

## Carnival

Carnival is a festival celebrated in countries of Catholic tradition, often with public parades of playful, imaginative wagons typically called "floats, masking, jokes and feasts and even debauchery.

### ETYMOLOGY



The word *carnival* comes from the Latin "carnem levare" (=eliminate meat) and originally indicated the banquet that was held on the last day of Carnival (Mardi Gras), immediately before Lent, the period of fasting and abstinence when Christians would abstain from meat. The first evidence of the use of the word "carnevale" (or "carnevalo") are the texts of minstrel Matazone da Caligano of the late 13th century and writer Giovanni Sercambi around 1400.

### CARNIVAL PERIOD

In Catholic countries, traditionally Carnival begins on the Septuagesima Sunday (70 days to Easter, it was the first of the nine Sundays before the Holy Week in the Gregorian calendar), and in the Roman rite ends on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent. The climax is usually from Thursday until Tuesday, the last day of Carnival.

Being connected with Easter, which is a moveable feast, the final dates of Carnival vary each year, though in some places it may begin already on 17th January. Since Catholic Easter is on the Sunday after the first full moon of spring, therefore from 22 March to 25 April, and since there are 46 days between Ash Wednesday and Easter, then in non-leap years the last day of Carnival, Mardi Gras, can fall any time within February 3 to March 9.

In the Ambrosian rite, which is followed in the Archdiocese of Milan and in some neighboring dioceses, Lent begins with the first Sunday of Lent, therefore the last day of Carnival is on Saturday, four days later than the Mardi Gras in other areas of Italy.

#### **CARNIVALS IN ITALY**

The most famous carnivals in Italy, some of them with century-old traditions, attract large amounts of visitors and tourists every year from all over. Just to mention some:

- in Basilicata, at Satriano di Lucania and Tricarico
- in Calabria at Castrovillari
- in Lombardy at Castel Goffredo, called "Reggia del Re Gnocco".
- in the Marches, the Fano Carnival, the oldest after that of Venice
- the Carnival of Ivrea in Piedmont, famous for its traditional "Battle of the Oranges"
- in Sardinia, at Tempio Pausania
- in Puglia at Manfredonia, known for the "Sfilata delle meraviglie" and at Putignano, the oldest and most important in the region
- in Sicily: at Sciacca and Acireale, the most ancient in Sicily
- in Tuscany, the Viareggio Carnival with the biggest, most lively floats in the world
- the Carnival of Venice, the most famous in Italy.

# A Brief History of the Venice Carnival and Its Traditions



*“A Carnevale ogni scherzo vale” – any joke goes at Carnival.*

This famous Italian common saying embraces the carefree and irreverent spirit of the festival. Ever since the Middle Ages, when Carnival represented the last opportunity to enjoy food and drink and have fun before Lent, a period of fasting and penance, this festival celebrated the playful side of human nature.

Traditionally, the Carnival season was also a time for unruliness, exaggeration, and mockery of power. During the festival, social rules and behavioral norms were suspended. Indeed, from an anthropological perspective, Carnival is one of the many “cyclical rituals of disorder and social rebellion” that can be found in many cultures throughout the world.

In Italy, Carnival has always been one of the most popular festivals. While every Italian city, however small, has developed its own Carnival traditions and customs, the Venice Carnival is the most famous. In the 18th century, it became the most visited Carnival in the world. Each year, thousands of visitors arrive in Venice to soak up the unique and transgressive Carnival atmosphere of the floating city.

The word *Carnevale*, Italian for Carnival, was first recorded in the texts written by Matanzone da Caligano, an Italian jester and poet, at the end of the 13th century.

Some scholars claim that the word Carnival comes from the Late Latin phrase *carnislevamen*, meaning "farewell to the pleasure of the flesh." However, it is generally accepted that the etymological roots of the word can be traced back to the expression *carnevale*, a vulgar Latin phrase meaning "farewell to the meat."

Others link it to the *carrusnavalis*, a boat-shaped carriage carrying masked men and women that was paraded through the streets of ancient Rome during the Saturnalia festival.

In the Republic of Venice, the word *Carnevale* was first recorded in a 1094 document issued by the Doge Vitale Falier. In this decree, the Doge allowed Venetians to take part in public Carnival festivities before Lent. According to legend, in the same year, the body of St. Mark miraculously reappeared in a pillar of the Basilica.

However, some scholars claim that the actual origin of the world-famous Carnival festivities in Venice must be traced back to 1192, when Venetian citizens gathered in St. Mark Square, the heart of the city, to celebrate the military victory of the Serenissima over the Patriarch of Aquileia. This theory seems to suggest a political rather than religious origin of the festival. The history of the *Festa delle Marie*, one of the most famous events of the Venice Carnival, is even more ancient than the history of Carnival itself. In the Middle Age, on February 2 (Candlemas), twelve beautiful and poor girls and their fiancés received a blessing for their marriage in the Basilica of St. Peter of Castello.

In 943, a group of pirates broke into the Basilica and kidnapped the young women. They were later rescued by a group of noblemen led by the Doge himself. To commemorate the event, the city established a parade composed of twelve beautiful girls from its poorest families. In 1343, twelve wooden figures were paraded through the city streets. The citizens weren't pleased and expressed their dissatisfaction by pelting them with stones and rotten food.

The Flight of the Eagle, the most spectacular event of the Venetian Carnival, was first performed in the mid-16th century, when a young Turkish acrobat reached the top of the bell tower in St. Mark Square by walking on a tightrope fixed to the nearby pier.

He then reached the balcony of Palazzo Ducale to render homage to the Doge. Initially called *Svolo del Turco*, Italian for "flight of the Turk", the performance became a permanent feature of the Carnival celebrations. During the 1759 Carnival, the event ended in tragedy when an acrobat crashed to the ground. After that, the Venetian government decided to substitute a wooden dove for the acrobat. Thus, the event was renamed the Flight of the Colombina, Italian for little dove.

Eventually, the Venetian government started to regulate the use of certain masks. For example, the *Bauta*, the oldest and most iconic Venetian mask with a square chin and no mouth, was required by law in certain political decision-making events to preserve the voters' anonymity. Tough masks created a level playing field, they were also useful for illicit and criminal purposes. For example, many Venetians wore elaborate masks to escape their creditors, break into churches and convents, and conduct their illicit affairs.

In his memories, Casanova, the famous Venetian adventurer and libertine, writes that during the 1745 Carnival, he and a group of friends pretended to be members of the Council of the Ten, the body tasked with maintaining security, and arrested the husband and relatives of a beautiful noblewoman. Eventually, the Republic of Venice gained a reputation for luxury, sexual promiscuity, and moral decay. The authorities tried to limit the abuse of masks with a series of official decrees. The word "mask" was first recorded in Venice in a 13th century in a decree that forbade masked men to throw *oviodoriferi*, Italian for scented eggs. In the 15th century, the abuse and misuse of masks was so widespread that the government made it a crime for masked men to break into convents to commit *multasinhonestates*, Italian for "many indecent acts".