

Festivals, Carnivals and Celebrations

plus

Dorset Days, Saucy Sophia's Snippets

and trailer for next month.

February, 2023.

Unlike last month where the subject, “The Three Kings” or the Magi (three wise men) is as old as Christianity itself but was not celebrated in its present form in Spain and the countries of the former Spanish Empire until the Nineteenth Century, our subject for this month, the Venetian Carnival, has a very definite commencement date. The Carnevale di Venezia in its present form is an annual event commencing in February and ending on Shrove Tuesday, Martedì Grasso, or Mardi Gras the day before the start of Lent on Ash Wednesday. and famous for the elaborate masks worn by those participating.

The origin of the Carnival of Venice arises from the celebrations following the Serene Republic's military victory of 1162 when the Venetian army defeated the forces of the Patriarch of Aquileia, one Ulrico di Treven. There were mass celebrations in San Marco Square in Venice, partly from joy of victory and also relief that the city would not be occupied by the enemy with all the attendant rape and pillage practiced in the twelfth century. It is uncertain if the festival immediately became an annual event from 1163, although this seems unlikely.

Marco Polo, the much-celebrated Venetian explorer, who established for Italy a lucrative trade in luxury goods from the Orient of which Venice was the main beneficiary from 1295, and the profits of this trade enabled the Serene Republic to achieve domination of the eastern Mediterranean and the establishment of colonies on the eastern Adriatic Sea, and landward expansion westwards into north-eastern Italy, all from its origin as an island settlement in the Venetian lagoon. This attractive source of revenue came to a disastrous conclusion after 1498 when the Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama established a sea route to north-west India, which rapidly eclipsed the land route of the silk roads. Although perilous by modern standards, travel by sea in the sixteenth century was quicker, more reliable, and less expensive, much to the advantage of those countries on the Atlantic coast of Europe. In 1500 the Pope decided to rebuild the Vatican; he could not have chosen a more disastrous time, as funding the project led to the wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Serene Republic was one of a few Italian countries with the vision to search for a means of replacing lost income and the strength to defy the Holy Inquisition.



Carnival Scene or the Minuet by Giandomenico Tiepolo, 1754/5.

The European Renaissance of the late fifteenth century and the early sixteenth century, with the great flourishing of the arts provided Venice with the means of economic durability. They may have lost the trade of the silk roads, and their maritime power was waning, but defiance of the edicts of the Holy See enabled Venice to benefit from the trade in works of art. The Republic provided a safe refuge for artists whose works sold for good prices but were proscribed by the Vatican. Thus, Venice became a centre for the arts, and also, by virtue of providing safe refuge for some of the Jews evicted from Spain after the conquest of Granada in 1492, a centre for European banking at a time when usury was prohibited in many catholic countries. The Venetian Ghetto was a safe location for the Jews of Venice, not a place of confinement. An early example of the establishment of the Serene Republic as a European centre of the arts in the sixteenth century is the venetian artist Tiziano Vecelli or Vecellio usually referred to in English as Titian who enjoyed the protection afforded by the Republic to paint the “Venus of Urbino” in 1534, purchased by the Duke of Urbino, the subject may well be a portrait of the Duchess. It is remarkable for Titian’s ability to defy papal law and avoid the auto de fe (the dreadful death by burning) as the lady is not only nude but looking invitingly directly at the viewer. In all earlier pictures, e.g., Adam and Eve, Eve is shown demurely looking away from the viewer.



Venus de Urbino by Tiziano Vecelli, 1534.



View of the Rialto Bridge by Francesco Guardi.

Not slow to cease an opportunity the Republic re-started the Carnival during this period; the celebrations, prohibited for many years, provided a diversion for the population after the loss of much military and maritime prestige together with an attraction for the European wealthy to visit Venice, enjoy themselves and spend money. By the eighteenth-century artists such as Giovanni Bellotto, Giovanni Antonio Canaletto, Francesco Guardi, and Giandomenico Tiepolo were producing numerous paintings of Venice for well healed visitors to take home to adore the walls of grand houses in Austria, Bavaria, France, Great Britain, Prussia, Russia, the United Provinces, and many more. By the eighteenth century together with Rome it was one of the “must visit” cities for those enjoying the grand tour. The sons of the wealthy were often despatched on the “grand tour” to further their education, rather like an eighteenth-century version of a young ladies finishing school, except that being the 1700’s the term “education” could be loosely interpreted to include admiration of ancient antiquity, more recent buildings, statues and paintings together with the blatant absence of virtue and morals among some ladies, to be greatly enjoyed away from home. The use of masks enabled the wearer to disguise their identity, social standing, and class. The son of a labourer could, during the carnival, wear breeches and carry a sword, dress otherwise prohibited for one of such low birth. The encouraged licence and pleasure was also used to protect Venetians from present and future anguish. However, the festival was under the rule of the Holy Roman Emperor and the then Kaiser of Austria, Francis II, who ordered that the festival be terminated entirely in 1797 and the use of masks became strictly forbidden. It reappeared gradually in the nineteenth century, but only for short periods and above all for private feasts, where it became an occasion for artistic creations.



