

# Venetian Carnevale Masks: A History



Carnevale revelers wearing forms of the *bauta*/*larva*/*volto* masks with hats and veils, c. 1610 by Giacomo Franco. Image courtesy of the British Museum.

Presentation by Lady Isabetta Orsini of the Barony of the Rhydderich Hael in the Sylvan Kingdom of Æthelmearc

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## Brief History of Carnevale in Venice

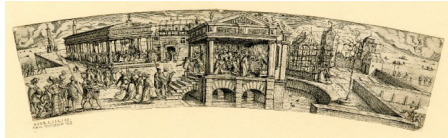
Carnevale: A time to have fun and let loose before the beginning of Lent  
• Carnevale season was from December 26 through the beginning of Lent

Eymology of Carnevale

Roots of Carnevale

Liston: a parade of costumes and wealth taking place at the beginning of Carnevale

Shrove Thursday and Shrove Tuesday Celebrations



Description: February's *Piace*, a segment of a circle with a city on a waterfront with two open buildings in the style of classical temples, dancing on the one at the back, a carnival procession with musicians moving from it towards the temple in the foreground.  
Date: 1554-1591  
Museum number: 1845.0805.1350

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## Brief History of Carnevale in Venice Continued

“The Venice Carnival has changed significantly in the course of its long history. Between the Renaissance and Enlightenment Carnival represented aspects of politics, culture, and social behavior: from an aristocratic exhibition of individual wealth and power to an increasingly homogenous masquerade that concealed the gap between patricians and citizens; from a rigidly controlled state spectacle in praise of the city’s apotheosis to a libertine festival in the wake of the city’s decadence.”



Scene played in Venice during carnival, including ball and horse racing, and a long lit game. c.1519 Engraving by Calvesotto  
From: Image courtesy of the British Museum. Museum number: 1845.0922.5127

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## Discourse Against Carnevale

### Discourse Against Carnevale, 1607 by Anonymous

- In masking the face, one also covers their conscience: Carnevale made people act in ways they otherwise not permitted, for example dancing like a fool, a lady venturing out alone in public, a widow amongst revelers all under the guise that Carnevale allows it. Thus mask wearing incited corruption.



"Clarissimi in Piazza San Marco"  
by Giacomo Fracchi  
engraving ca. 1610

Il Carnevale Italiano Mascherato:  
Que si Veggono in Figura Varie  
Inventione de Capri  
by Francesco Bertelli  
Published 1642 in Venice  
Written in Italian  
Retrieved 08/09/20 from  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bv1h525035073/149.f1ca>



Bertelli  
Jouanolle

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## Mask Wearing

### "Signora Maschera: "Lady Mask"

- An acceptable greeting for any costumed person

### Masks as the great equalizer

- Rich and the poor, casino owners and patrons or gamblers, and peasants and nobles

### Masks were not considered a luxury item

- Masks were worn in Venice up to 6 months a year



Book of Italian Costumes,  
by Nalana Kippell  
ca. 1988 - The Walters



Pietro Bertelli "Vilof" - engraving (1642)

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## Il Ridotto

Venice casino where all except the banker were supposed to be masked



Il Ridotto by Joseph Becher the Elder  
Bavarian State Painting Collections - State Gallery in the Würzburg Residence  
<https://www.staatliche-bayern.de/en/artist/joseph-becher-the-elder>

*This is where they come to wager  
Ducats, sequins, silver, gold.  
It has no equal; none can match  
Its splendid air or noble mold*

*A sculpted goddess in the foyer,  
Keeps stately vigil night and day  
At the threshold stands a gambler  
With mask in hand and keen to play*

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## Mask Legislation

Mask Legislation: much of what we know/presume about masking in Venice is due to the legislation that survived.

Though many laws enacted intended to limit the behaviors of mask wearers, these laws were, for the large part, ignored by the populace.

Historians are able to infer that mask wearing was not largely popular prior to 1268 as regulations would have emerged earlier.



Open manuscript of laws in venetian, showing page 107 verso, 1550.  
1470. Item. Page. Paper. B. 70.14. See page 107. 1470.14.  
British Library  
<http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullView.aspx?ref=MS.A.9.2.v.107r>  
MS.A.9.2.v.107r. f. 107r. 1470.14. See page 107. 1470.14.  
MS.A.9.2.v.107r. f. 107r. 1470.14. See page 107. 1470.14.

