

## □ **Pulcinella in illustrations and puppets**

The *Pulcinella in illustrations and puppets* exhibition offers the onlooker an impression of the traditional puppet theatre which is still very much alive around Naples (Italy) even today, and a glimpse of the life and times of the Pulcinella character.

The exhibition consists of a number of puppets and trinkets, figurines, posters, illustrations, books, slides and a video recording of a Neapolitan puppet theatre show. There are also many photos on view, most of them taken by *Otto van der Mieden*.



Many of them – for instance the ‘snapshot’ of the characteristic *Via San Biagio dei Librai* (Saint Basil of the Booksellers Street), or the picture of a partially obliterated poster on an old church wall which shows a dying Pulcinella – vividly recall the atmosphere of the city of Naples.

Pulcinella is one of the clown figures from the *Commedia dell’arte*, a theatre form dating from the 16th century. Many of the characters from this Italian folk comedy have also become regular features of other folk puppet theatres.

Pulcinella himself comes from the Naples district. He is the forefather of the English *Mr Punch*, the Dutch *Jan Klaassen*, the French *Polichinelle* and many other similar comic figures from the puppet theatre repertoire.

## □ **A Neapolitan scoundrel**

In centuries past Italian puppeteers travelled throughout Europe, and Pulcinella also became very popular with audiences abroad. Within a very short time his international descendants came into being. The influence on the character from the various countries and cultures gave rise to an international repertoire. The fight of the comic ‘star’ against the *policeman*, the *monster*, the *devil* and *Death* itself is a recurring theme albeit in various guises.

Whereas his successors now wear bright harlequin clothing, the original Pulcinella is dressed in *white* and he wears a half-mask. He has a *floppy pointed hat* on his head, his back has a slight *hump*. If he behaves like a coward one day, the next he is a cheeky scoundrel or a credulous fool. He can be long-winded, a bluffer, but he always scampers off at the first hint of danger.

## □ **Scapegoat and saviour**

Pulcinella is always the *scapegoat* and he carries the burden of our collective sins. In the puppet theatre Pulcinella separates himself from his inner fears and anger and they become his opponents. Feeling safe behind his mask, he is able to conquer his fears and he fights bravely against evil. Pulcinella has taken the role of saviour upon himself. His character encompasses both a *devil* and a *Christ*.

□ Illustration: le guarattelle. Terracotta, Naples (199-?).