

The Center for Puppetry Arts Museum Collection **by Nancy Lohman Staub, Founder and Consultant**

The Center for Puppetry Arts of Atlanta, Georgia, is the largest organization in the United States whose total focus is the art of puppetry. Its mission is to build recognition of the art form as well as to increase awareness of puppetry's aesthetic and educational aspects. Its primary goal is to present productions by America's leading puppetry artists and international guests. Because puppetry is the unique performing art that focuses on objects rather than actors, exhibitions of puppets are essential to enhance understanding and appreciation of performances.

The Center officially opened to the public on September 23, 1978. Many of the 150 puppets I loaned to the Center were on display when Kermit the Frog and Jim Henson cut the ceremonial ribbon. I later donated those puppets, and the collection has grown to over 900 puppets and 1,000 posters and other graphics. A complementary research library now contains files of numerous photographs, clippings and periodicals, over 1,500 books and over 1,000 videotapes. There are two large climate controlled storage rooms with state of the art cabinets, a large gallery of several rooms for long term installations and a smaller gallery for rotating exhibits of six months to a year. Puppets and posters are also displayed in the huge main theater atrium and throughout the facility. Over 350,000 people visit the Center annually, all of whom see some part of the collection.

The mission of the Center's Museum Program is to introduce the American public to the diversity and universality of the art of puppetry. The objective is to amass a collection of puppets that exemplifies myriad types, styles and social functions of puppetry from every continent of the world. There is virtually no culture without some form of puppetry. The historical significance of a particular tradition or artist is always a consideration. The ultimate goal is to demonstrate the universality underlying the diversity of puppetry and, through it, of humanity itself.

I began collecting because David Nixon, an elderly artist and puppeteer in New Orleans, fell down on his luck. When he needed money, he would ask me to buy some of his antique puppets. I felt I should save them for the puppet world rather than decorators or dilettantes. My occasional support of the man who introduced me to puppetry grew into something more substantial when I could no longer resist puppets for sale in shops and galleries to supplement his collection. I put them in cases of my own theater, Puppet Playhouse of New Orleans. In 1978, when I left Louisiana and my theater to organize the 1980 World Puppetry Festival in Washington, D.C., I decided to transfer the collection to the new Center. I realized it would become a major regional and eventually national institution due to the vision and business acumen of its Executive Director, Vincent Anthony.

The Center expanded its holdings considerably through donations of two major collections. Following the participation of the Caroline Lutz Collection at the University of Richmond in *Puppetry in China*, and the Ilhan Basgöz Collection of Turkish puppets at the University of Indiana in *Turkish Shadow Theatre*, the institutions recognized that the Center would be an excellent repository. This significantly increased the breadth of the Center's Museum. Sometimes individual artists have also donated puppets they loaned for temporary exhibits as Winnie Wilson did after *African and African-American Puppetry*. Some companies bestowed puppets immediately following performances at the Center like Les Zygomars of Belgium and the Velo Theatre of France. Some gifts were by dealers who had dealt with the Center for years including Joan Walker-Abrams who gave numerous Asian shadow puppets. The Center became the beneficiary of individual collectors including Allelu Kurten, former General Secretary of the American Center of UNIMA, the international union of puppeteers, and Caroly Wilcox,

former head of the New York puppet-building workshop for Jim Henson Productions. Jane Henson and Jim Henson Productions contributed several Muppets and have been generous supporters of the Museum. The estates of Donald Cordry, Mel Helstein and Marjorie Batchelder McPharlin placed objects at the Center. A few puppets were specifically commissioned at my request such as the Kathakali hand puppet that U.S. puppeteer Theodora Skipitares secured while on a Fulbright Study Grant trip to India. Prominent Atlantans have offered puppet treasures where they felt they would be appreciated. Edith Hill donated several Taiwanese hand puppets. Henri V. Jova gave a fabulous Sicilian rod marionette acquired by his ambassador brother in Argentina. Ruth and Don Gilpin, of local television fame, entrusted the Center with many of their famous string puppets. One morning, two Burmese marionettes appeared mysteriously on the doorstep followed by an anonymous telephone call saying the Center was welcome to them because his lover felt they had bad *karma*. The Museum now has a priority list detailing the pieces desired to fulfill its encyclopedic vision. Through a modest acquisition fund, it seeks to purchase or commission new works and hopefully waits for the next wonderful and unexpected gifts.

