

## Maschere a Venezia

What mask will you wear to the Bal di Carnevale?

BY CAROL WOOD



*PUT off that mask of burning gold  
 With emerald eyes.  
 Oh no, my dear, you make so bold  
 To find if hearts be wild and wise,  
 And yet not cold.  
 I would but find what's there to find,  
 Love or deceit.  
 It was the mask engaged your mind,  
 And after set your heart to beat,  
 Not what's behind.  
 But lest you are my enemy,  
 I must enquire.  
 Oh no, my dear, let all that be;  
 What matter, so there is but fire  
 In you, in me?*

W. B. Yeats, *The Mask*

The man in Yeats' poem wonders what his lover is hiding behind her seductive mask as have millions of revelers during Venice's Carnival over the centuries. At the height of festivals in Venice's history (mostly during the 18<sup>th</sup> century,) one could legally wear masks two thirds of the year. Depending on the decade, laws were decreed to regulate what time of day masks were allowed, even what gender could wear a specific mask. The rich, increasingly debauched, tradition of Carnival in Venice which found its roots in the 13<sup>th</sup> century declined precipitously five centuries later when the Republic of Venice fell to Napoleon's army in 1797. The tradition found a rebirth, albeit only two weeks a year, in the early 1980's.



*Contemporary Carnevale revelers in plain white masks.*

Today, the mask worn by most costumed revelers in Venice is the expressionless white full-face mask. Less usual, you can also see the generic half-mask that conceals only the area around the eyes. Humans must have a fascination with hiding behind a generic face, the face that melts into the crowd. Interestingly, this fascination is not unique to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but was actually present for celebrants of earlier centuries as expressed by some of the masks here described.

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## Maschere a Venezia, *continued from page 1*

There are a few masks commonly worn in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Venice during Carnival and at other times, and also some made famous by the Italian Commedia dell'Arte theater:

The most widely worn mask was that which developed into a form of standard dress or uniform donned by Venetian nobility, "Bautta" or "Bauta." This mask can be seen in most paintings depicting Venice in the arms of her beloved Carnival. Assumptions abound as to the origin of the mask's name (see <http://www.bluemoonvenice.com/en/venetian-masks/the-bauta> in particular.) The mask itself was generally stark white with no embellishment. It covered most of the face from view, the upper lip of which jutting out so as to allow the wearer to converse and imbibe with ease. Those with means wore the Bauta covering the face, then the "volto" or "larva," a black lace hood covering the wearer's upper body skin and hair down to the waist. The Bauta and volto were usually held in place by a black tricorne hat. Sometimes, to hide even more clues to the wearer's identity, a floor-length black cloak was worn. This was not only an economic equalizer, as anyone of any means was allowed to wear this mask, it was also a gender equalizer since not only a woman, but also a man in Bauta was addressed as "signora maschera," or "lady mask."



*Bauta with volto in Pietro Longhi's "Il Ridotto."*



*Moretta in Pietro Longhi's "Il rinoceronte"*

Also common and worn only by women was the "Moretta" or "Muta." Originating in France, this popular disguise was first known in Venice as "Servetta Muta," or "mute servant." The name then merged into "Muretta"/"Moretta." (Some say it got its name from Italian "moretta" meaning "small and dark.") With its black velvet covered surface and only two small openings for the eyes, the wearer was forced not to speak because she held the mask to her face by gripping a small button mounted inside. Extremely erotic, the lady remained enveloped in mysterious silence with her face covered by this small oval mask, but revealed a beautiful décolletage and neck, unlike the less exposing Bauta with volta.

We may wonder why depictions of women revealing their breasts to potential customers typify the image of Venetian prostitutes. The roots of this form of advertising are tied closely to masks during this period. Homosexuality in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Venice was illegal, punishable by death, yet homosexual prostitution thrived during this time to the extent that it threatened female prostitutes' business. One way in which male prostitutes skirted around the ban on homosexuality was to display their wares by dressing as a woman wearing a half mask that looked like a rosey-cheeked gal. By wearing the "Gnaga" mask, any man was merely acting a role, playing a part, which was completely legal and not punishable. The name derives from the way in which these men enhanced the charade as women by using a particularly harsh voice that sounded like cats screaming; "gnau" in Venetian means "cats."

The fascinating "Il Mattaccino" costume didn't always wear a mask to begin with, but its hallmark was brightly colored garments. This prankster was wont to pummel passersby, if possible the nobility, with perfumed eggs. The costume of Il Mattaccino evolved into that of a little devil with the horns emanating either from a headpiece or a mask. This



*Gnaga*

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*Il Mattaccino*

character gets its name from the Italian “mattinate” meaning “mornings,” since these hoodlums stayed up to all hours looking for unsuspecting victims.

With its beginnings rooted in a very sad, but practical use, “Medico della Peste” became a popular costume because of its frightening appearance. As early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, doctors could be seen protecting themselves with an avian shaped mask. Emblematic of this full-face mask was the overlong beak that covered both nose and mouth. This beak had long slits extending down either side and was stuffed with aromatic herbs to filter the germ-laden air, similar to a gas mask. No longer out of necessity, but in

keeping with the look, the Medico della Peste costume also consisted of a long stick with which to hold the afflicted at a safe distance, a full-length dark cloak, and a large black hat. The costume was meant to terrify spirits rather than keep yet-to-be-discovered microbes away.

And then there were theater masks worn mostly by Commedia dell’Arte actors, but which also influenced masks worn by the common individual. Some of the better-known characters are below.



*Pantalone by Maurice Sand 1860*

Donning the most authentically Venetian mask, the “Pantalone” character was penny-pinching and calculating, but also naively trusting. The mask had a very large nose with huge, bushy eyebrows.

