



A face in the crowd at the carnival in Mainz.

Mainz brings to mind Gutenberg or the Electors, the old cathedral, the Romans or the Mainz Republic of 1793. But, above all most people link the city with *Fastnacht*, the carnival season. Local events such as the *Rosenmontagszug*, the big parade on the Monday before Lent, a televised carnival session (if they understand enough of the language to watch German television) called *Mainz wie es singt und lacht* (Mainz as it sings and laughs) or the typical carnival figures *Till*, *Bajass*, *Prinz Bibbi* and the traditional carnival songs *Rucki-Zucki*, *Humba Tütärä* or *Heile Gänsje* are familiar to many people.

Yet, there's more to *Fastnacht* than all that. Its history, traditions, rituals and clichés all form something much more complex. It's a *Volksfest* (public festival) and an important part of life in Mainz. Ever since the political and literary carnival began 150 years ago, world events have received a foolish response here and have been interpreted in a humorous and witty way.

All festivals are imbedded in the church calendar. However, since the Middle Ages there hasn't been a single festival that hasn't reportedly been celebrated in an unchurchly manner. This holds true for Easter and Christmas as well as *Fastnacht* activities. The people used these festivals as a reason to go heavy on food and drink. *Fastnacht* celebrations developed in a chaotic manner which both church and secular powers were unable to control. Times were tough and food and drink, especially the latter, helped to divert attention from daily hardships.

In 1823, in far-away Cologne, reformers of *Fastnacht* attempted to put an end to such unorderly foolish activities. Mainz followed this example in 1837 when a mer-

## Fassenacht

Carnival starts punctually at 11 minutes after 11 on the 11th day of the 11th month of the preceding year, but the first preparations take place as early as late summer. Cologne, Mainz and Munich are regarded as the three major "carnival cities" of Germany, and each of the three claims its own style of playing the fool under the scepter of Prince Carnival.



Carnival in Mainz (11.11.11)

chant named Nikolaus Krieger initiated a spectacle called *Krawinkler-Landsturmzug*. This precursor to the big parades on the Monday before Lent was a superb celebration, a colorful parade which was to develop tremendously over the years.

Today, the *Rosenmontagszug* is a highlight of the season.

In the same year, the MCV or Mainzer Carneval Verein was founded. This was a club of wealthy burghers whose motto was *All unified in foolishness* or, as another carnival club later proclaimed, *Nice to all, nasty to none*.

Beside these bourgeois influences, which are still in evidence today, carnival was also shaped by political circumstances.

The harsh realities of the day, press censorship and bullying by the political police directly provoked the *Narren* (fools) to seek a political enclave where they could engage in harmless fun. The *Narren Club* (fools' club) corresponded to the political clubs, while the *Elferrat* (Council of Eleven) with its bell-ringing president has its counterpart in the revolutionary tribunal with prosecutor and president.

Since there was no freedom of the press at the time, the *Narrenpresse* (Fools' Press) took over. In 1841, the first *Narhalla* appeared, followed by the *Neue Mainzer Narrenzeitung* (New Mainz Fools' Newspaper) in 1844. Both publications combined politics with tomfoolery, teased the censors and marked the beginning of the political-literary carnival. What couldn't be directly stated was indirectly said and what couldn't be said in the present was alluded to in fictional visions of the future.

Serious tomfoolery justifiably needs the following foolish symbols.

**Scepter:** Once a fool was made king, he needed a fool's scepter. A cob was adorned with the head of a fool sticking out his tongue, as a sign of disrespectness. Masters of ceremony and presidents today carry such staffs.

**Cap:** Another product of the *Fastnacht* reform of 1837/38 was the *Kapp*, a hat worn by club members which made them easily recognizable as such. Originally, caps differed in looks from year to year. In design contests entries were judged more on imagination and pep than fancy decoration.

**Star:** Beside the *Kapp*, the star was a main accessory of the Mainz fools. Used as a form of recognition, it showed the name and number of the bearer and also functioned as a ticket for carnival dances and sessions. All of these were written on the back of the star and were punched as events were attended. No wonder that stars were popular Christmas gifts.

**Medals:** Originally intended as a take-off on military pomp, they quickly became awards of honor and still are to this day.

Often works of art in their own right, they are presented to deserving club members, speech-makers and special guests.

**Corps:** The task of the uniformed corps used to be to keep *foolish* order, while at the same time mocking military rituals.

Today, the corps guard the sessions of their own as well as friendly clubs and escort carnival notables.