

## The Way to San José: Fallas

By Gina Cariño



Some may still be nursing a hangover from the St. Patrick's/St. Joseph's Day weekend, so maybe we can talk about excesses and ephemera.

Do you know the way to San José? I didn't know March 19<sup>th</sup> was St. Joseph's Day until I came to Spain, where San José is a holiday in some places. And when I did (I mean come to Spain), I also learned about the popular Valencian festival that came about when local *carpintero* guilds began to burn their wood shavings on the feast of the Holy Carpenter. I itched to see for myself what had been described to me as one of the most exuberant and consuming, literally consuming, fiestas in all of Spain. I had seen pictures and videos but I wanted to see those *ninots* in person, those constructions of papier-mâché, rags, and wood filling the streets and squares. Something in me wanted to witness the spectacle of an enormous toyland being set on flames at the strike of midnight and getting reduced to rubble, to the accompaniment of massive fireworks and the euphoria of tipsy crowds. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

I hopped on a very early bus to the Mediterranean capital with three other young foreigners from "ex-colonies." We reached Valencia at mid-morning and wandered around town. I wasn't exactly awed to finally see the vast figures at close range, but they were conversation pieces, perfect for practicing my then still elementary Spanish with my Latin American companions. Some were fanciful, some were naughty or risqué, some just plain corny or kitsch. If anything really impressed me, it was the idea that they were built up just to be burned down.

At an intersection they were cooking a giant *paella a la valenciana*, the *paellera* reaching all four sidewalk corners. That whetted our appetites. We knew what we would have for lunch. Not in town, though, where prices seemed unsuitable to our student budgets and all restaurants were filled to the brim anyway. Someone told us to taxi to the seashore and have our rice in a beach-tent sort of eatery, which is what we did.

Then back we were in the city to resume our wanderings, take pictures, sip *horchata*, peel Valencian oranges (for a needed dose of Vitamin C), hooray the parades, rest our tired backs, legs, and feet at locked storefronts, gaze up at more *ninots*...

An hour before midnight we rose to ensure ourselves a decent view of the imminent burning, which was no simple task because we were told that one had to guard against getting trapped between panicking mobs and immobile buildings in the event of a wind blowing the holocaust astray. The clock struck twelve, Cinderella time. All I can remember, today, is a lot of fire around me but none inside of me.

The conflagration still in process, we inched our way to the bus station for the journey back to reality, reality being the ephemerality of fiestas and siestas. We arrived in Madrid about 4 am, so could count on at least a three-hour bed sleep before our alarm clocks went off to start us on a new regular work or study day, for it was March 20<sup>th</sup> and no longer a holiday. At 26, your body can do these things. At 46, quite less.