

Le fiabe sono vere... Storia popolare italiana

Fairy Tales Are True... Italian Folk History

In Depth (summaries)

8. ENTERING THE VILLAGE: BETWEEN WORK AND CELEBRATION

Workshops and Street Vendors

In the village, trades were passed down through generations, with workshops providing essential services to the community. Artisans focused on production, while family members handled sales. Shop signs often depicted the trade or goods sold, while some craftsmen worked as itinerant vendors, announcing their arrival with loud calls. Among the most common trades were blacksmiths, knife makers, grinders, tinkerers, chair caners, umbrella repairers, coppersmiths, carpenters, coopers, shoemakers, cobblers, glove makers, tailors, butchers, pork butchers, fishmongers, egg and dairy sellers, greengrocers, water carriers, wine sellers, melon vendors, innkeepers, tobacconists, coffee sellers, pharmacists, and barbers.

Carnival: The Upside-Down World of King Carnival

Carnival is an ancient festival rooted in winter rituals and celebrations such as the Greek *Anthesteria* and the Roman *Saturnalia*. Its name may derive from different origins, including *carnem levare* ("removing meat"), *carrus navalis* ("naval cart"), or *cornobal* ("horned dance"). At its centre stands King Carnival, a clumsy, merry puppet dressed in a mishmash of garments—cap, oversized collar and tie, coat, waistcoat, breeches, and shoes (such as the *Pupo* of the Marche region, the *Nannu* or *Nanna* of Sicily, or the *Bucefere* of Grotte Santo Stefano). He embodies disorder and is ultimately destined for sacrifice to restore balance to the world. Carnival is a time of ritualised chaos, excess, disguise, and role reversals. Its defining feature is the mask, which not only conceals identity but also allows people to explore ambiguity and connect with the realm of the dead. In essence, Carnival is a festival that temporarily overturns the established order, fostering renewal before restoring balance, with King Carnival serving as the scapegoat for this cyclical transformation.

The 1961 International Labour Exhibition in Turin: From Rural to Industrial Italy

One year after the Rome Olympics Games (1960), we can imagine us in Turin, 1961: the city celebrates a century of Italian unification. A new urban district emerges, featuring modern architecture that reflects the nation's technical and industrial progress. Yet at the heart of this event is not just a tribute to machinery but also an homage to Italy's diverse regional cultures—just as in 1911. The exhibition presents a mosaic of traditions, where each region, while preserving its heritage, contributes to the broader European identity. The exhibition portrays a country weaving together history and progress, with its three main sections showcasing the memory of the past, the labour that defines the present, and the territorial communities that safeguard traditions. Special attention is given to the transformation of rural life. Carlo Levi paints Basilicata in *Lucania '61*, a monumental panel dedicated to Rocco Scotellaro, portraying the life, death, and politics of a people navigating the tension between tradition and the promise of progress.

Lunar Phases and Farming Work

First New Moon: Avoid cutting clover, as feeding it to animals will make them bloat.

Do not do laundry on the new moon, as the moon's presence lingers in the washbasin, leaving a round shadow on the clothes placed in the centre.

From the Second First Quarter: Cut hair during the waxing moon to encourage faster growth.

Set eggs to hatch, as chicks born under this moon will be strong and healthy.

Third Full Moon: Prune trees, as wood cut outside of the waning moon lacks strength, burns poorly, smokes excessively, and is prone to woodworm.

Last Quarter: Do not trim cows' horns, as they will not regrow.

Prepare preserves during the waning moon to prevent spoilage.

Festival: From Tradition to Its Interpretations

Time stretches, and daily life fades away—this is the essence of every festive day. It is an experience where ordinary rules are suspended, not merely a recurring event but a true laboratory of meaning. A blend of ritual and spontaneity, of fixed dates and unexpected appearances, festivals are living organisms in constant transformation, able to adapt over time and reinterpret themselves. Even forgotten traditions can resurface, linking past, present, and future. In festivals, time becomes layered: the past emerges in the present through shared stories, while the future is envisioned as an echo of ongoing needs and desires, even when shaped by contemporary hybrid and globalised interpretations.