The first full-time Museum Director, Diane Kempler, began the arduous process of documenting the collections and improving the storage facilities, arranging important consultancies and self study grants. She organized several excellent exhibitions, and the collection grew substantially under her tenure. Among the Museum directors to follow her, Kerry McCarthy stand out for her diligence and efficiency as she expanded the Museum Program in both space and activities as well as multiplying the size of the collection. The current Museum Manager, Susan Kinney, and her professional assistant and volunteer docents work closely with a Museum board of advisors and with the Center's Education Program staff.

The collection serves as the resource for the Center's exhibitions and loans to other institutions. Long-term installations present an overview of the art form, as did *Puppetry: Echoes of Society*. Temporary exhibits focus on specific cultures such as *Puppetry of India*, techniques as in *Trick Puppets*, themes like *Fools, Jesters, and Gods*, the work of individual artists including Bil Baird, and related arts exemplified by *Masks*. The Center reaches larger audiences for its collections by touring special exhibitions to other venues regionally and nationally, and tours have lasted as long as three years. The Center hosts traveling exhibitions as well, including the blockbuster *Art of the Muppets*.

The Center has examples of the four main categories of puppets: shadow, rod, hand, and marionette. Shadow puppets are designed to cast a shadow on a screen and are generally controlled by rods from beneath or behind. Rod puppets are also worked from below or behind, generally with a central rod and, often, additional rods and sometimes strings. Hand puppets fit directly on the hand. Alternately called glove puppets, they are sometimes actually gloves. Marionettes are worked from above with strings or a central rod, sometimes a combination of rods and strings. Of course, there are hybrid forms such as the hand and rod puppet in which the head rod is short so the controlling hand is inside the puppet. Some hand puppets have rods on the hands or feet. There are several additional types of puppets including finger puppets and body puppets. Related forms in the collection include toy theatres and masks. Of course, according to Bil Baird in his book *The Art of the Puppet*, "A puppet is an inanimate figure that is made to move by human effort before an audience." This means almost anything could become a puppet.

The collection includes examples from most of the culturally significant styles of puppetry. Puppets naturally reflect their diverse creative cultures so they have very different styles around the world and even within one nation. Puppet face painting may simulate theatrical makeup. The figures may resemble sculptures or paintings. Movements may imitate dancers or actors and vice versa. The stylistic diversity makes puppetry ideal to stimulate study of artistic codifications and traditions as well as reflections on

their sources. Underlying the differences in culturally determined stylistic appearances and movements of puppets is the basic human concept of animism, belief that natural objects and phenomena and the universe itself possess souls or consciousness. Children instinctively accept manipulated objects as alive, and adults can be manipulated to accept them as they once did instinctively as children. Puppeteers can exorcise demons, perpetuate myths and legends, promulgate religious and social values, and celebrate the human condition with tears and laughter. I have tried to find examples from all over the world that serve various universal functions and seem, to me, to have souls.

Photographs and slides of puppet performances, puppeteers and their audiences augment the inanimate objects. When certain important puppetry forms are unobtainable or have not yet been acquired, photographs are incorporated into the exhibitions and enrich the collections. Hundreds of posters and other graphic materials add another dimension. Videotapes of performances and documentaries of specific traditions are indispensable and available for viewing in the library and in the galleries. These materials all serve to aid the viewer in his/her experience with a static performance object. They place the puppets within performance context and remind visitors and scholars that the puppet is meant to move and be seen in motion.

While the Center's Museum professionalizes its operation and expands its collections, it continues to move toward achievement of long-range goals. The creation of the Center's Study Center is one such objective. Through this program, the entire collection would become accessible worldwide by placing digitized photographs and detailed accession records and information on the history of each puppet tradition in an online database.

We are grateful to our many patrons and contributors including individuals, national foundations and corporations, and local and national government agencies. As the Center nears its 25th anniversary, the Museum program continues to set new goals and seek out new puppets for its growing collection.

COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

AFRICA

The strength of the Center's African collection of over 25 objects lies in the range of figures from Sub-Saharan Africa. While this section is small in number, it is one of the richest in sheer aesthetic quality. In Sub-Saharan Africa, sculptures are often carried by a dancer, worn on the body or head, or mounted on a mask and pulled by strings. These performing objects can be called puppets and some still appear today in rituals and ceremonies addition to articulated figures more commonly classified as puppets. The Center has examples from traditional performers of the Bamana and Bozo of Mali, the Ibibio, Ibo, and Yoruba of Nigeria, the Kuyu of the Republic of Congo, as well as modern marionettist from Togo. The North African collection includes puppets from Egypt and one promised son from Tunisia.

