

Venetian Masks: A Brief History

Historically, masquerading was a shared practice among Venetians, regardless of whether they were wealthy, destitute, bold or even shy.

The Venice environment, because of its crowded city conditions, didn't really allow for much seclusion or solitude; individual anonymity or privacy was difficult to come by. Thus, the "mask" became an outlet for many to depart from the mainstream life they were leading. The average citizen found that by wearing a mask they could act like a stranger, revealing their real persona, which they normally kept to themselves to avoid being judged by others.

Sadly, there were some greedy characters who would use to their benefit the frequent masquing events throughout the year to engage in various illegal and immoral acts.

In 1268, the city's governing bodies, in an attempt to control masquerading, voted for the first of many city statutes that would ultimately ban brutal and aggressive acts, the waste of valuable fabrics, forbidden visits to convents and unlawful ownership of weapons. These types of ordinances would continue being passed right up until the fall of the Venetian Serenissima Republic in 1797.

The use of masks was ultimately banned completely at certain times throughout the year. These bans were strictly enforced during religious services and celebrations. Interestingly, however, there were two periods in which wearing disguise in the streets was encouraged. One of those periods began on Ascension Day (40 days after Easter) and lasted until June 10th. The second period started on October 5th and ran until December 16th. This was when the "domino" clothing was also allowed even during Doges' coronations and special services in honour of well-known or famous personalities.

It was in those years that the Venetian Carnival planted its roots. The annual start date was December 26th and to this present day, it closes on Shrove Tuesday, which is the day before Ash Wednesday.

As the tradition continues today, the beautiful city of Venice, Italy serves as the gathering place for more and more Venetians and many other visitors from around the world to take part in this exceptional event of uninhibited celebration and contra-vention.