

FROLICS BEHIND THE MASKS

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Carnevale has spread from Venice to many parts of the world, including Australia. With the season of Carnevale fast approaching, and the release of the film *Marie Antoinette*, interest in masks and masquerade balls or parties is surging.

At Carol Trubee's Church Studio launch of Dennis Roper's recent art exhibition in Adelaide, I had the good fortune to meet two well-known mask importers behind their masks. The sisters, Tania D'Antonio and Sandra Ciccarello, import exquisite hand-made Venetian masks and Murano glass jewellery.

'It all started with a gift' Sandra relates, 'when our parents went on a holiday back to Venice some years ago and brought back various pieces of Murano glass jewellery for us to wear. The items of art-fashion attracted so much positive attention that we hatched a plan to import "the best of Venice" in terms of masks and Venetian glass.'

The family company has a philosophy of presenting the meticulous hand-crafting of Venetian arts. Avid collectors as well as marketers, they have a vested ancestral interest in being such staunch proponents. Famed opera singer of the 1940s, Signora Vivante, gave many objets d'art to their Venetian grandmother, who then handed down her treasured mementos.

Surrounded by the magnificent display of masks at Church Studio, they showed me intricate handmade papier maché items, many of them leather-backed and embroidered with gold braid. Others have 24-carat gold

supports for fine Swarovski crystal adornments. Some more modern representations feature Gary Glitter look-alikes and other less tarnished celebrities. 'There is a now a trend for the traditional as well as zany creations of contemporary inspired themes' Tania suggests. Detail is stitched on by hand and 'glued-on glitter is generally only found on the rash of cheap copies flooding the market.'

So, how did this grand and magical Venetian tradition begin? The festival had its genesis in the 11th century and by 1436 the *masceri* or mask makers formed their own guild. The festival reached its zenith in the 18th century, with many weeks of decadence around the grand piazza and canal-side alleyways of Venice.

With anonymity behind the masks, silk hoods, tricorne hats and flowing capes, games of seduction and intrigue could be played out. Amorous advances between noblemen and commoners, wealthy merchants and servants became a giggling pursuit of titillation rather than full-on public scandal.

In recent years the spirit and magnitude of Carnevale in Venice has been revived. The first modern mask outlet opened in 1978 with inspiration from Academy of Fine Arts students. Mask making draws on a dazzling array of traditions,



one of the more endearing being the Commedia dell'Arte with Pulcinella and Arlecchino constantly sparring in street theatre. Both male, these are the inspiration behind the French pair of Harlequin and Pierrot, which translated into Punch and Judy across the Channel.

The white Volto half-mask with a phallic-beaked nose cover is visually magical against a flowing black cape. These date back to the time when 'plague doctors' sported these detachable noses, filled with absorbent material soaked in camphor or fragrant oil, in an attempt to ward off the dreaded disease when treating patients. An extended element of fantasy is often based on historical figures such as Casanova, il Capitano, Pantalone, Mozart, Vivaldi or whatever custom fantasy the wearer desires.

In Venice, event companies organise meticulous re-creations of Carnevale. One, La Fondazione, escorts guests across St Mark's Square to a grand ball aboard a galleon, with a sumptuous banquet and an evening of entertainment. With masquerade titles announced and guns firing across the canal, the scene is set for an evening of pure magic. Italian film director, Antonia Sauter, has used costumes and masks designed by Alberto Targheta and Renata Bastianello (cousins of Tania and Sandra from Venice) and hand-stitched by Alberto's mother and her team. In turn, her ideas are inspiration for the décor aboard to create a truly 18th century experience.

Another company, Tragicomica, stages their 'Mascheranda' in the Palazzo Pisani Moretta on the Grand Canal. Within the walls of this magnificent palace, adorned with 18th century frescoes, troubadours, animators and musicians create an evening of surreal fantasy. Resplendent in dazzling costumes and disguised by a mask, locals and foreigners meet in a 'great game of transgression and seduction.'



There is an expectation to be decorous, however, and as Alberto relates, those who disgrace themselves are ceremoniously removed, 'perhaps via gang-plank and *vaporetto*' (canal ferry), he says with a chuckle.

Back in Adelaide, Carnevale has developed into a colourful annual event. A flamboyant procession through the main streets, followed by a weekend carnival at Rymill Park, is an essential part of the Festival City calendar. Tania and Sandra display their splendid array of masks at the event. The business and their mission to share their zeal for Venetian craftsmanship and culture has led them into involvement with fashion parades, Melbourne Cup lunches and the SALA festival in the

majestic marbled and columned Grand Lodge of Freemasons Hall on North Terrace, Adelaide's cultural boulevard.

A selection of masks and Venetian Murano glass is on display at Carol Trubee's Church Studio, the scene for yet another surreal evening, site of our recent introduction behind the masks.

Sydney's Carnevale di Venezia, organised by the Italian Cultural Association and billed as 'a night of fine food, masquerades, entertainment and dancing' takes place at the Burwood RSL Club on 23 February. For information call Jo 02 9712 5260.