

History of the Carnival in Venice

The Tradition of Carnival in Venice

Venice carnival on the Place Saint-Mark

Since 5th century, the people maximized the opportunity during last days before the beginning of the Lent to amuse themselves and savor the pleasures and joy of life.

In **1094** carnival was already mentioned in a charter of the doge Faliero and in **1269** the Senate approved that they should designate the day before Lent as a holiday (Fat Tuesday).

They could then carry the mask, thankful to find a measure of equality lost in the course of time later, when under borrowed clothes; the noblemen still fraternized with the people.

In return for political inaction, the people became attached to this glorious pomp which characterized memorial holidays of Venice, when conflicts between the big families were forgotten; in hunt of bulls and of course the festivals of the carnival, which served for showing all seductions of wealth, all fads of fashion.

Venice carnival masks for all! During the holidays, and especially carnival, ardor and joy burst with life, harmony of colors, pomp and emulation of luxury.

To avoid public resentment, a law forbade the rich men Venetian to wear their jewelry publicly, except during official holidays and during the last carnival days! Carnival allowed them to finally satisfy all their affectations.

In the middle of active, mobile, cheerful multitude, among the flickering torches and the noise of the trumpets, circulated masks of a thousand disguises in fancy scintillating dresses of gold and gems, and matrons in precious dresses with trains so immense they were carried by maidservants.

In the middle of this mélange, the people were rather good and peaceful. Seldom did the huge crowd have any brawls or menacing gestures. There was no need for police officers or security forces: the throngs passed peaceful and merry across calli, like a true family celebration.

The Reputation of the Venice carnival

Venice carnival - Class and elegance The reasons for the popularity and success of the Venice carnival since revival (and perhaps even before) are political and

economic at the same time.

The people, who enjoy holidays and public entertainment, found both entertainment and pleasure during the carnival, but also especially a freedom of expression which existed at no other time or place.

They could criticize and make fun of whomever they wanted when they wanted: during carnival, the aristocratic Republic became a democracy in the form of laughter and joy.

The rules of precedence faded, only the festival of the carnival gathered everyone under its banner. The social release during the carnival was a factor in keeping the peace.

The massive arrival of the foreigners, (between 20 and 30,000, by some estimates) among whom they could count monarchs, who came to enjoy the entertainment and pleasure that the incognito of the mask afforded them, represents an economic manna for Venice doubled by a unique reputation for freedom and splendor.

The Venetian Mask is King

Venice carnival: happiness undercover

If carnival was this single moment, when the fable and the comedy jostled the rules of the day, it was especially the holiday of the world upside down, the utter disorder and the feast.

The play and freedom of madness leads the dance of all carnivals. Except that in Venice, carnival becomes a way of life and a frame of mind!

The Republic authorized the mask, and it was protected by it.

As long as carnival lasted everybody carried the mask, the doge, and the priest, the nuncio and even the maidservant and was occupied with their business "incognito".

They were concealed as went shopping, visited, and went about their ordinary life; except that the mask made it possible say and do everything they dared!

The mask erased the social barriers: from etiquette to conventions to respect.

No longer the patrician, the inquisitor, the priest or monk, the zentildonna, the foreigner, the nun, nor the rich or poor man. There wasn't any bashfulness, or embarrassment; everything remained "A Masked Ball".

The black cape (tabarro), the white bauta and the black dominoes under the tricorn hat were not sad: they were first of all signs of freedom of speech; it sanctioned folly, joy and secret pleasures. Nobody was indebted to anyone and nobody forbid anyone.

The only rule: have a good time, laugh, and dance and have fun with the group.

Venetian Masks and Characters

Spangles are not always needed!For costumes, the masks and figures of the Italian comedy gave them a wealth of characters, silhouettes and grotesque accessories: famous Harlequin and Pantalon, Punch, Brighella, Colombine, Scaramouche and so many others met, heckled and made their comedy on the place, others mingled, laughed and applauded, while Pierrot fell of the moon.

But they could also dress up, and endorse the costume of any figure: jobs and style of those that exercised them, as well as all foibles of the human person inspired a lot of people.

They could be which they wanted: a miser, a tinker of saucepans, a charlatan, a lawyer, a beggar, a tooth-puller, a monk, a chimney sweeper, a trader of rat poison, but it was necessary to be able to support the performance of the one whose attire they sported.

A British traveller wrote:

« The lawyer has an argumentative tone, and the doctor has pedantic air.

They have a lot of animation in their language; those who have no talent to support it do not run the risk of it. Every man, whom you will meet in your path, is sure to be entertained here.

I heard more witticisms in this one day of conviviality than during week in quite other place. »

Carnival in blue and goldThe art of the caricature and mockery showed the truth which made everybody laugh, including those who were portrayed, yet they also were letting off steam with a figure of their choice!