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## Important Dates in Mask Legislation

- 1268: Law that forbade mask use in a street game known as "Ova" aka gioco dell ova
- 1339: Law forbidding night raids by mask wearers
- 1436: Reorganization of arts magistrates
- 1443: Law against men dressing as women
- 1444: Law reiterating current prohibitions, emphasizing laws against women disguised or with heads covered
- 1438: Law prohibiting men dressed as women from entering monasteries
- 1461: Imposed serious fines for men in masks who threatened others
- 1463: Creation of Mask-Maker's Guild
- 1467: Further laws regarding masked men from entering monasteries
- 1502: Takes a stand against masked men running around town carrying weapons, e.g. guns and sticks
- 1504: Reiterated many prohibitions already listed



"Maschere usate in Venetia ehe Titano Ovi isolatori" by Francesco Bertoli Engraving (1642) Museum number 1881.1008.21

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## Important Dates in Mask Legislation Continued

- 1531: New decree forbidding use of weapons by/on people in masks
- 1546: Plague masks are prohibited, no one knows how well this law was observed
- 1585: Further prohibition of masked individuals carrying weapons or other dangerous tools
- 1590: Reiterates same prohibitions, also forbade masked people from using whips on coachmen
- 1593: Prohibits masked men from bearing arms
- 1603: Repeating ban on masked men talking to nuns
- 1604: Law threatening confiscation of clothes deemed to be too elegant, made of materials that are too expensive as this was expressly prohibited by law
- 1605: Prohibits masked individuals from using weapons



British Museum number 1881.1008.69 A couple, masked and wearing feathered hats, is standing; the woman at the left has a hank with frills and the man at the right holds a dagger in his left hand. Print made by Francesco Bertelli biography Date 1638-1650

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## Important Dates in Mask Legislation Continued

- 1606: Masked people not allowed in places of worship
- 1607: Renewing prohibition of carrying weapons while masked
- 1608: The Council of Ten issued a decree beginning to limit the times of year when masks could be worn; masks including fake beards or mustaches, other fabric covering the face, limited to citizen nobles, or strangers on ground or boat.
- 1613: Repeated 1608 decree with same prohibitions and penalties
- 1615: Law forbidding prostitutes from using boats and wearing masks
- 1618: Further magistrate action against masked men or women with clothes deemed to be too luxurious.
- 1628: Senate call for the Council of Ten to take action against masked men gambling, and take under its full jurisdiction all matters relating to games and masks



Book of Italian Costumes, by Nicholas Kippell ca. 1588 - The Washers

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## Mask-Making as a Profession

- April 10, 1436: Painter's guild reorganized to include mascareri/maschereri, joined by targheri
- Between 1530-1600 11 new members joined the Painter's Guild/Mascareri including one woman, Barbara Scharpetta
  - Worked on volti - "faces" in fine, waxed canvas, or oil cloth, or papier mache

- Tommaso Garzoni's *Piazza Universale di Tutte le Professioni del Mondo* (The Universal Assembly of All the Professions of the World, Noble and Ignoble written in 1585)
- Portrayed the mask as an evil invention, reminder of the biblical temptation of the serpent

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## Common Types of Masks

### Etymology of word mask



A woman led by a player holding a torch by Jacob de Gheyn II  
Museum number 1878.07.13.2633



Description: Detail of a miniature of a horse-drawn litter carrying a lady in mask.  
Origin: France  
Artist: Louis Papon  
Title: *Discours à Le-saliquères*, with dedication (ff. 34r)  
Date: 1597  
Language: French



Goblet: glass; conical bowl on folded bell-foot; three enameled male figures in masquerade  
Period: 16th century  
System identifier: 12-543764  
Inventory number: S.832  
Production site: Kuehnenck (origines) Venise (origine)

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## Common Types of Masks: The Bauta

Bauta/Larva/Volto: "noble" or "national" mask of the Serene Republic  
 "Mask that hides all differences"

- Various etymologies for Bauta (highly disputed)
- Etymology of larva, from largo or larvae
- Bauta was the accessories typically worn with this mask
- Larva was the white mask used to conceal the wearer's identity
- Use of this mask was typically permitted outside of just Carnevale time



