

16th Century Replica Puppets

I have researched many period toys, and find myself always coming back to puppetry. There is nothing more magical than watching a puppet perform and dazzle a crowd. After many years of research on the shrouded origins of this form of entertainment, I decided to share my findings and my puppets.

Puppet Theater developed parallel to regular theater entertainment, covering the same historical and cultural changes in Europe, this miniature art form has survived the plague, wars and famine. (Baton p.178) In essence Puppet Theater and Stage Theater acting is performance through a miniature medium. Their handlers for certain types of plays, character puppets were specifically made to fit the play. The puppeteers made their own puppets by hand and were made all over Europe. (Baton p.178) Their construction has been passed through oral tradition and is very hard to track original materials and techniques. (Baton p.178) My research has led me to images in manuscripts depicting daily life and instances of puppet creations entreating the masses do exist. (Bodley 264, fol. 54v and 76v)

Starting around the classical Greek period, puppets were mentioned in chronicles by authors like Aristotle. (Dall'Orto) In his writing the *Motion of Animals*, he is quoted as, "The movements of animals may be compared with those of automatic puppets, which are set going on the occasion of a tiny movement; the levers are released, and strike the twisted strings against one another." (Farquharson p7) Archimedes is said to have perfected the puppetry art and portrayed such classics as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The Romans have also had their hand in the development of marionette as an art form from the Greeks.

During the middle ages, the survival of the puppet arts was preserved by the Christian Church. Since many people were illiterate, this new medium brought a fresh way to convey the Bible messages and stories to the masses. The monks made beautiful depictions of many popular stories from the Bible. They carved the figures from wood, richly painted and clothed the figures. These plays were revered ceremonies and were as important to the new converts as mass. In the 12th century manuscript *Hortus Deliciarum*, two men manipulate two-rod knight puppets to fight one another. (Landschafts) Found a reference to a puppet theater in a 14th century medieval manuscript called "The Romance of Alexander" (Bodley 264, fol. 76v). Which the illuminated manuscript depicts a lot about 14th century life, and there are two separate instances of a puppet theater entertaining depicted in this document. (Bodley 264, fol. 54v and 76v)

Eventually, the marionette moved beyond the confines of the sanctity of the Holy Mother Church and the impish comedy of the marionette theater beings. (Baton p.178) The plays evolved and became rowdier the characters would fight and hit one another, tell jokes, and be very naughty. (Baton p.178) What famously is known as the Punch and Judy routine began its introduction to Puppet Theater. Punch and Judy are believed to develop from original Noah and wife characters.

The clergy would not tolerate this noise in the church so the marionettes were banned from the church due to lude behavior of the plays. (Baton p.178) From the manuscripts we can gather the puppet plays were seen in the regular populace in adapted farm carts at street fairs and festivals. (Bodley 264, fol. 54v) Many a marionette handler set up a cart outside a church or cathedral in protest and eventually became a regular spot to see these plays. (Baton p.178) The productions were very slapstick, noisy, and would lure away many a parishioner from their divine intentions. Punchinello, originated in Italy, started as an ugly deformed patron saint reportedly turned normal through prayer and devotion, developed over time throughout Europe to be Mr. Punch, with his hook nose and funny looking face. (Baton p.178) Many of Mr. Punch's political views would have his handler in the dungeon for treason. My intention is to fashion a puppet pair after Mr. Punch and Mrs. Judy in the traditional sense, and then a fancier court variety in Tudor clothing, since these were political tools of their day.

The puppets in the 16th century began to look more elaborate and had a greater following than ever thanks to the entire wood craftsman in Germany. (Arnold p157) The woodcarving became very lifelike in the details. In some places, the small puppets ranked with their human counterparts as far as popularity and acting skills. In Italy the more ancient roots of marionette beginnings, the writing of puppet-dedicated plays to accommodate the special stages and theaters for these miniatures virtuosos was a more real than ever. (Baton p.178) Some of these theaters still exist today; the most famous is The National Marionette Theater in Prague.

The materials I used for this project are as follows; Natural colored 100% cotton muslin, 100 cotton taupe sewing thread, off-white 100% silk dupioni fabric, off white 100% silk organza fabric, white polyester lace, lace butterfly appliqué, copper colored wool fabric, olive green wool fabric, orange and gold variegated silk fabric, burgundy lozenge patterned polyester fabric, string plastic pearls, gold-tone bead caps, Czech red glass beads, polyester stuffing, 100% wool golden rod colored 4 ply yarn, 100% cotton embroidery floss in black, green 100% wool thread, lead weights and glass marbles, silk ribbon, wood napkin ring, black thread, 2 wooden dowel sticks, 2- 12"x1"x1/8 and 2- 10"x1"x1/8" wood slats, 2 wooden tongue depressors, 100% cotton size 10 crochet thread in white, 100% cotton light peach and peach cotton DMC floss, gold metallic aglet points, brass clasping collar bracelet, 2 brass cup hooks, 4 brass toggle rings, leather hide ties, rhinestone gold buttons.