Here is a devil followed by the seven deadly sins, a monk, a courtesan, a dervish, an Egyptian, a satyr, shameless French, a gang of Spanish lansquenets in full regalia, Spanish morticians, a doctor of the plague carrying the mask in the long beak filled with herbs who lifts the clothes of the sick with his staff, a seller of love potions, a mufti, a Calabrian on his donkey...

And “Illustrissimo”, ruined nobleman decked out in an immense wig and in a ridiculous morning coat, carrying the sword in the side, muddied bottoms and shoes with a hole, who gave to the passers-by his protection, its treasures and its palace.

Undoubtedly there were also deposed kings and princes, these princes of carnival whom Candide (Candide in Voltaire's story of the same name) met in the course of meal during the Venice carnival!

Really, as in Candide, all is for the best in this, the best of all possible worlds, of the carnival, when Carlo Goldoni has been transformed and “sings histories of the Rive”.

They said then: “Nobody forges better than Goldoni the air, tone and grandiloquence of this kind of charlatans; it is its favorite fancy dress.”

The jeers, retorts went along with each other, each to control the qualities of his figure to give more pricking dialogues and to improvised scenes with other masks. The agile Venetians do not allow themselves to be content with merely wearing costume; they must embody the spirit as well.

The Venice Carnival! A Magic Formula, open Sesame to a Marvelous World of Beauty, Joy and Pleasure

Carnival of Venice The Prince!

« In other states of Europe, the madness of carnival lasts only some days: here they have privilege of extravagance six months of the year. »

ANGE GOUDAR (1708-1791) – translated from L’ESPION CHINOIS

In the 18th century, the Venice carnival began from the first Sunday in October to Christmas, then resumed from Epiphany until midnight on Fat Tuesday, when the bell announced the end of festivities.

It began again in ascent, for two weeks. And it rose from the dead on every election of a new doge, in Saint-Mark or at any opportunity!

The period of carnival opened the season of operas and comedies, and all of Venice waited for new shows with impatience.

For instance, in 1749 **GOLDONI** promised to deliver 16 new comedies for carnival. And the amateurs of the Commedia dell' arte found gratification with **Gozzi**.

ALBINONI and **VIVALDI** took responsibility for operas, and the finest vocalists enraptured a public that was very fond of exquisite voices.

Some people were quite expensive: the famous **FARINELLI** asked astronomical prices.

No worries! In Venice, music is a passion, because Venice is the country of music.

The young person Mozart was present at the carnival of **1771**.

Pretty Mask in the Venice carnivalThe beautiful ladies particularly liked to go to the opera, where their fine outfits and glittering jewels were resplendent under the lights of the big chandeliers during this holiday of fashion and elegance.

Added to the jokes and festivities, were the pleasures and danger of debauchery and passion of game!

When the entertainment of the place ends, that of the little room (ridotto) would commence.

Ridotto, forefather of the casino, was open every evening and it was accessible to any and all, the only condition was to carry the mask. Under the direction of unmasked noblemen, they played different games: basset, piquet, and especially the Faro.

On the gaming tables huge sums changed hands in a perfect silence in spite of the abundance of losses, and the masks covered the despair of the unlucky ones.

Carnival was the blessed period for the rogues and “hooked” to games such as Casanova and Da Ponte and the ridotto was a place favored for meetings.

Women from all walks of society were under the mask there, with which they could converse, play, flirt and the intermediaries were prompt to be of help, particularly to the rich foreigners!

But beware... the neighboring mask could hide a spy or a jealous husband whose henchmen would follow the audacious as they exited.

Intrigues and meetings in VeniceAs jokes and farces of the sort helped to eliminate the worries and small humiliations of the common life, added loving intrigues and discreet meetings became a reality as secret rendezvous.

Because the respect was owed to the mask, all doors opened, including those of palaces and convents, while anonymity was guaranteed.

In **HISTORY OF MY LIFE**, **CASANOVA** tells how a young patrician moved a beautiful woman away from her cumbersome husband with the complicity of his companions (Casanova was one of them) he managed to get the husband to believe they were Messengers of the Ten coming to arrest him.

They took him away to the island of San Giorgio where he was left, and met at with those who had stayed with the beautiful one!

And everybody spent a entertaining evening...

Here is how Casanova tells about his visit to the convent of Murano under the costume of Pierrot which so allowed him so to meet famed M M., who was the Ambassador of France's mistress:

« I decided to hide as Pierrot. There is not cleaner mask to dress somebody up if it is not either hunchbacked or lame.

