

# Marionette

*Italian c1500*



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Medieval and Renaissance puppets were made up of three distinct types.

“The first of these are the jigg- ing puppets, which had been illustrated for four hun- dred years, and which are now described as consisting of two dancers, whose move- ments were controlled by a single thread passing from the musician’s leg to an upright post” (Speaight, p.35)

The second type is the glove puppet (Figure 2). Like the popular Punch puppet, these were controlled from below by the hand, which was inserted into the puppet (Speaight p. 36).

“The most popular and usual type of puppet in his day (1640)” (Speaight p. 37)

Lastly there were the rod puppets or what we refer to as marionettes controlled by a rod and strings (Speaight p 36). These three types of puppets are rarely differentiated from one another in period texts which use the all purpose title ‘puppet’ or ‘marionette’ to describe all. It is necessary then to re- search further into any period reference to determine the control type.

The earliest image we have of medieval puppets comes from a 12th century woodcut from the “Hortus Deliciarum” which shows two boys playing with fighting puppets controlled by strings (Figure 1). These puppets were about fourteen inches tall and seem to have articulating limbs. Although these are not what we would call marionettes, they show the use of strings and the concept of fighting puppets. A 12th century puppet theatre still in existence has some interest- ing details that give us a clue to the type of puppets that were used upon it (Figure 3). The stage is only two feet off the floor and four feet high. This type of stage could only have puppets which were controlled from above or behind.

“The types of puppet used were marionettes, probably supported by a rod fixed to



Figure 1. “Hortus Deliciarum” 12th century woodcut



Figure 2. 13th Century illumination

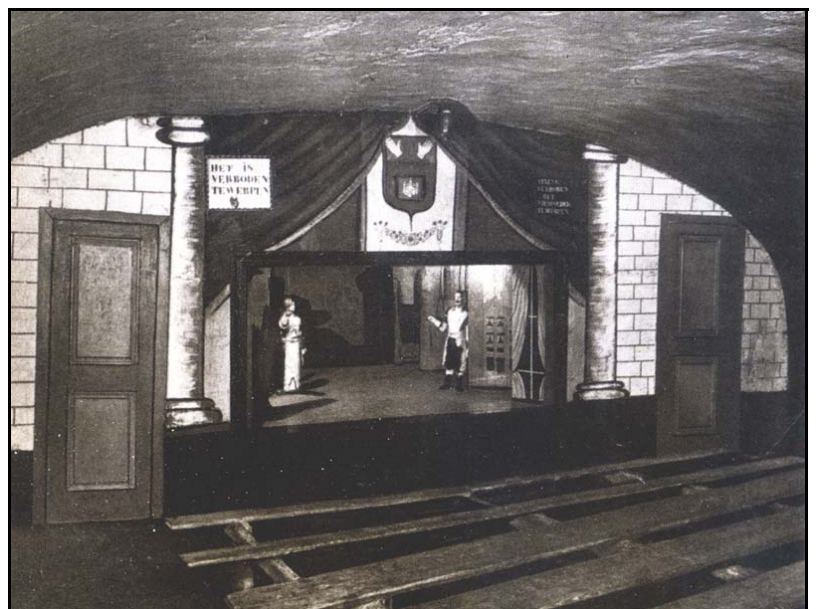


Figure 3. Oldest puppet theatre in Europe, 12th century.

the head with the limbs manipulated by strings or fine wire” (Currell p. 8)

In the fourteen hundreds, there was a religious mass known as the Mysteries of the Mid-August (Baird p. 64). This mass contained religious stories that were acted out for the audience.

