

MASKS & MONSTERS



What Is Mumming?

Mumming, or guising, is the practice of a group of people donning masks (and usually full costumes) to represent various wild and often threatening characters, walking through a town, and interacting with others. Sometimes the mummers collect money, sometimes they put on a play, sometimes they go door to door, sometimes they sing or dance. These customs have been documented throughout Europe over the centuries, and are still practiced in some areas today, as well as migrating over to North America in various forms.

TO DRIVE THE DARK AWAY

One of the primary purposes of mumming appears to be driving out the dangerous spirits of winter. This is why so many traditions happen during the darkest part of the year, usually around the winter solstice but as early as Halloween and as late as Candlemas in February. For the participants – and the community as a whole – these practices can provide a powerful means of catharsis.

There are also pockets of mumming that show up around the time of Carnival in early spring, and again at May Day (especially in Britain). These processions bring good luck, prosperity and fertility to the people and the land. They can be a fun way to create a sense of tradition and cohesiveness in the community.

“The masked figures are universally said to drive away evil and bring good fortune, but one way they do that is to embody evil. They are the personification of multiple dangers and are placated by villagers with material offerings to secure their departure. Not to treat them and get them on their way is to invite their return all year long.” (Gerald W. Creed, *Masquerade and Postsocialism: Ritual and Cultural Dispossession in Bulgaria*)

A TYPOLOGY OF MUMMING

In the book *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland*, Herbert Halpert put forth the following “Typology of Mumming,” categorizing the various ways in which the practice can be carried out.

A 1. The Informal Visit

- a) The house-visit (e.g., Newfoundland janneys)
- b) The visitation by inquisitors (e.g., Eskimo ‘naluyuks,’ St. Nicholas and Black Peter)
- c) The collectors’ performance (e.g., wren-boys, carolers, mayers, soulers)

A 2. The Visit with the Formal Performance

- a) Renaissance dumb-show, masque
- b) The dance (e.g., Sword Dance, Morris Dance)
- c) The folk play (e.g., Sword Dance Play, Plough or Wooing Play, Hero-combat Play)

B 3. The Informal Outdoor Behaviour

- a) Undirected wandering (e.g., general carnival behaviour)
- b) Going from point to point (see A, 1, above)

B 4. The Formal Outdoor Movement

- a) Groups moving to give performances at fixed points (e.g., dancers, players, etc.)
- b) The dance procession or ‘running’ (e.g., the Helston Flora Dance or Furry Dance)
- c) The formal procession (e.g., parades, pageants)

AN ANCIENT CUSTOM?

“If the ‘pre-Christian religious ceremony’ theory of origin of calendar customs is correct, then ideally there would be records of them at all periods since pre-Christian times. On the whole such records do not exist, and the previous surveys of the ritual dance and drama produced little evidence before 1800. Therefore it becomes fashionable to discard the popular theory, to suppose that these customs are of comparatively recent origin, and to search for this origin in observably common characteristics of human behaviour. Nevertheless a few records do exist of various customs before 1800, brief and vague though they usually are, rather as if stage-hands had twitched aside the curtain while they adjusted the properties before the start of a play; it is impossible to tell what is about to happen, but clearly there is something afoot. In contrast to the dance and drama, there are records of animal disguise in every century since the thirteenth, in either Great Britain or France. The recent customs might therefore be expected to have lengthy pedigrees, but they seem to be so distinct from the events recorded earlier that the situation is much as before; it can only be guessed that there may be some connection between the recent customs and the older ones. And yet again, there is the painting of a tourney horse as part of a morris team at Richmond in the time of James I, the Abbots’ Bromley performance has a documented history since about 1630, hobby-horses appeared at Christmas in various years, and in processions, and in verse, the early Christian writers condemned animal disguise on the first of January, there must have been *something* going on.” (E. C. Cawte, *Ritual Animal Disguise*)

Types

“In whatever proportions, mumming clearly depended on a mixture of playfulness and a sense of danger: both are necessary, but either might be dominant. Mumming brings the unknown (whether real or pretended) to interact with the familiar. This may be felt as a threat, welcomed as a liberating release for host as well as mummer, affectionately accepted as customary, or any combination of the three.” (Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter, *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England*)

There are many different types of mummers or guisers, especially when you look at all of Europe throughout the history of the practices. However, some rough categories can be discerned, although there is of course a lot of overlap.

Wild Men

Animals/Animal-Headed

Monsters & Devils

Green Men

Straw Men/Bears

Cross-Dressers

Fools

Tatters & Grim Faces

Giants

Hobby Horses

Mast Animals

There are also very specific traditions which involve particular costumes, activities, etc.; I have included several below. Each one is complicated enough to be the subject of its own book, but I have provided links to some information to begin with.

- [Schnabelperchten](#) (Austria)
- [Krampuslauf](#) (Germany)
- [Kalogeroi](#) (Thrace/Greece)
- [Burry Man](#) (Scotland)
- [Kukeri](#) (Bulgaria)
- [Abbots Bromley Horn Dance](#) (England)
- [Mari Lwyd](#) (Wales)
- [Jack in the Green](#) (England)
- [Pelzmartle/Belznickel](#) (Germany)
- [Bärbeletreiben and Klausentreiben](#) (Bavaria)
- [Busos](#) (Hungary)
- [Jarramplas](#) (Spain)

And a few related customs:

- [Calusari](#) (Romania)
- [Morris Dancing](#) (England)
- [Sword Dancing](#) (Scotland)
- [Trick-or-treating](#) (North America)
- [Wassailing](#) (England)
- [Mummers Play](#) (Great Britain)

