

Puppets

by Linda Baxter

Watch a group of children playing with their toys. At first they might be happy to put the plastic animals in their cages at the zoo and take them out again, or dress the dolls in different clothes, but after a while things get a bit boring. So the toys will be moved across the floor as if they had real legs, the animals will start to speak to each other and the dolls will pay visits to each other's houses and talk about what they've been doing today, all in slightly different voices of course. It seems that the impulse to make inanimate figures move and talk is a very natural one, and, of course, that's exactly what puppets are all about. And that's probably why they've existed for thousands of years - and are known to children and adults all over the world.

The basic types

Shadow puppets are one-dimensional silhouettes which move against a light background so that they can be clearly seen by the audience. They usually have moveable arms and legs which the puppeteer controls. These ancient puppets still survive in some parts of the world, for example, the leather puppets of India and the Javanese Wayang Kulit.

Rod puppets are three-dimensional figures controlled by pieces of wood or bamboo attached to different parts of their bodies. The simplest form, and one of the earliest, is just a head on a stick - an early form of doll. But more sophisticated versions have many moveable body parts and can be moved in a very realistic way. Once again, Java has probably the most famous rod puppets in the world - the Wayang Golek.

As the name suggests, string puppets (or marionettes) are three dimensional figures controlled by strings. The standard puppet has strings attached to its arms, legs, shoulders, back and head. These are attached to a cross of wood which the puppeteer holds in one hand while moving individual strings with the other. Different versions of string puppets are found all over the world.

Hand puppets (also known as glove puppets) are three-dimensional figures which are usually made of cloth and worn on the puppeteer's hand or arm. They are probably the most common form of puppet all over the world because they are easy to make and to manipulate. The famous Punch and Judy puppets, which every British adult remembers from childhood days at the seaside, are glove puppets.

How they developed

Very little is known about the origins of puppets. Puppets have been found in ancient Egyptian and Chinese sites and puppets were mentioned by Plato and Aristotle but we have no details about how they were used. All we know is that different cultures had them and they developed in different ways.

The earliest puppets were probably simple shadow puppets. Later, when rods were added to give more control to the silhouettes, the three-dimensional rod puppets developed and then the types that we know today.

In Britain, string puppets became very popular in the Middle Ages, when they were used in church services to illustrate Bible stories, such as the birth of Christ. It's possible that the word 'marionette' (which means 'little Mary') comes from this time. The puppet shows slowly moved out of the churches and into the streets and by the sixteenth century there were puppet theatres at every country fair. The shows were popular entertainment and were often very rude and satirical.

Punch and Judy arrived at this time from Italy. The puppets were marionettes but by the nineteenth century they had become glove puppets because they were cheaper to make and easier to transport and manipulate.

Puppets today

Nowadays in Britain puppets are usually associated with children's entertainment but they still survive as an adult art form in many countries, particularly in the East. One of the most important uses of puppets today is in education for children and adults alike. Traditional puppet shows are a good way of exploring sensitive issues such as sex education or AIDS awareness which people may be embarrassed to discuss openly. They are widely used in therapy too. A child who doesn't want to talk about the terrible thing that happened to him is often happy to act out the scene using puppets.

And of course, on a lighter note, let's not forget the new generations of puppets that television has brought us through the years, from the old classics like Thunderbirds, to Kermit and Miss Piggy of the Muppets, and the satire of Spitting Image. It really does seem that puppets are not just for children.

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