“This masterpiece of medieval showmanship was performed entirely by marionettes and moving statuary.” (Baird p. 64)

This description, although uses the word ‘marionette’ may not refer to the rod or string puppets that we think of by that name. One piece of evidence seems to indicate that they were indeed stringed puppets:

“Two angels, leaving His side, make a majestic descent to the foot of the altar.” (Baird p. 64)

This description of the show would require that the puppets were controlled from above in some fashion and not hand puppets controlled from beneath. There were also moving statuary used in this performance which were controlled by:

“Iron wires cleverly hidden controlled all the movements.” (Baird p. 64)

The marionette I constructed was patterned off the puppets in the Italian and Sicilian tradition. The puppetry in Italy developed into it’s own style in the popular story of Orlando Furioso. The story of Orlando is the Italian version of the Song of Roland which is an 1100’s epic poem from France.

“In its [the Song of Roland] slow progress from medieval France to Renaissance Italy, the story also has taken on many Sicilian colors and flavors.” (Baird p. 119)

The story of Orlando, as it is played today, seems to follow the period style (Figure 4, Figure 6). These puppets use the center rod and minimal string design as seen in the medieval woodcut shown in Figure 5.

“The Orlando marionettes became more popular in Sicily than anywhere else and Sicily has become the permanent home of this traditional puppet drama....A heavy rod passed through the puppet’s head from above supports the whole body and another rod works the sword arm. The shield is moved by a string.” (Currell p. 9)

This type of puppet and style of performance has become known as Orlando Marionettes. Not only becoming a popular title, it defines a whole style of puppet design and aesthetic (Baird p 118).

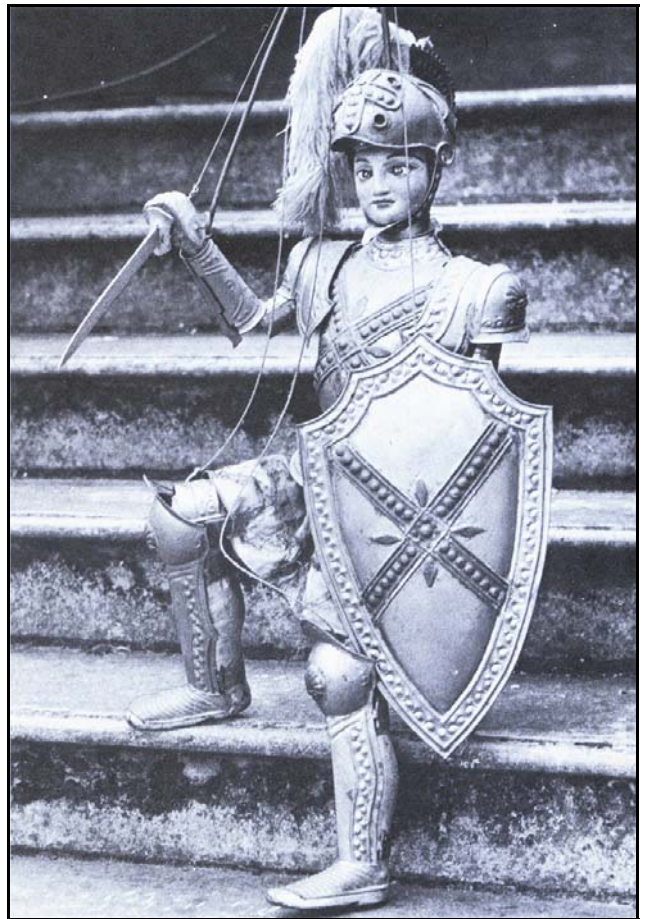


Figure 4. Orlando Marionette, 19th century Sicilian



Figure 5. Medieval woodcut of puppet maker

“The first references to the Orlando story being played by marionettes appear in the sixteenth century. We do not know what the plays were like, although we do know that the type of marionette (with the heavy hooked rod through the head) had been in use since Roman times.” (Barid p.124)

Although this style was developed and flourished in Italy and Sicily, evidence seems to indicate that it also migrated to many other parts of Europe. The Orlando story has taken root and is still played today in Belgium (Figure 7).