“In gross outlines the animalistic costumes and themes are more pronounced in New Year’s customs, which are more common in mountainous and semi-mountainous regions, whereas the use of fabric and other materials is more evident in the late-winter/pre-spring events, which are more common in the plains. The costumes and timing thus reflect different economies. The centrality of pastoral activity in the hills and mountains makes the animal imagery more resonate and the materials more available, whereas the focus on agrarian activity in the plains economy makes material from crops like cotton or flax more available and meaningful....The different timing also fits with this correlation. Given that the rituals are intended to drive away evil and bring luck, it is interesting that one can associate the different periods of ritual practice with the especially dangerous times in the two different economies. The winter ritual falls just at the time when flock and herd animals are birthing, and the pre-spring rituals mark the transition to the growing season which can also be dangerous if early warmth sparks growth that is destroyed by late frosts.” (Gerald W. Creed, *Masquerade and Postsocialism: Ritual and Cultural Dispossession in Bulgaria*)

“There is a more general underlying assumption by those who do not come into contact with traditional existence, that a tradition has a single life like an individual human, and, once ended, can never return....The invention of writing, ascribed to ancient gods and heroes, enabled us to put away thoughts and activities so that they could be recovered later. So, when we read an ancient poem, sing an old song, or play a drama that no one has staged for a century, we are not reviving or re-enacting them. **We are making them present.** Whether the space between the last performance and ours is a minute or a century, each performance is a living enactment of the poem, song or play. It is present whenever it is performed. Whenever a custom has lapsed for a time, it can always come back again, if there is the will and the need for it so to do. This is a constant feature of human culture which has happened throughout time to most customs and traditions the world over. Consciously or unconsciously, every fresh performance is a statement of continuity with those which have gone before.”(Nigel Pennick, *Crossing the Borderlines: Guising, Masking & Ritual Animal Disguises in the European Tradition*)

BOOKS

- [*Crossing the Borderlines: Guising Masking & Ritual Animal Disguises in the European Tradition*](#) by Nigel Pennick
- [*Wilder Mann: The Image of the Savage*](#) by Charles Freger
- [*Mummers, Maypoles & Milkmaids: A Journey Through the English Ritual Year*](#) by Sara Hannant
- [*Masken im Alpenraum: Perchten: Tresterer, Wilde Leut’...*](#) by Clemens Zerling & Christian Schweiger (in German)
- [*The Krampus and the Old, Dark Christmas: Roots and Rebirth of the Folkloric Devil*](#) by Al Ridenour
- [*The Hobby Horse and Other Animal Masks*](#) by Violet Alford
- [*Ritual Animal Disguise*](#) by E.C. Cawte
- [*Arcadia Britannica: A Modern British Folklore Portrait*](#) by Henry Bourne
- [*Masquerade and Postsocialism: Ritual and Cultural Dispossession in Bulgaria*](#) by Gerald Creed
- [*Once a Year*](#) by Axel Hoedt (Carnival in Southwest Germany)
- [*Make Merry In Step and Song: A Seasonal Treasury of Music, Mummer’s Plays & Celebrations in the English Folk Tradition*](#) by Bronwen Forbes
- [*Sacred Mask, Sacred Dance*](#) by Evan John Jones & Chas S. Clifton
- [*The English Mummers Play*](#) by Alex Helm
- [*The English Mummers and Their Plays: Traces of Ancient Mysteries*](#) by Alan Brody
- [*Once a Year: Some Traditional British Customs*](#) by Homer Sykes
- [*All Silver and No Brass: An Irish Christmas Mumming*](#) by Henry Glassie
- [*Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland*](#) by Herbert Halpert
- [*Christmas in Ritual and Tradition*](#) by Clement A. Miles ([available online from Project Gutenberg](#))
- [*The Old Magic of Christmas: Yuletide Traditions for the Darkest Days of the Year*](#) by Linda Raedisch
- [*Acadian Mi-Carême: Masks and Merrymaking*](#) by Georges Arsenault

- [*Masks and Mumming in the Nordic Area*](#) edited by Terry Gunnell
- [*Masks: The Art of Expression*](#) by John Mack
- [*Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England*](#) by Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter
- [*Glacial Jubilé*](#) by Estelle Hanania
- [*Mumming, Howling and Hoodening: Midwinter Rituals in Sussex, Kent and Surrey*](#) by Geoff and Fran Doel
- [*Percy Maylam's Kent Hooden Horse and the Traditions of Hoodening and Gavelkind*](#) by Richard Maylam et al.

ARTICLES

- [*Perchta the Belly-Slitter and Her Kin: A View of Some Traditional Threatening Figures, Threats and Punishments*](#) by John B. Smith (PDF)
- [*Recovering European Ritual Bear Hunts: A Comparative Study of Basque and Sardinian Ursine Carnival Performances*](#) by Roslyn M. Frank (PDF)

WEBSITES

- [*Fear the Austrian Perchten: Pagan Traditions in the Alps*](#)
- [*The Perchten Dancers of Salzburg Austria Tyrol Pinzgau*](#)
- [*Europe's Wild Men \(National Geographic\)*](#)
- [*Better Not Pout: Krampus is Coming to Town*](#)
- [*Pre-Christian Alpine Traditions*](#)
- [*Master Mummers*](#) (folk plays)

DOCUMENTARIES

- [*Mummers, Masks & Mischief*](#) (Youtube)
- [*Here's a Health to the Barley Mow*](#) (DVD)
- [*Mari Lwyd*](#) (Youtube)
- [*Mari Lwyd*](#) (Vimeo)
- [*Shetland straw guizers*](#) (Vimeo)
- [*Kukeri*](#) (Youtube)