



Carnival has its roots in an ancient Roman holiday called the Feast of Saturn. It was used as an escape valve to help reduce the tensions between the “rich and famous” and the “never to be rich and famous”. It created an outlet for the frustrations of a major part of the society. There were many more Roman slaves than there were Roman rulers. The Feast of Saturn distracted the slaves from doing the math and trying to take control.

When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Feast of Saturn was converted into Carnival. The last day of Carnival became known as Fat Tuesday, or in French... Mardi Gras. It’s the last opportunity for the Catholic community to live it up before the forty days of Lent that are marked with fasting and abstinence. Carnival was imported to the new world by the original French and Spanish settlers. And even today, many of the rituals of the New Orleans Mardi Gras are the same ones that are followed in France and Spain. The ethnic origins of New Orleans are still here, still respected, and still presented as dramatically as ever.



Mardi Gras in New Orleans is packed with the ancient elements of Carnival. And one of the most important ingredients is the theme of importing something from some other time or place. One way to take in something from someplace else is to bring up “the past”. The past usually feels like it’s in some other place, and during Carnival it is constantly dragged out and put on view. Most of the groups have names from the past, taken from Greek, Roman and Egyptian mythology.

The earliest forms of Carnival go all the way back to ancient Rome. They were designed to keep the masses happy, in line and amused. And one of the ways they did that was to throw things to them.

In New Orleans hundreds of thousands of plastic necklaces and coins called doubloons are flung from

the floats to the crowds below. The town fills up with people wearing the necklaces, and fingering the coins that they have caught during the ritual. The hope is that everyone will feel that they are getting, or at least have an opportunity of getting, a piece of the good life. The guys on the floats have everything they want. They’re “up there,” moving through life. The watchers, on the other hand, are more or less locked in place, watching life go by. The hope is that the trinkets will help keep the watchers amused and in place.

It’s a perfect Carnival joke. It celebrates the American myth of equal opportunity and success through the accumulation of material wealth — and yet at the very same time it makes fun of it. And that’s what Carnival is all about — making fun of those things which are normally respected.

The first documented Carnival procession in New Orleans, with masks in the street, took place in 1837. From the beginning it was a mixture of French, Spanish and Portuguese traditions, African rituals and the masked balls that were held by the aristocratic families of the Confederacy. In many cases, the pageants of the past made fun of life in New Orleans.

Over the years, there’s been a change in the content of the festival. These days a New Orleans’ Mardi Gras float is most likely to make fun of something that is safe, something that is already in the process of being joked about. It’s a distinct feature of North American culture to institute change without revolution, and these days the New Orleans Mardi Gras functions within that format. It’s a lot like the cooking — hot and spicy, but not so hot or so spicy as to offend the millions of tourists who come here each year.

In the middle of the 1400s, a French priest compared the people of a country to wine fermenting in a closed



barrel. He said that as the pressure built up in the barrel it needed to be opened so it wouldn't explode. And in the same way, the human madness that built up as a result of the pressures of society needed a release. And Carnival was that release. It turned insanity into the good wine of pious devotion.

THE FOODS OF CARNIVAL

January 6th, which is known as Twelfth Night, Epiphany or King's Day marks the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of a new season called Shrovetide. The word "shrive" means to hear confession and be given absolution. On Shrove Tuesday, Catholics confess their sins and cleanse their souls in preparation for Lent. Church bells ring and remind people to get "shriven."



Eating pancakes, which are too luxurious for Lent, became part of the Shrove Tuesday ritual. After the Reformation, Protestant communities abolished confession but the idea of eating pancakes or fritters hung on. The bells became a signal to start making the pancakes.

Shrovetide lasts from January 6th to Mardi Gras. It is a

time of feasting in preparation for the fasting of Lent. In New Orleans, Shrovetide kicks off with the Reveler's Ball which also marks the beginning of the Carnival season. The season ends with Mardi Gras which is French for "Fat Tuesday". During Mardi Gras you gorge on the foods that will be given up during Lent.



