

COMMON HOLLYHOCK

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The garden at Fortuny's house

Looking at the garden of the house where Fortuny lived, in the Realejo quarter of Granada, time stands still. My gaze wanders over it and alights on a rusty dead cypress tree, perhaps killed by poor drainage: maybe the fountain oozes water that finds its way down to the roots of the conifer, which does not like to have its feet wet. Another cypress stencils a dense shadow on the startling white of that wall. There, too, is the oleander; its fuchsia-red flowers bloom in mid-August. Now



it has a flower or two, brownish and withered. The pumpkin reigns in all its splendour, climbing to wherever its tendrils can reach. A new pot has been planted with old petunias. Their small flowers, with their whites, lilacs and pinks, illuminate the bottom of the boxwood hedge, which for lack of light is beginning to thin out. Facing the petunias, from another terracotta pot, decorated with garlands, rises a very special plant, the common hollyhock. Judging by the number of times he painted it, this was a species Fortuny had a personal affection for.

That reminds me: the 16th-century Segovian physician and thinker Andrés Laguna wrote of common hollyhocks that "but for a lack of scent, they would compete with roses."

After looking at every detail, enjoying every brushstroke, letting myself be enveloped by the colour and light of the painting, a whole half an hour has gone by, a part of my day. I'm late for lunch yet to me it seemed a mere sigh. Just as if I'd been in a real garden: time stops, dissolves, vanishes. You know when a walk through a garden begins, not when it ends. Even if it only lasts a few minutes, those minutes will stay with me. The scent of the rose will remain entangled in my memory and then reappear while I'm eating my pudding; on the Metro, hemmed in by a crowd, the sprig of lavender in my pocket will, of a sudden, remind me of my soft footfalls on the garden path; the sound of a stranger's cell phone will take me back to the moment when a robin eyed me inquisitively as I bent down to pick up an empty snail shell; and as I lie in bed, just as I switch off the light, I'll be returned to the scent and shadow of the fig tree. So the beauty that lasted only a few moments will walk alongside me all day long. And, before I even realise, a blink of my eyes announces another fresh morning in the garden. Even if Fortuny is no longer there. And, as I am someone different today from who I was yesterday, so the garden also changes. So, today, I notice the new light-green leaves sprouting on the ivy that climbs the whitewashed wall, where the sun has just drawn with its rays some scratches of light. I see how the stem of the pumpkin that has found the ground starts growing upwards and again begins its rise. And I look at the trunks of the cypress trees, peeking at intervals through the thicket of their own leaves. The other day I didn't notice, but I do notice today, a single drainage hole in the side of the pot that holds the common hollyhocks. Next season I shall have to plant them in a larger pot. So, what's the real difference between a real garden and a painted one? In the painted garden, the leaves make no sound as they fall.