

Carnival in Italy

By

Maria J. Falco, Phd

For those of us who have lived in Louisiana for any length of time, Carnival, or Mardi Gras in French, is as much a part of our lives as is Halloween, Christmas, New Year or Easter. It is a time we celebrate with family and friends, but to the extent and lavishness that few Americans outside of this state are familiar with. Philadelphia has it's Mummings Parade (derived from the name of the Roman god, Momus) on New Year's Day, but not with the number of parades, balls and parties, beginning with Twelfth Night (Epiphany) and ending with the day before Ash Wednesday, that we hold here in celebration of Carnival. This is obviously due to the French and Spanish origins of the people of Louisiana and their customs going back to earliest colonial times.

Nevertheless, those of us whose parents and grandparents emigrated from Italy during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, also found it very much in line with their own customs and traditions and therefore felt truly welcome and "at home" in this place. So, let us explore some of the actual origins and practices of Carnival as they developed and took root, first in Italy and then here.

"Carnevale" in Italian, literally means "farewell to flesh (or meat)." It celebrates the days before Lent when we can eat as much meat as we wish before giving it up or "fasting" for the next forty days before Easter. So, basically, we can celebrate as much as we wish

between Twelfth Night (January 6th) and Lent and do so in various (exotic?) ways.

Some historians claim that the type of celebration we see during this time of year actually dates back to pre-Christian days in Rome when “Saturnalia” or the Winter Festival in honor of “Sol Invicta” (the unconquered sun) which returned to its full glory following the Winter Solstice (December 25), and “Lupercalia” or the Spring Festival honoring the wolf (Lupa) who suckled the infants Romulus and Remus before the founding of Rome.

Whatever its origins, “Carnevale” soon became one of the most important Christian Festivals in medieval Italy. Unfortunately, the battles over control of different parts of the peninsula between France, Spain and Austria, took its toll in Italy, especially when the Austrians forbade all masking throughout its territories (including Venice), until long after the wars of unification in the 19th century. In fact, the Venetians did not return to their customary masked balls, etc., until 1979!!

Some of the customs as well as the costumes of the period when parades and balls were lavishly celebrated throughout Italy gave rise to the specific personalities and pranks developed during the 16th and 17th centuries when the “Commedia dell’Arte” became the predominant mode of entertainment preceding and even dominating the themes and music of the theater and evolving opera performances. Shakespeare, Moliere, Rossini, Verdi, Puccini, Mozart, Leoncavallo and many others, took advantage of some of the traditional characters and plots of the “Commedia” to produce, not just “Punch and Judy” shows but references to “Pulcinella”, “Harlequin” (Arlecchina), “Pantalone,” “Colombina” and “Zanni” (Fools or Clowns), using “Slap-stick” and “opera buffa”—usually

acted out with what had become the traditional masks for the different characters. Even Picasso in the 20th century used these characters in his famous painting “The Three Musicians” and for Stravinsky’s Ballet “Pulcinella.”

Today, almost every city and town in Italy celebrates “Carnevale” in its own way—with parades, balls, or just public and private parties. The most widely visited of all the celebrations of Carnival, however, are those of Venice and of Viareggio on the opposite or western coast of Italy, just north of Pisa.

In Venice, most of the costumes are in the style of dress common in the 18th century, very elaborate and ornate. And since Venice is built on islands and lagoons, parades per se are not possible, but “regal” or stately “walks” around the main piazzas of the city are good substitutes for individuals and families who wish to stage and display their characters of choice. Viareggio, on the other hand, prefers large parades satirizing or caricaturing famous individuals, especially politicians.

Needless to say, here in New Orleans, we combine the traditions of both cities: elaborate dress, raucous parties, huge hilarious, stately and satirical parades, and lots of masks, plus throws---both elaborate and multitudinous—to the unending calls of, “Throw me something, mister!”

New Orleans will never stop celebrating Carnival, or Mardi Gras (call it what you will), in this fashion—nor will Italy---at least not in our lifetimes! “Salve, yo Pagliaccio!!” (Hail, Oh Fool!!)

Attached are some of the pictures I took on my trip to both Venice and Viareggio during Carnival season in 2003.