I made a decision to narrow my style of puppets, despite my focus on the Elizabethan puppet theater. Since a variety of puppet styles developed all at the same time I wanted to show just one type this time. Most information focused on either hand puppets or marionettes, which I made string marionette puppets for this project. Though there is rod and shadow puppets that exist in the time period, most of them were more popular in Asia. (Baton p181) I wanted stay truer to the manuscript representation of European puppets for this project.

When I made the puppets I did go for an untraditional route, period marionettes are made from wood or clay then dressed in cloth. I decided to make their base out of cloth and stuffing, more than wood or clay. My reason is my experience with doll making and keeping with the spirit of the puppeteers making their puppets out of materials they had available. I have lots of material available from Elizabethan and Tudor garb making, so I used the best out of the materials available. (Baton p.178) Figuring out the construction features I found a reference to hand puppets and modified it to work as a cloth marionette. Though the advice from it is most useful for modified stages and coming up with various ways of putting up a marionette stage that is portable. (Fetherson-Drake 188-119) The following is the modified construction of the cloth marionette.

I made the head first taking cotton muslin and made a round bag like shape stuffing it and shaping the stuffing to give the desired features, using the taupe thread I then sewed on stuffed piece of muslin for the nose. Taking care to sew knots and seams to give the nose shape, I formed it to the desired shape. Then placed the eyebrows with the same taupe thread and making the outline for the eyes. After the eye shapes were made, I changed to the black cotton thread and made the pupils of the eyes, then green wool thread for the iris of the eyes. After they were made to the desired aesthetic, I then I began work on the mouth. I decided I wanted her lips to look full and used light peach and peach colored floss for a natural effect against the color of the natural muslin. Then I added a small amount of taupe thread between the upper and lower lip to give a separation line. After the face was done, I worked on the hair. Gathering a large amount of golden rod colored wool yarn, made sections then proceeded to braid it then secure the braids to the head making a high bun. After the head was complete then I sewed the head to a long section of wool, this becomes the base for the body and clothing. I made hands from the same cotton muslin and wool for the arms, sewed them to the body making sure to leave a little room for a shoulder. I made a kirtle to go over the wool made out of orange and gold silk fabric edged it with burgundy polyester lozenge pattern fabric. Then I added a partlet neckline in silk dupioni fabric and added lace ruff and cuffs. For period details I added organza puffs to the sleeves, accent pearls and Czech beads to the hair and costume for sparkle, and made a shaped organza veil with a decorated edge.

For the male puppet I took the same construction steps for making the simple head though it is larger. Though the features are different, large eyes, longer nose made fuller eyebrows, and shaped the mouth differently. On his costume I used the green and orange wool fabric as the base, and made a lattice of the lozenge fabric held at the intersections with pearls. This made a nice layer for the doublet without being too bulky. Then preceded to make the lace collar and cuffs from trim and accent lace on his outfit with the lace butterfly appliqués, also used the same appliqués to make the cod piece. Made a square shaped wool hat from the orange and green wool and accent it with the lozenge fabric, a butterfly appliqué, pearl beads, and orange silk edging. I also made some shoes and Elizabethan slops with orange felt to break up the green wool that I used for the hose and under doublet. For interest made an Elizabethan man's cape from the orange silk, edged it the lozenge fabric on the collar and hem, then lined

it with green and orange wool and accented the outside with 3 of the butterfly appliqués. Made silk ties finished in cone gold aglets and sewed them on the cape, tied over the shoulder and under the opposite arm in an Elizabethan knot.

These same butterfly appliqués are used on the backside of the organza cap, and on the bottom forepart skirt on the female puppet. So it creates continuity with one puppet to the other to show they are set. On both puppets I put small weights on the inside of their arms, legs, and in some of the clothing to weight them down. Weighting the limbs helps show the movement, and making expressions will be more noticeable and controllable. Now the pair is all ready for stringing.

