

The Commedia dell'Arte

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The Commedia dell'Arte

This study will single out Franz Anton Bustelli's ultimate masterpieces: eighteen porcelain figures of the Italian Comedy modelled between 1756 and 1760. The Italian word *arte*, as used in the title, does not so much pertain to the poetic content of the plays they performed, as to the skills of the performers in the spontaneous invention of action and dialogue – according to their appointed roles, mostly held for life – in minimal settings; originally on the steps of a church; on a stage of boards on trestles at country fairs; or in a private tent. A suitable adaptation in English of the term «Commedia dell'Arte» could be the «Comedy of Artistic Dexterity». The original Italian players were helped by their native theatrical gifts, a real aptitude for improvisation and, not least, by their inborn genius for repartee. As a result, the show was never quite the same from one performance to the next; the extemporized antics and pranks delivered with quick-witted patness, and intended to amuse and entertain, were often being larded with derisive allusions to topical subjects and society happenings.

The Commedia dell'Arte originated in 15th century Italy as a lowbrow defiance to and flying in the face of the *Commedia Erudita* or *Commedia Sostenuta*, which latter had a written dialogue to be learnt and to be reproduced verbatim on stage. The improvised parody of this largely survived its forerunner, and attained an extraordinary vitality and popularity all over Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Moving westward across the Alps, the first comedians from Italy performed their ribald pieces on the parvis of French churches and in village squares in the reign of Henry III of France (1551–1589); a date of 1576 is recorded. But it was the arrival of Marie de Medici (1573–1642), on her marriage to Henry IV in 1600, and the massive migration from Italy of architects, artists, painters and artisans of all kinds which ushered in the arrival of Commedia dell'Arte troupes in France.

One of the many incidents recorded of this early period has to do with the tragicomic adventure of an Italian Comedy troupe invited into France by the King. Having played on the squares of Lyon on their way north for a few days, the entire company was condemned to death for some misdemeanour. The court agreed, however, to grant them an ultimate wish, whereupon they asked to be allowed to play their comedy to the people one last time. The public applauded their performance so wildly that the judge freed them and allowed the troupe to go on their way to Paris.

Some years on, when Louis XIV (1638–1715) was still a minor, his chief minister Cardinal Mazarin institutionalized the Commedia dell'Arte, making sure that there would always be a troupe available to the Court, by offering them a theatre in Paris – at first the Petit-Bourbon, later, on a part-

time basis, the Palais Royal theatre. From 1684 Madame la Dauphine established a set of statutes that were to rule the Commedia dell'Arte company, now established in the Hôtel de Bourgogne.

The scurrilous satire of manners as expressed by the actors of the Italian Comedy and the frequent coarseness of their buffooneries finally ended by offending established society. The King's troupe had announced a forthcoming performance of a comedy named *La Finta Madrigna* – the Deceitful Stepmother – but had the insolence to substitute at the last moment a play called *La Fausse Prude* – the Spurious Prude – which was based on a satirical pamphlet published in Holland that scoffed and sneered at the King's favourite, Madame de Maintenon. The piece was never mounted. On the morning of 14 May 1697, Monsieur d'Argenson, Lieutenant-General of Police, carried out the monarch's ordinance of the previous night to close down the troupe's theatre at the Hôtel de Bourgogne and to ban the company from playing in or near Paris or Versailles, *His Majesty no longer considering it appropriate to keep them in his service*²⁰ (fig. 3).

We know from Madame la Dauphine's statutes that at the time of their dispersal the company consisted of twelve comedians. Their names are listed by Olivier Le Bihan: *Harlequin*, the famous actor Evariste Gherardi, who had published the first history of *Le Théâtre Italien* in six volumes only three years earlier, stayed on in Paris with his wife Elisabeth Daneret, who had played the role of *Babet-la-Chanteuse*, and who now became a teacher at the Royal Academy of Music. Angelo Constantini, the former *Mezzetin*, went to Poland where the King, Augustus the Strong of Saxony, commissioned him to form and direct a new troupe in Warsaw. His brother Jean-Baptiste Constantini, *Octave*, went home to his native Verona. *Spinette*, a servant-girl, sister-in-law of Angelo and possibly Jean-Baptiste's wife, also returned to Italy, and so did Michel-Ange Francazini, or Fracanzini, the troupe's *Polichinelle*. The actor Marc-Antoine Romagnesi, listed by *Duchartre* as playing *Cinthio*, but better known as a magnificent *Doctor* (fig. 30), died in Paris in 1706. Jean-Joseph Jératon, *Pierrot*, retired with his wife to a property which they had acquired near the capital. Catherine Biancolelli of the distinguished theatrical family, the resident *Columbine*, married to the actor Pierre Lenoir de la Thorillière, refused a post at the Comédie Française and remained at the side of her husband. A new company was brought into being under the direction of Joseph Torriti, called *Pascariel*, who had acted the role of *Scaramouch*. This troupe included his wife Angélique Toscano, the former *Marinette*, and Charles-Virgile Romagnesi de Belmont, the old *Léandre*, who had started in that role as



3. THE EXPULSION OF THE ITALIAN PLAYERS FROM THE HOTEL DE BOURGOGNE IN 1697. Engraving by L. Jacob, 1729, after a painting by Antoine Watteau of 1705. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

early as 1694 and then played all the *amoureux* until the Expulsion. Tortoriti's company was licensed to appear in the provinces, particularly in the towns and fairs of eastern and southern France. Whilst playing in Lorraine, Romagnesi de Belmont fell in love with the former *Octave's* daughter. In 1707 he went back to Paris in order to marry his Elisabetta Constantini, who later, in 1730, played the character of *Camille* in Louis Ricoboni's troupe. Charles-Virgile Romagnesi de Belmont died in 1731²¹.