Saint Mark's Basilica by Giovanni Antonio Canaletto

After a long absence, the Carnival returned in 1979. The Italian government having decided to bring back the history and culture of Venice and sought to use the traditional Carnival as the centrepiece of its efforts. The redevelopment of the masks began as the pursuit of some Venetian college students for the tourist trade. Since then, approximately three million visitors have come to Venice each year for the Carnival. One of the most important events is the contest for *la maschera più bella* ("the most beautiful mask"), which is judged by a panel of international costume and fashion designers.

The wearing of masks had always been an important feature of the Venetian carnival as people of whatever social standing were allowed to wear them between the festival of *Santo Stefano* (St. Stephen's Day), from December 26th to the end of the carnival season at midnight on Shrove Tuesday. But masks were also allowed on Ascension Day and from the 5th of October to Christmas, thus a large portion of the year could be spent in disguise.

The makers of masks or *mascherari* enjoyed a special position in Venetian society, with their own laws established by the statute of the 10th of April, 1436 and a guild, The *Mascherari* belonged to the fringe of painters and were assisted by sign-writers who drew faces onto plaster in a range of different shapes and paying extreme attention to detail. These masks were made of leather or porcelain with elaborate decoration including gold leaf.



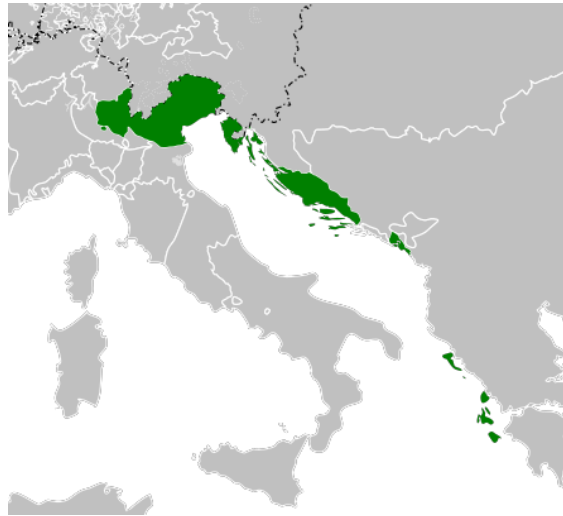
The Ridotto in Venice by Pietro Longhi.

The exact origin of mask wearing seems to be a little obscure, but it is easy to conjecture that at a time when the ravages of smallpox ran rampant throughout Europe masks were a convenient way of hiding the facial disfiguration. They also allowed and/or enabled promiscuity as one would not know with whom one was conversing and accepting an invitation. Perhaps also in Venice during Carnival as the sumptuary laws were suspended the rigid dress code ceased to apply. Thus, a lady or gentleman could appear in disguise as one of the working class, whilst a day labourer, kitchen maid or lady of the night could all appear in public dressed as people of the upper class. Men could wear buckle shoes, silk stockings and breeches, dress normally strictly reserved for gentlemen.



Conversation entre masque by Pietro Longhi, 1760-70.

It is important to remember that until the maritime route to the Far East was established in 1497 the Serene Republic controlled vast territory adjoining the Adriatic Sea including much of Croatia, parts of Greece and the lands of Northeast Italy, not just the islands in the lagoon. Below is a map of the Republic at the time of its demise at the hands of the Great Disturber (Napoleon Bonaparte). Venetian territory shown in dark green.



Dorset Days

On the 20th of last month my Wife, Mary and I attended by special invitation the private viewing of a special exhibition at the Lighthouse Art Gallery and Theatre in Poole, Dorset of the paintings of the East London Group of Artists. On show are a selection of paintings by members of the Group ranging from the 1920's to 1950's being pictures loaned by private families which included three of my late Father's works. Given the coastal location of Poole with its Quay and Harbour opposite Brown Sea Island, the theme of the paintings is the seaside, with pictures of the Dorset Coast, Brighton, Margate, Weymouth, and numerous others. Amongst the people we met there and talked to were the Mayor and Mayoress of Poole and two art lectures from Bournemouth University.

The exhibition will be open until the beginning of April and is well worth a visit.



Saucy Sophia's Snippets



Elizabeth Chudleigh, later Duchess of Kingston-upon-Hull, as she appeared at the Venetian Ambassador's fancy dress ball in 1749 dressed as Iphigenia. There is another engraving of her attending the same event but very much more scantily clad.

Trailer for next month.



Holi, the Indian Festival of Colour has an interesting though remote history originating from before the birth of Jesus Christ, and is celebrated on the 17th to 18th of March each year.

Dorian Osborne

1st February, 2023.