The Kuyu sculptured head may be the most beautiful carving in the collection. It is held above a dancer's head with raffia grasses disguising the dancer's and becoming the puppet's body in the *kyébé-kyébé* dance honoring the snake god and creator, Dyo.

The body puppet from the Yoruba, a culture located in Benin as well as Nigeria, may be one of the most unique in the collection. A Yoruba Géléde Society mask was mounted on a barrel, which serves as the upper torso. The puppeteer within could manipulate the arms, seeing through screened openings in the

chest. The performances are both spectacle and ritual honoring the power of women, especially the elderly; traditionally, women were a force that rivals that of the gods and ancestors.

ASIA

The Center's collection also includes over 425 objects representing the major puppetry traditions of Asia. The wide variety of techniques and fascinating cultural codifications make this a rich resource for understanding puppetry and its communal roles. Objects from Borneo, Burma (Myanmar), China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam are supplemented by Asia Minor examples from Turkey and Israel. Writings as ancient as "The Bhagavad Gita," part of the Hindu epic *The Mahabharata* make references to puppetry. Scholars place the origin prior to 500 BC, and episodes are enacted with puppets still today. In Indonesia some *dalang* (puppeteers) continue to perform rituals and are considered to have spiritual powers. Sponsored by royal courts, shrines and temples, puppet shows also became popular entertainment in private homes and public places throughout Asia. The various performing arts of narration, drama, song and dance were reflected in the puppet performances, and conversely the puppets often were imitated by their live counterparts.

The most seminal Asian acquisition is a contemporary four-part panel of a *wayang beber* (play scroll) from Indonesia. Some scholars consider the *wayang beber* to be the oldest form of *wayang* (play) preceding cutout flat figures and dancers that move like them. As the narrator unrolls the paintings on cloth to show the audience, he tells the story of the legendary hero, Panji, along with musical accompaniment. The painted figures resemble the Javanese *wayang kulit* (leather play) puppets which are carved from opaque buffalo hide and designed to cast intricate patterns of light on a screen. The rich colors, often gold, can only be seen by those seated on the puppeteer's side. The puppets are controlled by rods on the body and articulate arm(s) from beneath. Balinese clown characters have hilarious moving mouths pulled by strings. The collection includes two rare Thai *nang yai* (leather big puppet play) figures carved from hide representing scenes or characters with no moving parts. They are held by their two rods over the heads of dancers who appear in front as well as behind a back lit screen as a narrator tells tales from the other major Hindu epic *The Ramayana*.

Marionettes from Rajasthan State in India serve as models for the essence of puppetry. The puppet torsos are carved of one piece of wood, the arms are stuffed cloth, and there are usually no legs. Manipulated with as few as one looped string held in the hand of the puppeteers, these puppets can amaze with transformations as from male to female by flipping around and tricks including juggling. The Center has an authentic cloth stage in which to display the several examples in the collection.

A water puppet from Vietnam is the most unique puppet in the Asian collection. Villagers still create wooden dolls to imitate their daily life planting rice, fishing, and boating. They are controlled by ropes and pulleys mounted on long horizontal rods hidden under the surface of murky water that becomes the stage. The puppeteers stand waist high in the water concealed from the spectators on the shore by bamboo screens or more elaborate scenery in a kind of stage house. With music, the puppets perform a series of entertaining vignettes at communal celebrations including battles and a spectacular dance of a floating dragon with fireworks spurting from its mouth. There is now a government sponsored national troupe of water puppetry that tours internationally with a plastic pool to represent a pond.

AUSTRALIA

The Center's library offers an excellent history of Australian puppetry, which has flourished in the past 30 years. The Australian Aborigines are one of the few cultural groups that apparently have never used performing objects that could qualify as puppets, although some may be found among the Maori of New Zealand and on other South Pacific Islands including New Hebrides, examples of which we would like to add. The Center has only one puppet from Australia, a black silhouette of a hippo by the world renowned Richard Bradshaw. Contextual recordings of his work available in the library demonstrate how a cardboard cut-out can come to life through the expertise and humor of a master puppeteer.