The Harvesters' Incanate

The sun blazes over the fields, sweat trickles down brows, and the air is charged with energy. This is the *incanata*, an ancient ritual that punctuates the rhythms of agricultural labour—harvest, grape-picking, or olive gathering. More than just a break, it is a stage where workers become actors in a kind of folk theatre, a flow of songs, whispered and shouted phrases, double meanings, erotic innuendos, and playful insults—a way to express hidden desires and silent rebellions. The ritual unfolds as a game of seduction and challenge, irony and licentiousness. Its roots trace back to the Roman *ludi* of Liber-Bacchus, moments of freedom and transgression. Both the Church and civil authorities attempted to suppress this practice, seeing it as a threat to order. Yet its energy never faded, persisting as a form of resistance and a way for peasants to give voice to their condition.

Harvest Rituals in San Giorgio Lucano (The Game of the Sickle)

The *game of the sickle* is a ritual pantomime performed by harvesters at the end of the wheat harvest. Accompanied by the sound of the *zampogna*, the workers mimic the act of harvesting, engaging in mock fights with their sickles. The tension escalates until the harvesters chase and capture the landowner, who stands beside the *legante* (the binder) and the final sheaf. Symbolically, they strip him using their sickles—a gesture meant to pressure him into offering wine to the workers in celebration of the harvest's completion. After this ritual undressing, the wine is shared, followed by a procession towards the farmhouse—a blend of popular Catholicism and symbolic rebellion, which, in the modern era, would evolve into organised labour movements.

The Palio of Siena

A cultural heritage requires a heritage community, as exemplified by the Palio of Siena. Over time, its 17 *Contrade* have become sovereign entities, waging a ritual war against each other every year during the races in Piazza del Campo, held on July 2 and August 16, only to reunite under a shared and higher peace—that of the city itself. As the saying goes, “*The Palio lasts all year*”, a key phrase in understanding this celebration and its significance. The Palio sees 10 of the 17 *Contrade* competing in a horse race that goes beyond mere sporting competition—it is a deeply felt event that forms an integral part of Siena's identity and that of its inhabitants.

Festival Decorations and Illuminations

Parazoni—ephemeral luminous decorations used for festivals, fairs, and processions—have a long history, particularly in southern Italy. Before the advent of electricity, they were crafted using traditional materials and techniques, dating back as early as the 16th century. Even renowned artists contributed designs and sketches for these elaborate displays, aimed at dazzling spectators and creating a sense of an endless theatrical spectacle. With the arrival of electricity, the *parazoni* evolved into the *luminarie* that still illuminate many festivals across southern Italy today.

Nativity Scenes

In 1223, Saint Francis decided to recreate the birth of Jesus in a cave near his hermitage in Greccio. This event marked the beginning of the Nativity scene tradition, a living representation of Christ's birth. The scene originally featured the Holy Family—Baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph—warmed by the presence of an ox and a donkey. Over the centuries, the tableau expanded to include angels, the adoration of the shepherds and the Magi, as well as everyday figures depicting village life. The tradition flourished in the 18th century, particularly under the patronage of Charles of Bourbon, King of Naples, and his spiritual advisor, Father Gregorio Maria Rocco. The Nativity scene also became a way to reflect the culture and society of the time: figures were carefully crafted by artists and artisans, their clothing and features capturing the cultural and social characteristics of the era. What began as a simple depiction of the Nativity evolved into a complex work of art, rich with extraordinary ethnographic significance.

The Varia of Palmi

An ancient tradition is revived in Palmi with the spectacular *Varia* as it *scasa*—as it begins its grand procession. The *Animella*, a small child placed at the very top of the towering structure, sways with the initial movement, eliciting a mixture of awe and fear from the crowd. A wave of joy follows as she regains her balance and traces the sign of the cross in the air, as if to embrace and bless the gathered community. The *Varia* moves forward amidst cheers and chants. The *angioletti*, suspended on a white cloud decorated with mica, wave their tiny flags. The runners at the base of the structure scrape against the pavement, sending up sparks, forcing the *mbuttaturi*—the men pulling the ropes—to shield their faces with handkerchiefs as they strain to guide the *Varia* along the pre-drawn lines on the ground, to the sound of applause and celebratory fireworks.