In the United States, Mardi Gras wouldn't be Mardi Gras without King Cake. For hundreds of years, King Cake was traditionally served at a ball that was held on Twelfth Night. Made of a rich, yeast dough, the crownlike ring is topped with colored sugars—green for faith, gold for power, and purple for justice. At the stroke of midnight, everyone at a Mardi Gras party sits around a table and is served a piece of cake and a cup of champagne punch. Hidden in the cake is a bean, a pecan, a coin, or a tiny baby doll. Whoever finds the token becomes the king or queen of the group. If the winner is male, he gets to choose his queen; if it's a woman, she gets to choose her king. Together they get to reign until the following week, when the next party takes place and the ritual is repeated. In many Creole homes, you will find a small jewelry box containing a bean or a baby doll—a reminder of the time when the owner was king or queen of a Carnival party. If you are ever at a Carnival party and your slice of cake doesn't contain the little prize that makes you king or queen, don't feel too bad. Along with the prize and your royal



moment comes the responsibility for buying the next King Cake or organizing the next party.

Each year, well over a million King Cakes are sold during Carnival. They have become so popular that New Orleans bakers produce them throughout the year and ship them all over the world.

The first day of Lent is Ash Wednesday. On Ash Wednesday, Catholic priests mark their parishioners foreheads with a cross made of ashes. The ash comes from the palm leaves that were blessed and burned on the past year's Palm Sunday. As the priest marks each parishioner he says, "Do not forget that you are dust and to dust you shall return." The ritual echoes Death which plays an important part in Carnival symbolism. It also presents a powerful contrast to the rich foods that were part of Shrovetide.

THE CALENDAR OF CARNIVAL

SHROVETIDE/CARNIVAL: MARKS THE END OF THE CHRISTMAS SEASON AND THE COUNTDOWN TO LENT. IT BEGINS ON JANUARY 6TH WHICH IS ALSO KNOWN AS TWELFTH NIGHT, EPIPHANY DAY OR KING'S DAY.

SHROVE TUESDAY/FAT TUESDAY OR MARDI GRAS: MARKS THE LAST DAY OF SHROVETIDE/CARNIVAL, AND THE DAY BEFORE ASH WEDNESDAY. CATHOLICS CONFESS THEIR SINS AND CLEANSE THEIR SOULS IN PREPARATION FOR LENT. THE DATE OCCURS BETWEEN FEBRUARY 2 AND MARCH 9 DEPENDING ON WHAT DATE EASTER IS THAT YEAR.

ASH WEDNESDAY: THE FIRST DAY OF LENT, 46 DAYS BEFORE EASTER. WORSHIPERS RECEIVE A CROSS MARK ON THEIR FOREHEADS WITH THE ASHES OF BURNED PALMS FROM THE PREVIOUS PALM SUNDAY.

LENT: A 6 1/2 WEEK, 40 DAY, PERIOD OF FASTING BEFORE EASTER (SUNDAYS ARE EXCLUDED FROM THE FAST). LENT BEGINS ON ASH WEDNESDAY AND ENDS ON EASTER.

CHAOS PERSONIFIED

Cities are man-made, they are structured, they start with a planning grid. Cities need to be orderly or they fall apart. But a city's structure and control can also be exhausting for the inhabitants. People who live in cities have always felt, that from time to time, the city needs an infusion of new life, and the infusion must come from outside the city. In ancient Greece and Rome, the infusion came in the form of Carnival.



In Rome it was known as the Feast of Saturn and was used as an escape valve to help reduce the tensions between the rich and the poor. It created an outlet for the frustrations of a major part of the society. Rome had many more slaves than it had slave owners. The Feast of Saturn was designed as a distraction that helped prevent the slaves from taking control.

The Feast was conducted under the direction of the god Bacchus. Bacchus, who also worked under the name Dionysus, was the god of spring, of new life, theatre, masks and parades. And that was just his day job. He was also responsible for wine, feelings of ecstasy, and sexual license. He had a lot



on his plate, but he was up to it.

Bacchus comes to a city from "Out There" and he arrives on a float in the shape of a boat. His arrival is an invasion. He shows up with thousands of followers and disrupts everything. The population of the city is forced to drop their normal activities and attend to the needs of the god, which always include a considerable amount of alcohol, wild dancing and overt sexuality. He has come to stand for everything that is not orderly.

As god of the theatre he advocates the use of elaborate costumes and masks. You are expected to pretend to be someone else and to "lose yourself" either because you are behaving in ways that are very different from your normal self or because you are just lost in the crowd. Bacchus is androgynous and can show up as either a man or a woman—cross dressing is definitely his thing.