“It was wandering Italian showmen who carried their castelli dei burattini [puppets] into England, Germany, Spain, and France, and these countries seem to have adopted puppet conventions, devices and dialogues long established by the Italians, gradually adapting them to their own tastes.” (Joseph p. 51)

“By 1573, Italian puppetry had invaded England.” (Baird p.69)

Puppets performances, although already popular in the early 1600’s, becomes the primary theatrical media in England in 1642.

“When Cromwell and his Puritans achieved the Commonwealth in 1642, the theaters were locked tight, but as in old Rome the puppets kept on playing because they did not seem important enough to ban. For eighteen years, the only theater in England was the puppet theater.” (Baird p. 71)

So as our SCA period closes, the Sicilian rod marionette is presumably being used around Europe in the Orlando style. And in places like England, it have been the only game in town.

Only having the documentation above for building my marionette, I had only a loose outline as to the construction. I decided to use a combination of wood and leather, with a few metal joints to construct my puppet. As can be seen in figures 8 through 13, the main body, limbs and head are made of hand carved poplar. These pieces are connected by strips of leather, in the case of the elbows, knees, hip, stomach, and wrists. The feet are cast pewter and doweled into the legs. The neck is a combination of a wood dowel and metal tube to allow the head to be removed for repair and costume changes. I



Figure 6. Modern Sicilian puppet theatre controls



Figure 7. Modern Belgian puppets

did use modern epoxy for my glue in order to insure a lasting connection. I could have used a more period fish glue, but the maintenance and upkeep were a drawback I was not willing to endure. The hands are carved wood and are drilled out to accept different items, in this case it is a sword and shield. These can be removed and replaced or not, to fit the needs of the story the puppet is performing.

The controls for this puppet are very simple and I believe follow in the written descriptions of period rod puppets. The main motion is controlled by the rod in the head, which is connected to a rocker bar in the left hand. This bar is used to control the feet. By rotating the bar back and forth, the feet will move in a walking fashion. This is a very simple and easy technique used in modern puppets to control feet and main body with the left hand. The right hand holds the rod that is connected to the sword arm. This rod and the accompanying string allow for complicated sword movements, which are important in a fighting puppet like this. The last control is the shield arm. This arm is controlled by a string that is connected to the rocker bar, but is not affected by the walking motion. This string has a simple up or down function, allowing a guarded or relaxed stance.

The string that was used is all linen, and is a middle gray color to help hide its existence and not distract the eye from the puppet. The costume is made up of cotton pants and under tunic, which hold up the stainless chainmaille shirt, and a linen over tunic.



Figure 8. Marionette construction



Figure 9. Sword arm detail



Figure 10. Shield arm detail

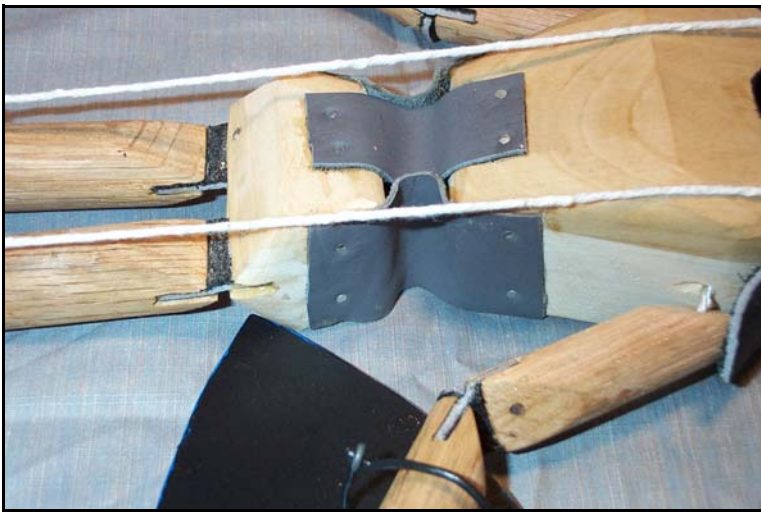


Figure 11. Hip detail



Figure 12. Leg detail



Figure 13. Back of hip detail

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