Puppetry of China

Courtesy of
Center for Puppetry Arts

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Southern Bell Center — East Lobby
String Puppet, Late 19th early 20th Century. Collection of Center for Puppetry Arts — Photo: M. C. Findar

Puppetry of China is an opportunity to view hand, string, rod and shadow figures with an appreciation for their beautiful construction and design while at the same time giving an idea of their dramatic tradition. Over the centuries puppeteers in China have entertained audiences at rural fairs and in city squares, giving special performances to mark festivals, weddings, birthdays, and funerals or to protect villages in times of famine or illness. Early Chinese written documents describe funerary figures, which were entirely life-like and could move, dance and sing, animated by a shaman for spiritual guidance, protection or to bring good fortune. By the 6th century the figures were used in acrobatic skits featuring the antics of a fat, bald character called Lord Guo or Bald Guo.

It was the gift of the puppeteer to bring to life the legendary characters of Chinese history and literature, unfolding the timeless themes of loyalty and betrayal, love and hatred, jealousy and compassion. The performers passed their special skills from father to son, preserving their distinctive movements, songs and play texts and further refining them in each generation. This performing legacy continues today in China, where young artists are bringing new flair to an age-old art form.
Hand Puppets are constructed of a silk costume over an interior cotton shell like a glove into which the puppeteer's hand is inserted to manipulate the figure. The lower body stitched to the hollow shell contains cotton-stuffed legs with carved wooden feet. At the ends of the empty sleeves are attached carved hands which may be moveable to grasp miniature props. The hand puppet is controlled by the forefinger supporting the head while the thumb manipulates one arm and the middle and little fingers manipulate the other arm. Other types of puppets create motion and expression via outside or indirect controls such as strings or rods, but hand puppets require a direct relationship between the figure and the performer's hand. Some of the best hand puppeteers have come from the Fujian Province in southeastern China, today this province continues to be an important artistic center for hand puppetry.

String Puppets (marionettes) are larger than hand puppets, averaging 2 1/2 to 3 feet in height. They incorporate beautifully carved and painted heads, hands and feet, in addition to intricately embroidered costumes. They are manipulated from above by a minimum of eight strings while the most complex figures may have more than forty strings and are controlled by two people. The Chinese say that the skill of the string puppeteer is most clearly displayed in the walk of the puppet, which requires fluid coordination of legs, feet and arms for realistic effect. Because the marionette is capable of very expressive movements, the distinctive style of a character's walk also reveals that person's inner nature.

One of the most famous centers of string puppet performance has been the city of Quanzhou in Fujian Province where the marionettist's art can be traced back over 800 years. The Quanzhou Marionette Troupe has preserved many classical performing traditions such as the soft, southern melodies called 'kuilei diao' (puppet melodies) which were developed especially for the marionette theatre. Due to the nature of this music, the pace of the marionette theatre is deliberate and graceful rather than the forceful staccato of the hand puppet stage.

Shadow Figures are formed of thin, translucent pieces of leather cut into complex designs which might have intricate latticework decoration. The structure of the shadow figure is modelled upon the joints of the human physique so that movements of the shadow figure produce natural-looking postures. As with three dimensional puppets, superstition held that the figure came alive when the head was joined to the body. The figure is manipulated by a central rod attached to the neck and two rods attached to the figure's hands. Seldom do the legs of a shadow figure require a separate control rod.

Their name notwithstanding, shadow figures are not designed to cast shadows but to act as colorful silhouettes viewed through a white screen. The audience watches the play from in front of the screen, while the performers move about behind with their figures lit by lanterns and later by oil and electric lights. Perhaps the most fundamental rule of performance is that shadow figures - unless entering, exiting, or in transformation - must be held flat against the shadow screen in order to create maximum clarity of color and outline. The cities of Peking and Tangshan have been important historical centers for the shadow performer's art.
Rod Puppets are the most popular in China today, supported by a thick, central rod. Two smaller rods control the puppet's arms and may be concealed inside the sleeves of the costume. Traditional rod puppets have no legs or feet. China's many different types of rod puppets may be roughly divided into three categories based upon size: the smallest type, from 11" to 18", was popular among itinerant performers in the north. Medium-size rod puppets of around 36" were popular in Sichuan, Hunan, and Guangdong Provinces and in the cities of Yangzhou and Shanghai. The largest rod puppets are the unusual life-size figures found in northern Sichuan Province, where these large figures were incorporated into performances in which small children, carried on the backs of performers, acted out roles with movements and costumes which imitated those of rod puppets. These plus medium-size rod puppets continue to be used today in performances by the national Chinese Art Puppet Troupe of Peking.

EXHIBITION ITEMS


2. Hand Puppets. Fujian tradition; early 20th c. Lutz Collection of the University of Richmond.

3. ACCESSORY BOX. and assorted costume changes; early 20th c. Fujian tradition. Lutz Collection of the University of Richmond.


These puppets are part of an exhibition entitled Puppetry of China that toured The United States for three years. It represents a portion of an extensive international collection of puppets owned by the Center for Puppetry Arts.

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The Center for Puppetry Arts Museum is open daily, all year on Monday through Saturday 9 AM to 4 PM. Admission is $1.00 per person or free with a performance/workshop ticket stub. Members of the Center are admitted free anytime.