YOU ANIMAL

Because Bacchus came from outside the city he was associated with nature and the animal world which was the opposite of the paved city and its formal citizens. When you dress up as an animal you have an opportunity to express the animal in you—especially the "sexual animal" that is now "on the loose".



The animals represented in Carnival are usually fantasy animals—mixtures of different species. The most important is the Carnival Dragon. Modern psychologists suggest that the dragon represents our unconscious self. It is big, powerful, terrifying, awesome and yet with some effort we can keep it under control and make it walk down the street as part of the parade. After all, we created our unconscious self and we built the dragon, we should be able to manage both of them.

Until recent times, horses were an essential part of transportation, but being on a horse also lifts you above the crowd. If you wanted to create a statue or a painting that represented an individual as important, you just set them on a horse and the point is made.

Accordingly, horses are an essential part of Carnival. New Orleans' Carnival tradition has the leader of each group traveling through the streets on horseback—a single rider with his face covered by a silken jeweled cloth, unknown and mysterious.



The animal world is also represented by the "fat ox". Until the middle of the 1800s, a live ox decorated with garlands was led through the streets.

As Carnival came to an end it was ceremoniously slaughtered and its flesh shared out as the "last meat" before Lent. It was one of the examples of the ancient custom of sacrificing animals for a feast. The "fat ox" still makes its way through the streets of New Orleans, but these days it's made of white plastic and usually surrounded by people dressed as chefs.

In some European countries Carnival comes to an end with a ceremonial burying of meat. In England it is the Burial of the Sausage, in Spain the Burial of the Sardine. A clear end to any festival is essential—it's the element that sends us back to our real day to day life and without that real life it is impossible to have the next festival.

KINGS, QUEENS AND A LOOSE BUCK

There is no royalty in North America, no real kings or queens, accordingly having a king and queen of Carnival is part of the burlesque. In New Orleans many of the floats have their own kings and queens in addition to Rex the official King of the season. During Carnival, America has an oversupply of royalty.



The entire organization of Carnival in New Orleans revolves around exclusive groups, private dances and balls. The groups are called Krewes and they have their own secret rules. The oldest krewe is ruled by Comus, whose real identity is known to only a few insiders. He remains masked, even at his own ball. That kind of secrecy enhances the power of being an insider. An ancient aspect of Carnival is making fun of hypocrisy. In New Orleans the element of secrecy is used to make fun of America's image as an open society. Most of the time the reality is that only people who are already on the inside ever get to have power.

Part of the ritual is to have the king die at the end of the festival, in Europe he was buried in effigy. In America, where we like happy endings, when midnight arrives the King waves his wand and Carnival is over. The ritual is also a reminder that we don't take royalty seriously.

Men had always ruled over the public parades, but in New Orleans, a woman, with the title of Queen, began to rule over the private balls. During the early 1940s the Krewe of Venus was formed and women began to march openly in the parades. However, men and women did not parade together until the 1960s.



THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CARNIVAL

Anthropologists love to discuss Carnival because it is a feast that sets out to invert normal reality—to turn everything inside out and upside down. All festivals do this to a certain extent, but Carnival is more dedicated to changing roles than almost any other celebration. It's always gross, indecent, openly obsessed with sex. It demands excess of all kinds: over eating, over drinking, noise, expense, size.

It ridicules the famous and powerful. It satirizes people, symbols and events. It also takes people who usually have little chance to be creative in their everyday lives and gives them an opportunity to show their

inventiveness. If you take a good look at what's going on at Carnival time you will quickly learn what elements in society are really annoying the population.

Carnival specializes in crossing the barriers and disregarding appropriate behavior and tradition. But it's actually not very revolutionary because it only allows this type of conduct during a set period of time and in specific places. An essential point of Carnival is to send a message that says, "You can behave in an unconventional way here and now but when Carnival is over, you will return to your previous status—or else! In the United States, Carnival specializes in attacking barriers that are already on their way out. It is a way of incorporating change without inciting revolution or violence.

Americans love belonging to groups and parades are an excellent way for a group to show off. Accordingly, the number of parades that are staged each year in the United States is extraordinary. In recent years, the parade that is part of Carnival in New Orleans has become a way for the city to show itself to the rest of the world. Television has given the event a vast audience which allowed the city to turn what had been a local event into a spectacle for others.



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