

## The History Of The Venetian Mask

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The history of the Venetian Mask is one which sounds as though it stems from fairytale or legend but which goes to show that sometimes truth is stranger than fiction.

Way back in the 13th Century, Venice was more than just a small city in Italy. It was a very important part of Italy and was known by the name of the Venetian Republic. This Republic was small, with a population in the region of 150,000 people. Nonetheless, the Republic had a very successful trade, which was ship building, and was able to produce one battleship in as little as thirty days. This was a very fast turnaround, made possible by the fact that the shipyards employed 15,000 of the local residents, a staggering ten per cent of the state's overall population. In addition to the shipyards, the Venetian Republic required workforces in all other aspects of daily life. The Republic was a well oiled machine which functioned smoothly and well and this meant that the citizens of the Venetian Republic were wealthy and successful. This wealth, luxury and extravagance, coupled with the beauty of the state, made the Republic very appealing to the rest of the world.

It was this wealth that was to bring about the tradition of the Venetian mask. Over time, the citizens of the Venetian Republic began to realise that if they concealed their identity they became able to carry out their daily lives in secrecy and without fear of retribution. With so much personal wealth in the state, people often found themselves making deals and agreements with other citizens outside of the eyes of the law. With the population as small as it was, many wanted to carry out such deals as these without other people knowing their business, and so the wearing of a mask became popular.

Once people began to see others wearing masks, it became apparent that they could hold additional benefits. When wearing a mask your identity is concealed and so your social status is not known to others. This allowed servants and business owners to be treated equally and prevented any form of inequality or prejudice. It also allowed all of the citizens of the Republic to have their say on matters which were important to them, allowing them to remain anonymous in the process. This was mutually beneficial to both the citizens and officials visiting the city, who were able to receive honest answers to their questions from the whole spectrum of residents. Soon, all of the city's residents were wearing masks to go about their daily lives.

This mutual benefit for all of wearing masks was not to last long though. It did not take long for people to start to take advantage of the concealment of their identity and to benefit from their anonymity. Knowing that there were to be no repercussions of their actions, as no-one could be identified, the society began to behave more lavishly and without fear. As a busy city with travellers and business visitors descending upon them daily, sexual promiscuity became common place and gambling was known to be occurring all through the day and the night, all over the city. In fact, gambling was even occurring in convents and was undertaken by men, women and even children. Homosexuality was starting to spread throughout the Republic and was not condemned there as it was in the rest of the country. Women were able to flaunt their sexuality in revealing clothing and engaged in promiscuous behaviour. Even those who had taken religious vows, such as monks and nuns, were undertaking the same activities as the rest of the population, wearing fashionable outfits, gambling and prostituting themselves.

The capital of Italy, Rome, knew about the activities which were occurring in the Venetian Republic but for some time chose to ignore them as long as the Republic was continuing to make regular and substantial financial deposits. However, a decision was finally reached to ban the wearing of masks throughout the majority of the year, only permitting it in a three month period from the 26th December onwards. Over time this has been gradually lessened and is now more commonly associated with week long festivities known as Carnevale, or Mardi Gras.

### **Short note about the author**

Steve Gink's hobby is collecting Venetian Masks and information about them, you can see his masks at his site <http://www.venetian-masks.org/>.

