



16th Century Italian Glove Puppet

PREPARED BY PORZIA DI CORBINO ROSSO
for Tir Righ's Arts & Sciences Competition, A.S. XVII



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While no one will refute that puppets have existed in Italy for a very long time, materials documenting their existence prior to the 17th or 18th centuries are few and far between to say the least. John McCormick states that "concrete documents are all but non-existent"¹ as are examples of extant puppets from the period before the 17th century. This presents significant challenges when attempting to research puppets of 16th century Italy. Those challenges are compounded when the material that is available is anecdotal, and largely untranslated. Reliance on secondary sources, and brief excerpts from primary sources become invaluable, as does a bit of deductive reasoning, and parallel thinking. After all, there are likely similarities in construction between puppets, and dolls of the period. Materials and methods of construction likely don't change significantly between the 16th and 17th century, and so long as we remain open minded, and patient, it is possible to effectively recreate a plausible period puppet. This project is very unique from my other entries, as it involves a much greater degree of extrapolation, and the "practical archaeology" of experimentation with the mediums. I have enjoyed the voyage of discovery.

GLOVE PUPPETS VERSUS MARIONETTES

I have chosen to create a glove puppet, rather than a marionette or rod puppet for a number of reasons. First off, it is widely acknowledged that the iconic glove puppet figures of Punch and Judy are rooted in 16th century Italian puppetry, and the Comedia dell'Arte. As a child, I loved Punch and Judy, and wanted to bring that nostalgia to the project, and the research. Secondly, I am fascinated by the bits of history that fall between the cracks, and are often too "common" to warrant recording. I thought this would be an excellent opportunity to take a closer look at the assumption that glove puppets did exist, and see if I couldn't find some sort of substantial evidence for their presence in 16th century Italy. I was extremely fortunate to acquire

a copy of John McCormick's, "The Italian Puppet Theatre – a History". It is an excellent study of Italian puppetry, but it is presented in English. No mean feat, as its sources are almost exclusively in Italian. McCormick draws a very persuasive linguistic case for the presence of glove puppets throughout Italy, as well as Naples, and Spain. He demonstrates a linguistic connection between the terminology used to describe puppets, and the terms for juggling, slight of hand, telling stories with the hands, and thus, arrives at a connection to glove puppets specifically. His redaction of the terms "burattino" and "bagatelle" leave little doubt that it is glove puppet and glove puppeteers that are being referenced with these words and in the face of a lack of extant examples and a maze of early modern Italian vocabulary, this is compelling evidence indeed². I have included several pages from McCormick's discussion of the language in the appendix for reference. In addition to the linguistic argument, there are also several contemporary references to puppet performances specifically involving or featuring use of the hands. In 1585 Tomaso Garzoni publishes a report of a "bagatelle" entertaining the crowd in St. Mark's square in Venice with "feats of prestidigitation"³. In 1552 Anton Francesco Doni writes of a female performer: "Fraccurradi is ...performed with 'fantocci' (figures) on the points of the fingers. They catch each other, play, joke, kill one another and take castles from each other"⁴. In 1688 Paolo Minucci "defines burattini as figures worked on the ends of the fingers" as well.

By the 17th century Italian puppet troupes are travelling, and both glove puppet and marionette companies are documented as performing in England⁵. Glove puppet shows in Italy and abroad are generally informal affairs, occurring as street performances, and with minimal setup or staging. In some cases they were used by Charlatans to aid in selling their wares and remedies⁶.

MATERIALS AND CONSTRUCTION

Without extant pieces, it is difficult to know definitively how glove puppets were made. However, we can certainly pose a reasonable hypothesis. A 16th century doll exists in the Victoria & Albert Museum, and it is logical to assume that a puppet would be similarly constructed. The doll's head is carved of wood, and covered in gesso. The features are painted on⁷. Several dolls were listed to be constructed this way, and the woods used for their

heads, as well as for similarly carved pieces from the period included oak, walnut, boxwood, and pine. I have opted to use pine, as I am a novice wood carver at best, and pine is a much softer wood than oak or walnut. I recognize that the grain on this wood would not be as fine or tight as the others and thus would not render detail as well, but it seemed a match to my skill, and to the more “practical” purposes of a puppet. I have used a commercially prepared gesso to cover the head, rather than attempt to render a gesso from a period formula, but the consistency and texture resulting will be very similar.

