

MASKS AND DISGUISES³⁵

During carnival time, those days in which men want to be amused, seem cheerful and create a joyful, carefree atmosphere, one sees masks and costumes of all sorts in the shop-windows.

I have stopped sometimes before such windows asking myself what the origin of masks was and what could have impelled man to wear masks and disguises.

Processions used to be organised during carnival period. Decorated floats appeared upon which people wearing masks and costumes rode, joking, yelling and gesticulating as they passed along the city streets. Onlookers did their best to enhance this conventional mood by shouting and laughing.

Logically speaking men should not laugh nor feel any gaiety on seeing masks, for they are somewhat frightening. A mask is lugubrious, gruesome and monstrous. When a clown appears in a circus or on a stage with a mask or a very heavily made-up face, which comes to the same thing, the audience laughs at once. It is traditional, conventional laughter. People know that they are supposed to laugh, but what makes them laugh is neither the mask nor the painted face but what the clown is about to do or say.

Why is it that men have decided that masks are funny, that one must laugh and be amused by them, that masks must create and spread an atmosphere of gaiety? Before and above all, this is because it is a tradition to think this way.

Our grandfathers and great-grandfathers also used to laugh during carnival. It was deduced, simply and naively without searching deeply for the reason that our ancestors were laughing at the masks. But it is not so. Although it is true that our ancestors laughed when they saw masks, this was not due to the look of the masks themselves, but because of the adventures attributed to them.

It was malicious laughter, the same sort of laughter that is called forth by stories of adultery or the sight of a drunken man.

Why did people wear masks on occasions dedicated to amusement? Primitive people still use masks for religious or funereal services. The use of the mask as an element of gaiety began when man was already civilised.

In principle, in using the mask, men did not think of the enjoyment of who was watching them, they were concerned instead about their own enjoyment. The mask served in hiding one's face and thus permitted the wearer to do what they wanted without being seen or recognised.

In the past, amusement was almost exclusively a privilege of the rich and of those who held important positions. Towns were small and means of travel uncomfortable, slow and few in number. Putting on masks signified liberty for people of high status, allowing them the possibility of doing what for one reason or another was often forbidden. It was thus that kings, princes and noblemen gave future generations the idea of using masks as an easy means of amusing themselves incognito.

Later, mask-wearing became more general. First it was adopted by the lesser nobility and the bourgeois and then by the people. The reason for its implementation by the general public is based on moral and social reasons.

Men have always tried to hide from each other the manner by which they find pleasure and gaiety, for to show this openly would be equivalent to a public confession of their desires, their vices, their depravities or, at least, of the level of their intelligence. By covering the face, the mask hid everything and protected their

35 G. de Chirico, *Maschere e travestimenti*, signed "Isabella Far" in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 214-216. Published in English here for the first time.

social position, their family and their intellectual and moral status. In short, the mask was a convenient and simple solution.

Towards the end of the last century and the beginning of ours, seeing people disguised in the streets during carnival provoked a cheerfulness that was more sincere than it was conventional. This was because many of the people dressed up were not masked. It was their costumes that gave them a paradoxical and caricatural look that made them extremely comical. Giorgio de Chirico told me that during his childhood he attended carnival festivities that took place in the streets of Athens. It was a tradition in Greece at the time to prepare a large float dedicated to Bacchus for the festivities. The pupils of the Polytechnic organised it; they were not young aesthetes, cerebrals, refined, complicated and decadent, but joyful, simple youngsters full of spirit originating from the middle and working classes. These youngsters dressed up as Maenads and Bacchantes danced like mad round the chariot with bare hairy legs playing their instruments and shaking their thyrsus', creating an extraordinarily amusing atmosphere. In Paris the pupils of the Fine Arts Academy tried to do something like this at the *Bal des Quat-z'-Arts*, but they did it more fiercely and with less gaiety and wit.

Later as an adolescent in Munich Giorgio de Chirico often saw people disguised in very comical ways during carnival. He recalled one figure in particular who had covered himself from head to foot with fir branches and, thus transformed into a man-tree, walked calmly in the middle of the street with the branches trailing and raising dust behind him. Even now, after so many years he laughs at the memory of the Polytechnic pupils dressed up as Maenads and Bacchantes and of the man-tree in the Bavarian capital.

In other instances, disguise allowed men to live, with a certain appearance of reality, the life of another individual, something that is often done within the mind. Up to a certain point, disguise allowed men to be something they were not and especially, more or less consciously, something they desired to be.

For example a peaceful civilian disguised as brigand or a buccaneer.

Times have changed. The human being becomes ever more anonymous. With the end of carnivals, masks, disguises and costumes have also disappeared. And the mask, the famous mask of the past, has been substituted by big cities, and rapid, easy and comfortable travel has taken its place.

All this modern progress permits us to remain anonymous if necessary and to go unnoticed in the crowd of our fellow-citizens. The mask has become of no use and man has forgotten why and how his ancestors had used it.