EUROPE

From Europe, the collection includes over 125 puppets from Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Russia, and Spain. While some Ice Age sculptures have been classified as puppets by Museum curators, puppetry in Europe was recorded as early of the fifth century BC in the writings of Plato. The hand puppet tradition derived from the Italian *commedia dell'arte* was spread across Europe by wandering showmen. One of the most popular folk puppet heroes from that development was Pulcinella, the Italian ancestor of Punch, who was first witnessed in London in the seventeenth century. In the twentieth century puppetry enjoyed a renaissance in Eastern Europe with state subsidies under Communist regimes and in Western Europe by intellectuals and artists.

The Center already possesses a marvelous Mr. Punch and plans to commission a Pulcinella soon. Additionally, the collections includes a number of their cousins who have taken on their own cultural characteristics: a Kasper from the Hohnstein of Germany, a Polichinelle from Marseilles and a Guignol from Lyons, France, and a Petrushka from the former Soviet Union.

The European Collection includes an example of the simplest form of rod puppet called a marotte. It is operated by one central rod with movement of any body parts incidental. It is from the Gulliver Theatre of Poland. Her head is a wooden oval with no features, and she wears a Polish ethnic folk costume. From the Central State Puppet Theatre in Moscow, the Center has a beautifully crafted puppet from *The Dragon* by Eugene Schwartz, directed by the legendary Sergei Obratzsov. His company brought the rod puppet to new heights of technical development with three or more manipulators using mechanical controls to accomplish very complicated maneuvers with a complex articulated figure. This state subsidized theater is among over 100 in the former Soviet Union.

THE AMERICAS

From the Americas, the collection includes over 350 objects. From Latin America, there are puppets from Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Mexico and Venezuela. Bernal Diaz who accompanied Cortez to Mexico in the sixteenth century described performance objects, as did the Conquistadors in Peru. The two clay figures from the Hausteca people of Mexico in the collection are dated AD 1200-1500. The articulated arms are missing, but the assumption is that these were used in a ritual or ceremony. New puppetry forms arrived in the New World along with the colonizers. The Cortez expedition to the Yucatan included a puppeteer to amuse the troupes. Guignol hand puppets from France and string marionettes date back to the mid eighteenth century in Mexico, where the French Emperor Maximillian ruled. Sicilian rod marionette troupes appeared in Argentina in the early twentieth century.

The American collection includes an example of the folk tradition called Mamulengo, which evolved in Northern Brazil. Its hand puppets have carved wooden heads and hands similar to the Pulcinella but take their own characters, melding indigenous, African, and Portuguese influences.

From Mexico there is a papier-mâché hand puppet of a simple farmer with a straw hat and sandals made by Roberto Lago, a beloved performer, historian and supporter of puppetry. He toured shows internationally that promoted cultural heritage as well as national touring productions that fostered educational and health related issues. He wrote a book about the small clay folk marionettes from Puebla, of which the Center has a set from the play *Don Juan Tenorio*.

Several of the best puppet companies in the Americas and world today are Canadian. While the Center's representation of the Canadian tradition of puppetry is quite small, it has showcased the range and breadth of this nation's work in a temporary special exhibition. One of the most imaginative puppets of the collection is Canadian, Trixie la Brique from Toronto's The Puppetmongers Powell production of *Brickbrothers' Circus*. Trixie, a tightrope walker, is a brick wearing only a tutu. Ann and David Powell, a brother/sister team, dressed as brick masons, create an entire circus with bricks, a few pieces of cloth and string, and a wheelbarrow that becomes a stage.

The United States shares with Canada indigenous groups of the Northwest Coast Native American and Inuit cultures, which still carve and use articulated masks and figures in their rituals and ceremonies. Obtaining examples is a high priority for the collection. The massive immigration into the United States included puppeteers who brought Punch by at least the end of the 18th century and variety marionettes by the 19th century from England. Contemporary Americans borrow from world culture and draw on the latest technology, using puppetry to teach, satirize, and entertain. Television and film have spread American puppetry around the world.

The most significant hand puppets from television in the collection are Jim Henson creations Link Hogthrob and Dr. Strangepork from Muppet Show episodes "Pigs in Space." Thanks to the new light plastic materials, Jim Henson's Workshop could create large sculpted heads whose mouths could be well synchronized. This kind of "mouth" puppet is often called a Muppet although that is actually a trade name. The Muppets were designed for the television camera, so precise "lip sync" was essential to the success of the Muppet Show. It was viewed weekly by millions internationally for several years, 1976-1984, and a new series has been produced recently. The Muppets on *Sesame Street* still teach reading and mathematics daily all over the world.