The body of glove puppets from a slightly later period were constructed of a “stout material” for the sleeve, over which the “costume” was worn⁸. I have opted to use a heavy cotton, as it will allow more movement than a canvas or buckram, but still provide structure for the body of the puppet. The “costume” is made of linen and wool. The structure of the body is obviously built to accommodate the presence of the hand and arm underneath the sleeve⁹. Because of this the arms are disproportionately short, and this may have influenced the frequently comedic tone of glove puppet performances. Puppets often had carved hands as well, so that they could hold items, often a sword or stick to beat the other puppets. I have opted for a more pacific model, and have given my puppet sewn hands.

CONCLUSION

My aim with this project was to learn if indeed there was evidence for the existence of glove puppets in Italy as early as the 16th century. I believe that though it is sparse, the evidence does indeed exist. I have then attempted to build a plausible example of such a puppet, using period materials, and



Medieval Images of Puppets in Romance of Alexander,
folio 076r



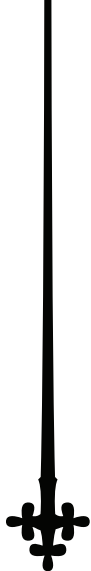
Medieval Images of Puppets in Romance of Alexander,
folio 054v



End Notes

techniques, and I feel that the piece before you is an excellent example of what can be accomplished even in the face of minimal historical resources.

1. Italian Puppet Theatre. P.3
2. Italian Puppet Theatre. P.4
3. Italian Puppet Theatre. P. 10
4. Italian Puppet Theatre. P.10
5. Elizabethan Stage vol. 2 p.158
6. Italian Puppet Theatre p. 9
7. Victoria & Albert Museum – doll web page.
8. Italian Puppet Theatre. P.31 and ff.
9. Italian Puppet Theatre p. 31.



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Appendix

DOLLS, CARVING, AND A PICTURE OF PUPPETS



Doll's shift

Place of origin: London, England (made)

Date: 1690-1700 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown (production)

Materials and Techniques: Hand-sewn lawn, linen and trimmed with bobbin lace

Credit Line: Purchased by public subscription

Museum number: T.846A-1974

Gallery location: British Galleries, room 54b, case 3

Public access description

Object Type

This shift was made for a doll, known as Lady Clapham, that is thought to have belonged to the Cockerell family, descendants of the diarist Samuel Pepys (1633-1703). The daughter of Pepys's nephew John Jackson (the son of his sister Pauline) married a Cockerell, who had a family home in Clapham, south London.

Designs & Designing

Lady Clapham offers a fine example of both formal and informal dress for a wealthy woman in the 1690s (Museum nos. T.846&A to Y-1974). Her formal outfit includes a mantua (gown) and petticoat, while her informal dress is represented by the nightgown (a dressing gown rather than a garment worn to bed) and petticoat. Accessories such as the stockings, cap and chemise (a body garment) are very valuable since very few items from such an early period survive in museum collections. Equally important is the demonstration of how these clothes were worn together.

Ownership & Use

Dolls were widely produced in the 17th century, although very few survive, due to the wear and tear they usually undergo. The high quality of Lady Clapham and her clothes indicates that she would have been expensive. There is little evidence of use, which suggests that she was admired by adults rather than played with by children.

Descriptive line

Doll's shift of lawn trimmed with bobbin lace, London, 1690-1790

Physical description

Shift of fine white hand-sewn lawn, mid-calf length. It has a low round neck trimmed with English bobbin lace with a draw cord of white linen for adjustment. The sleeves are of just below elbow length and are gathered into a cuff which has eyelet holes for a linen attachment cord. The cut of the shoulders cannot be observed but the shift has two gores on the left side of the skirt and one on the right.

Museum number

T.846A-1974

Object history note

The doll is thought to have belonged to the Cockerell family, descendants of Samuel Pepys. The daughter of Pepys's nephew John Jackson (son of his sister, Pauline) married a Cockerell. The doll and its partner were named 'Lord' and 'Lady' of the family home in Clapham.

