

## The Book of Masks



**A work of capital importance for the history of theatre, documenting the origin of interpretation and adaptation of characters to the scenic function with the use of masks.**

This is a valuable document on masks, their function and origin, but it also takes us back to the classical world, to ancient Rome, to the great collecting impulse of the Enlightenment for all kinds of antiques, archaeology, etc.

**Ficononi was the author of many publications** on the most varied subjects of Ancient Rome and the classical world. He was an excellent pupil of Pietro Bellori, who put together a superb cabinet of art and curiosities.

The masks, which today are often used to hide or conceal oneself, played a fundamental role in classical theatre and represented character. By changing masks, the same actor could play several roles in a show. There were even prototypes that could be used for different characters in different shows.

**Beyond theatre, masks played an important role in Roman liturgy and funerary art**, as a representation of the tragic nature of the fate and death of the characters. **A real delight for theatre lovers.**

When, quite by chance, we came upon this curious treatise, it immediately caught our attention. And it was not precisely because of its colourfulness, as anyone who browses through its pages will immediately appreciate, for this is not one of those books that dazzle with gold and sparkling colour. On the contrary, it is a beautiful black-and-white print, but one that also unleashes in the reader a sense of awe and immediate attraction. We would later find out that **it is a rather rare piece** that will delight all fans and bibliophiles who are not only sensitive to the exciting world of masks or Greco-Roman theatre, but also to anthropology, sociology and history, as the implications of this strange

and beautiful book in all these fields are many and profound.

Beyond its unusual subject matter, **what instantly catches our eye is the striking sequence of images of masks and costumes**, which challenge us, sometimes even provoke us, and connect our imagination with intense experiences and even with supra-sensitive realms, sometimes provoking in us the current of a subtle emotional shiver.

From the earliest times, costumes in general –and masks in particular– have played an extraordinary role in the life of mankind in society, whether in their funerary or religious, recreational, sporting, theatrical or festive aspects. In all tribes and peoples, in all cultures and civilisations, ancient or modern, masks have had and continue to have an important social function. Nowadays, we only have to think of the numerous costume parties, operas, carnivals or the widespread Halloween celebrations to confirm their validity and to better measure their influence.

The story that we find in this curious work, which, among many other considerations, provides a very interesting historical-archaeological sketch of the important social role of the mask, curiously also warns us against masquerading as a crime, that is, against a possible perverse use of the disguise as a means of concealment and deception, or a temptation to evil. All of which does not prevent our author from emphasising that human life, with all its varied array of festivities, dances, celebrations, games, etc., would be almost inconceivable –or simply quite different– without this use, and sometimes abuse, that man constantly makes of masks and disguises.

As Professor Marcello tells us in her valuable contribution to the volume of complementary studies, among the precious books that take us back in time we find this *Book of Masks (De Larvis Scenicis et Figuris Comicis)* by Ficononi, a real delight, which subtly brings us closer to that expectant and innovative 18th century, the Age of Enlightenment, and its intense desire to scrutinise even the most diffuse nooks and crannies of the human past.

And this leads us to recall the singular profile of its author, Francesco Ficononi, a son of that restless and curious time of all things ancient. A multi-faceted personality, Ficononi cultivated a wide range of



knowledge and activities, mainly focused on his passion for Rome and its history, which would increase his fame as a fine connoisseur and great scholar of antiquities and collections. This book on masks was his first book, and like the following ones, it is an exceptional document for a better knowledge of classical theatre.

The enormous variety of forms, materials and supports of the masks and other figures represented, as well as their multiple and diverse origins, is surprising. The book also features the illustrious names of other great collectors, travellers, archaeologists and various experts, all of whom lend a certain rigour and richness of exposition to this vibrant account of curiosities.

However, as is rightly pointed out in the aforementioned volume of studies, Ficoroni is not content with this work as a compulsive and unrepentant collector, but, driven by his passion, he goes so far as to scrutinise, and even meticulously analyse, compare and classify all the objects in his collection. **And this descriptive zeal reveals considerable erudition and endows this treatise with an exceptional historical-customary value.** Image and text complement each other in such a harmonious way that if the engravings are a real spectacle for the eye, the accompanying literature is a pure delight for any sensitive reader who is curious about history and its anecdotes.



But leaving aside this particular spell that such a beautiful set of images casts over us, perhaps the most valuable and curious aspect of this peculiar treatise is the author's finely honed ability to elaborate his original vision of history and the transition from ancient to eighteenth-century society through theatre in general and this parade of masks in particular.

For Ficoroni, the first actor to wear a mask was Roscio Gallo, who thus managed to disguise the fact that he was cross-eyed. And from then on, sometimes out of necessity and most of the time out of pure playful impulse, the use of the mask would evolve and would become established to the delight of generations of spectators.

The pages of this original book facilitate the perception of the fascination that masks have exerted in the past and still exert in today's society. And the enormous playful, even evocative and allegorical importance that it attained in the most diverse periods of history is still fully valid and fresh today. But beyond the multiple readings that Ficoroni and his work suggest to us, we cannot ignore its recognition as a key piece in the reconstruction and understanding of the role of masks in ancient theatre and, through it, in the development of the particular facet of entertainment and amusement of humanity throughout history.

For the editors of Siloé it is a true honour to present to our readers a work of such singular beauty and symbolic significance as this, although it is certainly atypical in the European facsimile panorama. We do so with the pride of offering the first Spanish version of its text. With this new title in our **Rare Bookshop**, as well as abandoning the beaten track of facsimile editions, we have sought to reinforce this unusual collection with a new touch of originality and suggestive rarity –if you will pardon the expression–.