Madame of television and nightclub notoriety is our most famous hand and rod puppet. Created by Wayland Flowers, her mouth was articulated, but Flowers stayed in full view interacting with her though making no effort at ventriloquism. It's a tribute to his artistry that audiences accepted his characterization. Frank W. Ballard, founder of the University of Connecticut puppet program and Ballard International Museum of Puppetry (BIMP), designed the most magnificent rod puppet in the collection. It is Abu Bakr, the Orange Merchant from the 1975 student production of *Kismet*. Ballard designed and taught for nearly 30 years influencing a generation of puppet artists.

Tony Sarg is considered the father of the marionette popularity in America of the twentieth century. The collection includes The Mad Hatter from his touring show of *Alice in Wonderland*. For many children and their families a marionette performance with an elaborate stage and scenery was their first experience, not only of puppetry, but of live theatre. A Ralph Chesse marionette of King Lear exemplifies his work for beautiful adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. The collection's Harry Burnett

clown from the Turnabout Theatre of Los Angeles has a coffee mill control so he can be swirled around at breathtaking speed, epitomizing the gravity-defying attribute of the marionette. The most famous marionette at the Center is Clyde from the Broadway show *Flahoey* by Bil Baird, which has his characteristic articulated big eyes and eyelashes. Baird's company performed not only on Broadway, but in TV, films, World's Fairs, and his own theatre in New York City.

The collection includes two puppets representing extreme scale differences from tiny to enormous. The smallest is a dancer finger puppet by Mollie Falkenstein, once a ballerina herself with the Ziegfeld Follies. The puppet's body was attached to her hand and her fingers became the dancing legs. The most gigantic is the Population Rod Puppet. It has a huge papier-mâché sculpted head with human figures on its forehead and surrounding its face and beard and enormous papier-mâché hands. It required at least 3 puppeteers who were concealed under an attached cloth. This was one of several large puppets from *The Pageant: Our Domestic Resurrection Circus* of 1994 by the Bread and Puppet Theater of Vermont. Known for political satire and participation in public demonstrations, the company performs summers in Vermont and tours regularly in the United States and Europe under the direction of Peter Schumann.

Bruce D. Schwartz, a MacArthur Grant recipient, donated his delicately sculpted Elizabeth the Queen, whose modeled composite head and hands appear to be porcelain. Schwartz developed a unique technique in which he directly held the neck between his fingers but used rods on the hands in a manner reminiscent of Indonesian rod puppet manipulation. He performed in the open as in Japanese Bunraku. His puppetry reflects Asian influence, as does the work of many contemporary Americans.

Modern artists have been attracted to theater of the inanimate by the poverty of theatrical realism and its replacement by the electronic media. Hanne Tierney explores materials, light, and movement to create abstract images that interpret the essence of her ideas and interpretations of the work of other playwrights including Chekov and Lorca. She invented an elaborate grid system through which strings are mounted from various objects to counterweights on a precise painted control panel. Her work is represented in the collection by a purple cloth Anita Loos and silver tubing Picasso from her version of *A Play Called Not and Now* by Gertrude Stein. Julie Taymor is represented by an abstract figure, The Angel of Death, made entirely of twigs for New York Public Theater Production of *The Haggadah* by Elizabeth Swados in 1979. Taymor has gained international acclaim for her production of *Lion King*, currently playing on Broadway and several cities in the USA and abroad.

Paul Zaloom animates objects from the trash to satirize our throw away culture. He has donated several of his cast off "junk" performances to us including *Acid Rain*. Trinkets and trophies become characters; sheets of plastic and cloth, egg cartons, and cardboard boxes become scenery.

A Phoenix, which serves as a metaphor for creativity, rises out of a trashcan at the entrance of the current collection exhibition *Puppets: The Power of Wonder*. The spectator triggers it by an electronic control. This Phoenix is classified as an automaton differentiated from a puppet because it is manipulated by mechanical means. In his Oregon studio, Michael Curry creates many automata with electronic activation for the Walt Disney Company and other prestigious clients. Curry generously contributed a great deal of time to the exhibit of the permanent collection which was the brainchild of guest curator, Michael Malkin, a professor of theater in California and author of many books and articles about the art of puppetry, including the catalog essay. *Puppets: The Power of Wonder* is a state of the art installation with over 50,000 visitors a year since it opened in 1995.