Historical significance: The doll and its partner are costume documents; their clothes being, in style, cut and material, perfect miniatures of the fashions of the late 17th century. Their importance is underlined by the almost total lack of other good visual source material for this period, whether pictorial or in the form of surviving garments. In particular the survival of accessories and the informal garments is extremely rare.

Historical context note

Dolls were widely produced in the 17th century, although very few survive. It is most unlikely that these particular examples were the playthings of children. Their production is of a high quality; almost all the accessories survive and there is little wear and tear on the dolls and their garments. The dolls were most probably purchased for the amusement of adults, and as a decorative accessory to a home.

URL

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O82496/dolls-shift-unknown/>



Doll

Place of origin: England, Britain (made)

Date: ca. 1680 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown (production)

Materials and Techniques: Wood, gessoed and painted, leather, and satin trimmed with metallic lace and fringe

Credit Line: Given by Major Vivian Nickalls on behalf of Clare Style

Museum number: W.18-1945

Gallery location: Museum of Childhood, Costume, Play and Learn Gallery, case 1

Public access description

The Old Pretender is one of the oldest dolls in the museum's collection. It was carved from wood and covered with gesso (a mixture of plaster and glue) before being painted. The doll is fashionably dressed with a wig made of human hair and beauty spots painted on the face. It is associated with the court of King James VII (of Scotland) and II (of England and Wales) at the palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh. It is said to have been given to a family of loyal supporters by James II's son James Edward (acknowledged James VII in Scotland but not James III in England and Wales who was subsequently known as 'The Old Pretender').

Descriptive line

Fashionably dressed wooden doll known as 'The Old Pretender Doll', made in England in about 1680

Physical description

A female fashion doll known as 'The Old Pretender doll' from her history. The doll represents a caucasian adult female: her head and body are carved out of separate pieces of wood and are gessoed and painted; her hands are covered in kid leather. Her face is adorned with black beauty spots which were at the height of fashion when she was made. She wears a fontange head-dress with lappets, and a coral-coloured satin dress (now faded) over a blue stomacher and a skirt trimmed with metallic lace and fringe; her legs are covered with linen to represent stockings, and her feet are encased in fabric shoes.

Museum number

W.18-1945

Object history note

Associated with the court of King James VII and II at Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh, and said to have been given to a family of loyal supporters by James II's son James Edward (acknowledged James VII in Scotland but not James III in England and Wales, and subsequently known as 'The Old Pretender').

Extract from Clare Style's letter of 30/03/1956: "...Major Vivian Nickalls, my brother, placed with you, on my behalf, a Stuart doll seated in a chair. You labelled it as "Queen Anne" [this was a term at that time applied erroneously to early wooden dolls of almost any date], and [I] believe it is still so described. I therefore thought the following notes might interest you, culled from old family notes and papers. Those re the doll were testified to by a Miss Margaret Bray, daughter of one Admiral E. Bray (my great-great-Aunt) - I am 78. About 1800 her great friend was a Miss Elizabeth Cunningham, daughter of Captain James Cunningham, R.N. Her mother's family were close adherents of the [Young] Pretender, Charles Stuart, and had accompanied them to St Germain's (one being a lady-in-waiting). Thus Miss Cunningham had been given many gifts of great interest, among them being "A large old Doll, which had been in use at Holyrood, and a chair for the said old Doll, an exact pattern of those in use in the Palace." Miss Cunningham left all to Miss Bray when she died..."

URL

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O101879/doll-unknown/>





Print - George Speaight Punch & Judy Collection

Object: Print

Date: 17th century to 18th century (published)

Artist/Maker: Unknown (publisher)

Materials and Techniques: printing ink and watercolour on paper

Credit Line: Accepted by HM Government in Lieu of Inheritance Tax and allocated to the V&A in 2010.

Museum number: S.1208-2010

Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

Engraving portraying a Pulchinella puppet show booth. Publisher unknown ca. 17th c. to 18th century. George Speaight Punch & Judy Collection.

Descriptive line

Engraving portraying a Pulchinella puppet show booth. Publisher unknown ca. 17th c. to 18th century. George Speaight Punch & Judy Collection.

Physical description

Engraving portraying a Pulchinella puppet show booth trimmed and glued to a paper.

Museum number

S.1208-2010

URL

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1160265/george-speaight-punch-judy-collection-print-unknown/>



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