garden). Machado’s first memory was the lemon tree, mine was a stumble and colossal fall that, I believe, left my nose like this. (He smiles as he looks back.)

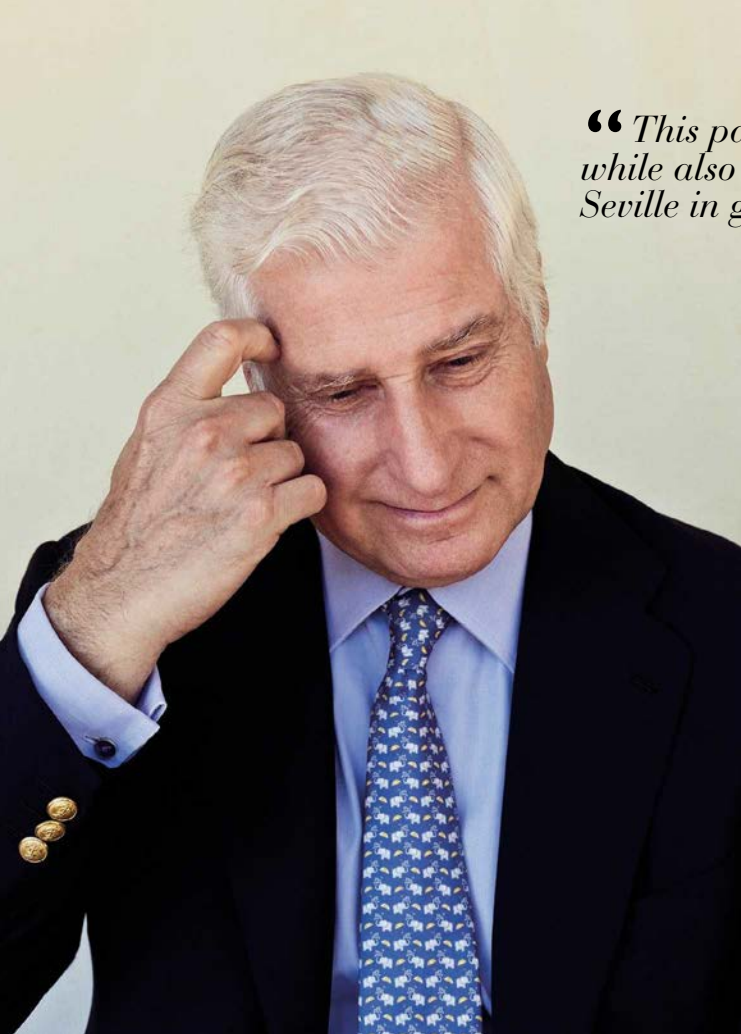
The columns, the Mudejar style, the gardens... so much beauty. It is very Oriental: it has magic, just as Seville in general

has. And then the foliage makes it a miniature botanical garden with tropical trees and plants. It is very special, a product – just like everything else – of the House’s history and its relationship with America. However, rather than American, it is tropical, from Latin America: this kind of vegetation softens the light and makes it very special.

Ferdinand the Catholic’s handwritten will, Columbus’s blood in your veins... so many historical documents!

In Madrid [at the Liria Palace] there are so many of them,

Above these lines, several rooms at the Las Dueñas Palace, in Seville. *Opposite,* the 19th Duke of Alba.



“This palace has magic, it is very Oriental while also has lush tropical vegetation, just as Seville in general has”



truly many, and lots of researchers are always working there. Here, in Dueñas, there are no documents, so the idea is to visit the house – whereas in Madrid, both things can be done. Now I am digitalising the archives. I have digitalised over 30,000 documents. I did a lot last year: it is essential for researchers and scholars. There are lots of people interested in 15th- and 16th-century documents, for University papers and PhD theses.

Was the exhibition at the Meadows Museum – Dallas, EEUU, – designed to making the House of Alba a bit more known internationally?

No, it was a bit of an exception. I do not want my house to be half empty. It is uncomfortable when things are not in their place. As an exceptional thing, I will allow it: I loan specific paintings for specific exhibitions. But I do not want 70 paintings and 40 pieces of furniture to go, because then I am left in an empty house which is terribly sad.

Your mother witnessed very important moments in history. Yes. My mother was born in 1926 and she witnessed World War II. During the Spanish Civil War, she was

away with her grandfather who was a diplomat. On her return, she had to rebuild the Liria Palace as it had been destroyed. It had burnt to the ground.

Do you have any relationship with other European royals? Well, unfortunately I do not know the European royal families. I have had some contact with them, with the European aristocracy. But to be honest, not a lot, which is a very Spanish thing since we are very local, not particularly internationally-oriented – which began with my mother. In my opinion, perhaps I did not cultivate relations abroad enough. And now I do not feel like doing it. Of course, some of my responsibilities demand it and I do know some people. But making new friends is difficult. ~

Above, a Mozarabic style courtyard.

Opposite, Carlos Juan Fitz-James-Stuart y Martínez de Irujo.