It is not easy to match these twelve to the figures painted by Watteau, who is unlikely in any case to have known them when he was a teenager. But he would have had access to engravings showing them in their role costumes. In the centre of the picture we perceive a stately woman pleading with the police official, who commands that the Royal Ordinance be nailed to the wall of the building. That could well be Babet-la-Chanteuse. Columbine behind her is running away weeping. On the other side we see a cursing Mezzetin waving his arms, whilst Pierrot makes a parting obeisance on the steps of his beloved theatre; and behind them is a vague figure which could be Octave. A masked Harlequin

salaams sardonically and black-clad Pascariel walks off protesting to the left. At the rear of Harlequin, a pot-bellied Polichinelle is strutting away, his back to Leandre in conversation with another man, perhaps Romagnesi, the Doctor.

In 1716, a year after the death of the Sun King, the Regent Philippe, Duke of Orléans, recalled the much-loved *Commedia dell'Arte* to Paris. A new company under the guidance of the actor Louis Ricoboni – later to write a history of the *Commedia* in France – was encouraged to move back into the former bastion of classic French drama: the theatre of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Here they gradually abandoned their Neapolitan or Bergamask, their Venetian or Bolognese accents and adopted the language of their host country. *The Théâtre Italien*, a French institution, was born. It became known as such throughout Europe, and differed from the original *Commedia dell'Arte* in that it lost a degree of its native Italian improvisation. Regular plots with simple indications were devised, yet the eventual performances were still interspersed with impromptu situations and extensive deviations from the texts.

We must return to an earlier age for another vignette of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. In 1568, even before Italian comedians journeyed to France, Hans Fugger of the renowned Augsburg family of bankers and merchants, had arranged for a company of four players, the troupe of Maestro Jacopo da Venetia, to travel to Castle Trausnitz, overlooking the town of Landshut, original seat of the Dukes of Bavaria. The reigning duke had assigned the castle to his twenty-years-old son Wilhelm on the latter's marriage in Munich to Renata de Lorraine. More actors were brought to Landshut in time, and soon Castle Trausnitz had its own resident company of Italian comedians. Between 1577 and 1578, only a year before he succeeded to the Dukedom and was obliged to move permanently to the Munich residence, Wilhelm commissioned magnificent *trompe-l'œil* frescoes to be painted on the walls and ceilings of a newly-constructed staircase and a council-chamber (destroyed by a fire in 1961) of the castle, depicting in perfect illusion characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte* in action. These frescoed walls represented the most extensive pictorial record of the Italian Comedy as it was known in central Europe in the third quarter of the 16th century²². Throughout the latter part of the 16th century, and in the 17th

and most of the 18th centuries, troupes of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, but latterly more often players of the *Théâtre Italien*, roamed across the Continent, to Bohemia, Hungary and Poland, to Scandinavia, and via Flanders to England, from France to Spain and to Germany.

Finally, around the 1780's, the fires slowly died. In Italy, the realistic Venetian dramatist Carlo Goldoni (1707–1793), author of more than two hundred and fifty plays, forcibly hauled the Comedy into the legitimate theatre, his ritualized and inflexible plot constructions replacing improvisation. The players were enjoined to adhere closely to Goldoni's written texts. For him the impromptu character of the *Commedia dell'Arte* was nothing but undisciplined buffoonery – even though he adopted many of the characters and incorporated basic *Commedia* situations into some of his plays.

A lonely voice of protest was raised by Count Carlo Gozzi (1720–1806), another Venetian, who wrote a satirical poem against Goldoni in which he defended the virtues and traditions of the *Commedia dell'Arte* and the highly coloured and bold originality of its jesters. But it was a lonely voice indeed, and little was left by the 19th century but the Punch-and-Judy shows for the children²³.

Bustelli's Creations

The journeys of itinerant *Commedia dell'Arte* troupes from Italy to Bavaria was one of the earliest in Europe, although France became the Italian comedians' second home inasmuch as in that country they achieved the status of accredited companies at Court quite early and were allotted prestigious theatres as their permanent bases. The Bavarian rococo, in which Franz Anton Bustelli played an indisputably important part, was distinguished by its particular vivacity and pronounced asymmetry of forms, as can also be seen in the carvings and sculptures of Straub and Günther. Bustelli's art shows extraordinary bravura. The bodies of his figures twist and turn in rapid movements and show a variety of feelings in their gestures and facial expressions. To this must be added an amazing interplay of rococo scrolls on bases and supports with the flowing, well-defined drapes of the clothes, presenting a fine grace not found elsewhere in eighteenth century porcelain modelling. Under these sharply defined drapes we find real human bodies, and it becomes evident that the artist had a thorough grounding in sculptured anatomy. At his death, his meagre belongings included a number of anatomical *academy studies*, an in-

dication that at some time in his young days he must have undergone first-class tuition in anatomical sculpture¹; but where and by whom will remain unknown.

Bustelli modelled emotion, be it dignity or delight, ecstasy or sorrow. Here we see deceit or avarice, there elegance and humour. Lovesick dandies and frenzied blusterers pursue scheming belles; mirthful pranksters create situations of mistaken identity and of intrigue, with much gesticulation and accomplished mimicry. F. H. Hofmann has pointed out that Bustelli endeavoured to arrange his figures in pairs or groups with a direct relationship one to the other, thus entering into the spirit of the improvised antics of his actors in a world of light-hearted illusion. He must also have been aware that, in his century, porcelain figures were created as «theme» decorations for the dinner table, not as objects to be displayed in a cabinet or a vitrine. His figures are his own creatures, imagined and matured in his mind, and in his heart. It is this which makes his comedians unique works of art in porcelain, standing head and shoulder above all else produced in the second half of the eighteenth century. Like all other modellers in the first century of European porce-