Unlike the plague doctor, “Il Dottore” (the doctor) portrayed either an expert in law or medicine and was either the caricature of pseudo erudite conceit, or a genuinely learned man who gave long, unintelligible monologues with puns aplenty. His was usually a half mask covering his whole forehead and nose and terminating in a mustache, but not covering his cheeks.

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*Medico della Peste by Maurice Sand, 1860*



*Il Dottore by Maurice Sand 1860*

## Upcoming Events

### GBACG Open House

Jan. 18, 2014

Members, Non-members, and Sister Organization Members are invited to our annual meeting where we highlight upcoming events, costume items raffle, present a fashion show, and other fun stuff! Location: Albany



### Leather Mask Workshop

Make a leather mask for our Venetian Carnivale event (or any other event) with Alyssa Ravenwood of [Ravenwood Masks](http://www.ravenwoodmasks.com). **Tickets have sold out.**

### Bal di Carnevale

Feb. 8, 2014

Enjoy an evening of appetizers, desserts and dazzling feats of skill in the glittering atmosphere of the Venetian Carnivale.

Costume: 18<sup>th</sup> Century, all classes, or 18<sup>th</sup> Century Fancy Dress. Masks required! Location: SJ \$\$\$\$ <http://www.gbacg.org/current/BalDiCarnivale.php>



### Costume Salon: Regency

March 2, 2014

Join us for potluck tea snacks, socializing, and sharing resources. Theme appropriate books, patterns, garments, or projects also welcome. Our Salons are free and no dress-up is required. Location: TBD.

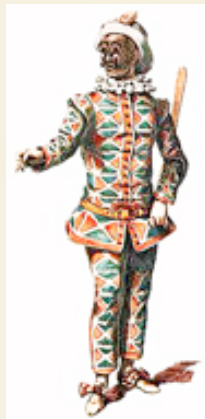
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No Commedia would be complete without its “Pulcinella.” A loose-fitting white tunic and trousers with white peaked hat typify his poor, lovestruck hunchback. His mask is usually a black, half-mask with short, hooked nose, poofy cheeks, and furrowed brow.

“Arlecchino” (or Harlequin) and “Colombina” (also “Arlecchina”) wear the most iconic Commedia costumes: they are brightly colored solids in geometric patches outlined in black or white. Arlecchino usually wears a pug-nosed mask with drooping cheeks and a look of surprise. The only woman to don a mask in Commedia, Colombina may wear a very simple black half-mask.



(Left) Arlecchino by Maurice Sand, 1860

(Right) Arlecchino's partner as Arlecchina by Maurice Sand, 1860



(Left) Arlecchino's partner as Colombina by Maurice Sand, 1860



“Zanni” (short for “Giovanni”) is the miserable servant with a thousand tricks just to get by. More than a specific mask or costume, this character is a persona that morphed into many aspects of characters like Pantalone and Arlecchino. However, typically he is portrayed in one of the better-known types of masks of the Commedia: very long, beaked nose, expressive eyes and eyebrows, and when full-face an exaggeratedly protruding chin or beard. masks”]

It is fascinating that Venetian masks hide their owners' identities so very well precisely because, after having developed over many centuries, the iconicity of these masks is so prominent, so admirably confident. Wearer beware: The mask may be confident like the woman in the poem, but you may attract more than you bargain for. Thus, *nose te ipsum* (know thyself)!!

*F*



Pulcinella by Maurice Sand, 1860



Zanni masks

### References:

1. Mario Belloni, *Maschere a Venezia: Storia e tecnica*, 2006
2. Fulvio Roiter, *Magic Venice in Carnival*, 1999
3. Paola Scibilia, *Venezia. Il Carnevale*, 2006
4. <http://www.delpiano.com/carnival/html/traditions.html>
5. <http://www.blumoonvenice.com/en/history>

## President's Column

BY DEBORAH BORLASE



Welcome to another year of costuming adventure. If you've not had the chance, check out our calendar ([gbacg.org/gbacg-calendar.html](http://gbacg.org/gbacg-calendar.html)) and see what's in store for 2014. The year starts out with our ever popular Open House where we will highlight these upcoming events, raffle costume items, and hold a fantastic fashion show. Also of note, is the spectacular Bal di Carnivale, which will be the event of the year as we recreate the elegant atmosphere of an 18th c. Venetian Carnivale. Additionally, with Costume Academy and a number of workshops, there will be ample opportunity to build on our costuming skills. I hope all of you will join us for these and other events.

## Events, continued

### Costume Academy

March 15, 2014

Join for fabulous day of workshops. Learn amazing tips & tricks, start on some cool projects, even do some shopping. Location: Fremont. \$ \$\$\$



### Sister Organization Events

Discount ticket information: <http://www.gbacg.org/about-gbacg/member-benefits.html>

### PEERS: Middle Earth Ball

Feb. 1, 2014: <http://peersdance.org/MiddleEarth.html>

### PEERS: Gotham City Black & White Ball

March 1, 2014: <http://peersdance.org/gotham.html>

### ADSC Annual Member Party

February 9, 2014, 2:00 pm-6:00 pm  
<http://www.artdecosociety.org/calendar/>

Interested in joining the GBACG or renewing your membership? Want to purchase tickets to events or workshops? You can do all of this on the GBACG website:

- Join/renew your membership: <http://www.gbacg.org/about-gbacg/join-gbacg.html>
- Purchase event tickets: <http://www.gbacg.org/gbacg-calendar.html> - see individual event webpages to order online (via PayPal), or to print out a form that you can mail in with a check.
- Purchase workshop tickets: <http://www.gbacg.org/gbacg.org/gbacg-calendar.html> - see individual workshop webpages to order online (via PayPal), or to print out a form that you can mail in with a check.
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