In my hypothesis, I can see a medieval puppeteer finding good set sticks from the wood pile, whittling them down smooth, tying them together with a small strap of leather, and stringing the marionette to the simple handling device. So I looked for similar materials available to myself. Most traditional woods like pine would hold up to constant use over many years as well be prevalent in most of Europe. So I looked for wood like an unknotted pine for its smooth grain and easy carving features. I found wooden slats 1/8" thick to accommodate for the additional weight of each puppet. Then proceed to make a cross bar with the two pieces careful to keep edges smooth and drilled holes for the strings to be tied. I also used white crochet thread that was strong as well as more subtle. Silk would have been used in period, though my silk thread I have the yardage was far too limited for this project. Had to string the puppets several times to get the right length of stings, I was having trouble with consistency of height in both. After getting the length just right, I knotted through the hands and feet of the marionettes. I was making sure to hide the knots as best as I could with the clothing on the marionette. I also looked to make sure my weights were helping keep the marionette balanced.

If I was to redo this project, I would like to try one in clay and one in wood to see the differences in manipulation based on materials used. As well as try some hand puppet and rod puppet variety to show the variations in construction and manipulation effects that can be achieved. Though I am happy with my results of this project overall, and hope I helped lighten the shadowy world of Puppet Theater for all.



Fig 1 Ancient Greek terracotta puppet dolls, 5th/4th cent. BC, [National Archaeological Museum, Athens](#) [7]

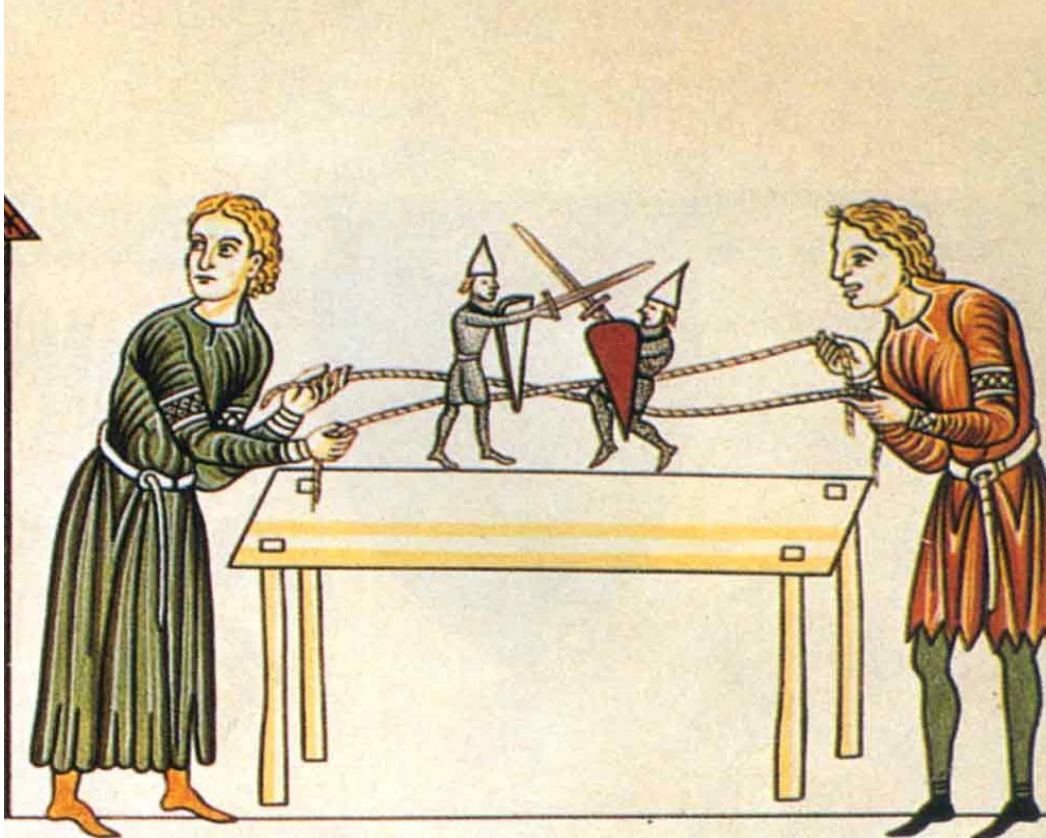


Fig 2. 12th century *Hortus Deliciarum* from Germany, a depiction of rope puppets. [6]

<http://image.ox.ac.uk/show?collection=bodleian&manuscript=msbodl264>

Fig 3 *Romance of Alexander* a Flemish manuscript circa 1338-44- depicting men watching a puppet theater act. 76v [5]

<http://image.ox.ac.uk/show?collection=bodleian&manuscript=msbodl264>

Fig 4 *Romance of Alexander* a Flemish manuscript circa 1338-44- depicting women watching a puppet theater act. 54v [5]

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