

*Every month, we will present an article on some facet of Italian life: traditions, festivals, food, wine, regional celebrations, art, or history. To start off our brand-new website, we are spotlighting Venetian Carnevale. Since we will be having our own Carnevale on March 24, you may want to know how it all started.*



## **The History of the Venetian Carnevale and Venetian Masks (and some help if you want to make one of your own)**



In 1162, Ulrich II of Treven (an ancient Roman city) was defeated by the Doge Vitale Michieli. The Doge held an annual celebration to commemorate his victory and in 1268 they began using masks during this celebration. Through the Middle Ages, Venice became a tourist attraction and socially-prominent people began using the masks in order to disguise themselves while performing unscrupulous (and sometimes immoral) activities.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the masks became more widely known because they were associated with the Commedia dell'Arte, a traveling theater. When Austria took over Venice in 1797, the masks were outlawed. During the 1970s, the Italian government decided to bring back the history and culture of Venice, and used the traditional Carnival as the centerpiece of their efforts. One of the most important events is the contest for the best mask, placed at the last weekend of the Carnival. A jury of international costume and fashion designers votes for "La Maschera piu bella." And the Gran Ballo della Calvachina at the Teatro La Fenice is considered the most spectacular and exclusive of all Venetian masked balls.

This month, on March 24, our Club will have a dinner and dance celebrating the Venetian Carnevale. When we think of Carnevale, Mardi Gras--French for Fat Tuesday--comes to mind as they are very similar. They both herald the last night of eating rich, fatty foods before the fasting season of Lent. And both involve elaborate costumes and much partying. But unlike the typical Mardi Gras, the Venetian Carnevale also involves disguise--a beautiful mask. Wearing a mask hid any form of identity--rich or poor. And in some cases, that was very important. After all there were things to do (some illegal), people to see (who knew?), things to say (without knowing who said it), and you might not want others to know what deals were being cut.

The Venetian masks were always a central feature of the Carnevale. They were made either of leather or paper-Mache. The traditional method of making a mask involves sculpting a form out of clay as a base for the mask. The mold is then lubricated and then small pieces of special

paper (rather stiff) are fitted into the mold. The mold is then placed in a special oven to dry. When the drying is complete, the mask is separated from the mold, the eyeholes are cut out and it is sanded. The *mascherari*, mask maker, then paints designs in gold, silver and bright colors such as royal purple or yellow. Common decorations include sequins, silk ribbons, and exotic bird feathers. Rhinestones, gold charms, glitter and other bizarre trinkets also are often added to Venetian masks.

There were two types of masks that were most prominent: the **Bauta** and the **Moretta**.



The **Bauta** was typically a shining white face-shaped mask and worn with a black cape or veil of silk and a tri-cornered hat. This costume was worn by both Venetian men and ladies. Sometimes the Bautas covered only the upper part of the face from the forehead to the nose and upper cheeks, thereby concealing the person's identity but still allowing the person to talk, eat or drink easily. During the 18th century, only citizens of Venice were allowed to use the Bauta and it was illegal to wear weapons along with the mask.



The **Moretta** was made of black velvet, oval in shape and worn only by ladies. It was held in place by a button held between the teeth. Men favored the Moretta as it forced a silence on women--after all they couldn't talk while holding a button between their teeth! The Moretta mask is also called the *Servetta Muta* meaning mute maid servant.



Among the most bizarre masks is the **Medico della Peste** (Doctor of the Plague). It's the one with the long nose. Originally, it wasn't really a mask but rather a protection for the doctors who treated people infected with the plague.

Masks were used to conceal the identity of the wearers as they frequented the gaming houses (Il Ridotti) of Venice. Love trysts were also much easier when no one could identify who was meeting whom!

*There are only a few mascherari left in Italy, and in the United States only one that still uses the traditional mask-making techniques. Carla Almanza-deQuant is a Venetian Mask artist and [www.carlaalmanza-duquant.com](http://www.carlaalmanza-duquant.com) has instructions for making a traditional mask. Or, you can watch a short video of one of her workshops at [www.gioiacompany.com](http://www.gioiacompany.com); click on Italian workshops.*