

# The Art Form: Puppetry

The first child who ever picked up two sticks and had them play with each other was making use of puppets. Strictly speaking, the difference between dolls and puppets is not the thing itself but whether or not there is an audience. In this case, the child making two sticks talk to each other is simply playing, while the child making two sticks talk together in order to entertain a little brother or sister is a puppeteer.

Puppetry has been used throughout the ages as a means of telling stories. It may have originated in India over 4,000 years ago where acting by humans was forbidden by a religious taboo on 'impersonation'; people probably used puppets to tell stories even before they ever acted them out. Even today, the lead player in Sanskrit plays is called "*sutradhara*", meaning 'holder of the strings'. There are a wide variety of puppet types which are found in many cultures all over the world.



**Hand or Finger Puppets** are the simplest kind of puppet, consisting of a simple head draped with a simple body made from cloth, paper, or other light material. The puppeteer's hand or finger fits inside the head to move it. Finger puppets do not have a moveable mouth, but a hand puppet may. Simple hand

puppets are usually not much larger than the hand itself. A **Sock Puppet** is a particularly simple type of hand puppet made from a sock. A **Glove Puppet** is slightly more complex, with an internal division for fingers allowing independent manipulation of a character's arms. Cookie Monster from Sesame Street and Lamb Chop are hand puppets.



In **Rod Puppetry**, the puppet is mounted on a rod or pole through its center, with other rods attached to its hands.



The puppeteer has a lot of control over the puppet's motions as a result. A simple rod puppet may have single rods attached to its hands, while a more complex puppet may have many rods. The puppets themselves may

be small or large, like the giant puppets in Bread and Puppet Theater (pictured below), which may require over a dozen puppeteers to operate. With small rod puppets, the operator is usually not seen, but with giant puppets like the lady at right, they are.



In **Shadow Puppetry**, probably one of the earliest forms of puppetry, flat, colorfully painted figures are placed in front of a light so that what the audience sees on a wall or screen are only the puppets' shadows. The puppets are often made of animal skin, heavy cloth or light wood. The elaborate painting and carving on the puppets serves only the puppeteers; the audience never sees it. Though originally from India, shadow puppetry is more commonly thought of now as a Balinese cultural form. With modern technology, shadow puppetry now sometimes uses film and video techniques.

**Bunraku Puppetry** originated long ago in Japan, where larger puppets (but typically not life-size) are manipulated by as many as three puppeteers working together. Traditionally, each puppeteer controls a different aspect of the puppet—for example, head and right hand, left hand and props, legs. Although dressed in black in order to downplay their presence, Bunraku-style puppeteers are visible to the audience. With several puppeteers manipulating one puppet, Bunraku puppets have a wide range of motion. Some contemporary western puppeteers use full-body puppets that have evolved from Bunraku. Thus a puppet with hands and feet might be manipulated by one puppeteer (or sometimes two or more) who is visible to the audience. The puppet might be small, life-size, or giant. The puppeteer might dress in black or in regular, "street" clothes, or even wear the same clothes as the puppet.

**Marionettes** are small puppets with joints at their elbows, knees, and sometimes ankles and beyond, which are manipulated from above by a puppeteer. Usually, strings connect the head, arms, and legs to two crossed pieces of wood that the puppeteer tilts and turns. The original Pinocchio was a marionette. Many people have seen the marionettes in *The Sound of Music* when the children and Maria perform the "Lonely Goatherd." Long ago, many companies performed operas for marionettes. Today the Salzburg Marionette Theatre keeps that tradition alive, performing an all-marionette version of *The Sound of Music*.



**Animatronic or Robotic Puppets** like those used in theme parks or in movies like *E.T.* and *Babe* are considered puppets because they are inanimate figures operated by a human—in this case by remote control. The difference between a robotic dinosaur and a Bunraku monster is not one of purpose or function but of technology. Animatronic puppetry is often used for animals in movies where either the creatures do not exist (like dinosaurs) or where the action is too difficult for live animals to do safely.



**Found-Object Puppetry** uses everyday objects—utensils, tools, packaging materials, small appliances—to create theatre. Animated by the puppeteer, objects can take on human or non-human characteristics. Without intentionally crafted pieces, found-object puppetry relies on the imagination of the artist and audience to fill in the blanks.