The broad morning coat of Pierrot, its long very broad sleeves, his broad pants which arrive at his heels hide all that he could have of distinctive in all his size so that somebody who would know it particularly should be able to acknowledge it. [...]

I go down to the parlor which was full; but everybody makes room for this extraordinary mask, the beings of which nobody in Venice knows.

I get ahead walking like a nincompoop, as the character of the mask demands, and I go to the circle where they danced.

I see Punches, Scaramouch's, Pantalons, and Harlequins.

Venice carnival: Butterfly of night or day? I see all nuns at the gates, and every resident, those who sat, others standing, and without stopping my eyes on any, I see however M. M. and standing across the tender C. C. enjoying the show.

I go around the walking circle as though I had been intoxicated, careful of the head up to feet each; but being much more looked and examined.

Everybody studied me. I stop on a pretty Harlequin, taking her roughly by the hand to dance a minuet with her.

Each laughs and makes room. Harlequin dances in marvel according to the character of its mask, and me according to mine; I made the biggest pleasure to the company because of the continuous appearance which I had to fall, holding me however always out of balance.

After general fright laughing stock followed. »

GIACOMO CASANOVA

The Grand Hullabaloo

So all possible and thinkable masks circulated across calli or danced on campi, drawn away by the boisterous music of the orchestras composed of flutes, harps, violas, lutes, and of course by "the instrument of the demon", the one who has a dance, the violin!

And everybody walked, and all this flow of colors poured on the Piazza covered with trestles where they displayed marvels, where they sold different things in an ambience of fair.

There are no more days or nights. They slept, ate and drank when they wanted:

« At midnight as in the middle of the day, they find all edibles displayed, all cabarets opened, ready-made suppers in furnished inns and hotels. »

CARLO GOLDONI. MEMORIES, I

Mysterious in the Venice carnivalThe time was as jostled as the rest.

More established rhythm, place in fancy, in improvisation and in surprise of meetings! Freedom and anonymity guaranteed by the mask, artistic pleasure doubled by imagination and licentiousness, a catharsis which lasted several weeks and an incredible cosmopolitanism, this is what made the Venetian carnival absolutely unique.

Under the most complete anonymity, complete fantasies, liberties and nonsense were lawful.

Everybody found their place in this general catharsis, including the homosexuals who were not appreciated in Venice: The young women could disguise themselves as beautiful pages; the men dressed up as women played "Gniaghe" which approached the passers-by by employing evocative and ambiguous purposes, or enjoyed calling out different obscenities to them.

In **1720** **MAXIMILIAN MISSON** writes:

« During carnival they push to the limit ordinary profligacy, they refine all pleasures; they plunge up to the throat there.

The entire city is dressed up: vice and virtuousness hide as well as ever. »

MAXIMILIAN MISSON

And he specifies that the place Saint-Mark becomes covered with one thousand kinds of tumblers, masks and musicians and that the courtesans and the foreigners run up by thousands of all corners of Europe.

And the... future Magistrate, Mr. **CHARLES DE BROSSES** explains us that it was not necessary to take up complicated intrigues to arrive at certain goals:

« To end our topic about females, it is necessary here more than elsewhere to say a word about the courtesans.

They compose a really respectable profession, by their good behaviour.

You should not believe, as some says, that their number is so important that you would walk all over them; this happens only in the time of carnival, where you can find under the archways of the Procuraties as many lying down women than standing up ones. »

CHARLES DE BROSSES - WRITTEN FAMILIAR LETTERS OF ITALY

On **1739-1740**, Carnival had taken such importance, as even a public mourning could not stop it any more.

In **1789**, they had held secret the funeral for the doge Paolo Renier!

Who photographs who?

Mardi Gras, last day of carnival

All these bacchanals attain their fateful paroxysm on Ash Wednesday which marked the beginning of the festivities.

On Mardi Gras (Shrove Tuesday), they set off fireworks in broad daylight, and in the evening they burn an effigy of carnival: a stake was raised on the piazzetta near columns, and they threw in Carnival which struggles by shouting affronts.

And everything ends with Cavalchina, last masked ball before the Lent and the return to peace. At midnight bells ring to announce the end of festivities.

ZORZI BAFFO writes in his **EROTIC WRITINGS**:

« One goes to see the Piazza covered with bankrupt merchants, the hospital filled with people covered with medicated plasters, or with their sex gnawed by ulcer, and the

forehead of almost all cuckold husbands adorned with horns. »

And regarding the first day of the Lent he added:

« Oh! What a strange change from evening till morning!

It would seem that a whirlwind confused everything.

All holidays are finished; joy disappeared, as though plague had destroyed everything.

No music, no singing; theatres are closed; dancers and musicians are changed into dormouse.

You could believe in the visit of a magician, who turned the city in a mess. »

ZORZI BAFFO