Il Carnevale Italiano Mascherato  
 by Francesco Bertelli c. 1642

Masques Venetianus by  
 Giovanni Tiepolo



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Carnivale revelers wearing forms of the  
 bauta/larva/volto masks with lace and veils  
 1610 Giacomo Franco.  
 Image courtesy of the British Museum  
 Museum number 1868.0822.83.58

A Dance at the Time of Carnival by  
 Muller Jan Harneman (1571-1628)  
 System identifier: 07-212716  
 Inventory number DNY29906



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## Common Types of Masks: Domino

Mask in Domino

- half mask, worn with a hood rather than a cape and hat,
- Etymology



Print made by Francesco Bertelli  
 c. 1638-1639  
 Museum number 1881.1008.79



VILLOTI (Peasants Mask) by Pietro  
 Bertelli: "Vilotti" - engraving 1642



Print made by Francesco Bertelli  
 c. 1638-1639  
 British Museum number 1881.1008.81

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## Common Types of Masks: Moretta

Moretta aka Muta

- Also worn with mantle that allowed sumptuous clothing underneath to still be seen
- Primarily worn by women



A man with a turban leading a woman wearing a mask, behind them stands a tavernkeeper, after De Gheyn, 1600. Museum number 1878.07.13.2630



Il Carnevale Romano Mascherato by Francesco Bertelli c. 1642

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## Common Types of Masks: Gnaga

Gnaga

- Etymology: "gnau" or "miau"
- Mask typically accompanied by a whole outfit
- Often seen accompanied by friends dressed as tati/tate (babies) to whom the gnaga played as nannies and carrying a basket full of kittens
- Originally created to help men dress as women in a time when homosexuality was outlawed



Image retrieved from <http://www.mondomuseum.net/arte/it/realismo.htm>

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## Common Types of Masks: Mattasin

Mattasin aka Il Mattacino

- Mask mentioned in earliest documented mask law from 1268
- Became a popular representation in the Commedia dell'Arte



Pietro Bertelli c. 1642 <http://www.delpiano.com/carnival.htm/mattacino.html>



Pietro Bertelli c. 1642 <http://www.delpiano.com/carnival.htm/mattacino.html>




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## Common Type of Masks: Spiriti Folletti

Traditional Venetian zanzale tied at the waist then worn about the head in order to make a spirit-like costume

Variation for poor women was a head scarf aka ninzioletto worn around the neck with 2 corners standing up like horns



Zanzale. Image retrieved from <http://www.venetianmasks.com/scheda.asp?id=839>



Venetian carnival scene showing revelers in different styles of masks. 1993, by Peter de Jode the Elder. Printed in *Private Lives in Renaissance Venice* by Patricia Fortini Brown.

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## Common Types of Masks: Commedia d'ell Arte

Commedia d'ell Arte Masks emerged in the mid 1500s

- Usually made of leather in order to withstand the many hours, days, and years of use on stage
- Continued to be worn for Mummerie long after regular mask-wearing was outlawed



Commedia dell'Arte troupe, probably depicting Isabella Andreini and the Compagnia dei Gelosi, oil painting by unknown artist, c. 1586; in the Musée Carnavales, Paris



Retrieved on 03/20/20 from <https://empestadimare.org/blog/commedia-dell-arte/>

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## Common Types of Masks: Plague Doctor

- Believed to be French in origin
- Dr. Charles de Lorme created it in the 16th century
- Only two known methods at the time to ward off the plague at the time
- 14th century medical texts recommended special dress by doctors treating diseases
- Precursor to modern gas mask?



c.1656 by Paul Furst

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## The End of Mask Wearing

- Downfall of the Venetian Serene Republic in July 1797
- Only limited information remains from obscure volumes
- Masks were outlawed except within private residences
- In the 1930's the fascist dictatorship completely outlawed even the private balls that had been permitted since the downfall of the Serene Republic
- In the 1980's Carnevale was resurrected in response to the end of the era of tyranny and terrorism beforehand.



Museum number 1881.1008.79.  
Description: Two men in costume and with masks accompany a woman, who is in between them, also in costume and masked, they walk in the ball.  
Print made by Francesco Bertelli  
Date: 1638/1639



2page watercolor of men in costume, drawing gold to brassmaker, (1660,1679) from Page Plate II, 26-19  
Source: Nuremberger Schaubst. Location: Stephen A. Schwarzman Building / Spencer Collection  
Catalog Call Number: Spencer Collection Ms. 111

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