

MARDI GRAS TREASURES

FLOAT DESIGNS OF THE GOLDEN AGE

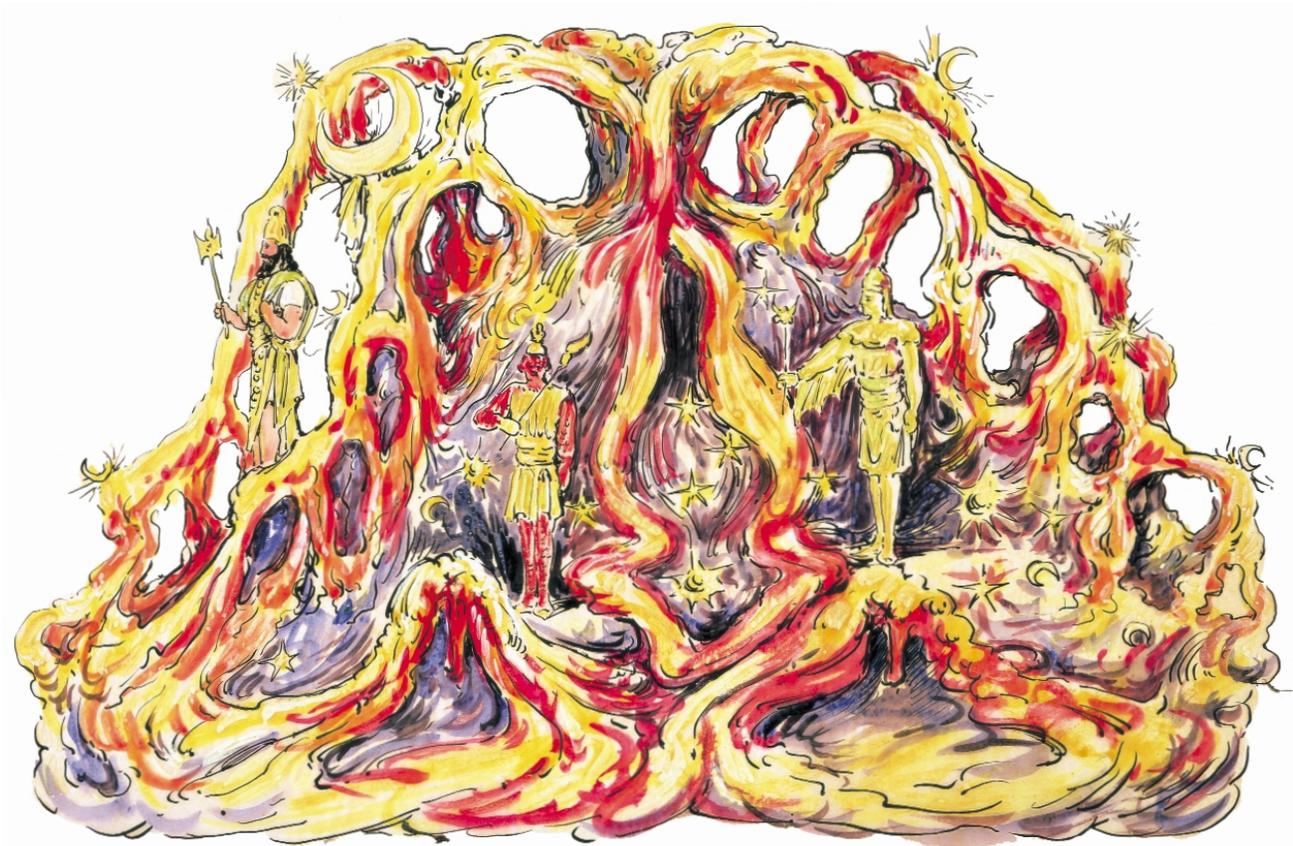




MARDI GRAS TREASURES

FLOAT DESIGNS OF THE GOLDEN AGE

Henri Schindler



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This book is dedicated to the memory of Louis Andrews Fischer (1901-1974).

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INTRODUCTION

Among the numerous felicities that have made New Orleans the least American of American cities, none surpass, in age or affection, the joys of Carnival. The glimmering processions of the masked gods and bearded kings of the New Orleans Carnival occupy a central position among the rites and glories of the great festival. And more: nothing better illustrates the worldly old city's fabled decadence or extravagant sensibility. The long succession of these glowing, torch-lit pageants—with their towering monsters and fantastic décors, their papier-mâché kingdoms and diamond-dust thrones—became the greatest and most beloved of New Orleans communal rituals.

Following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the governing of Creole Louisiana became young America's first experience in governing a foreign country. Masquerade balls and Mardi Gras masking, established customs in New Orleans, were viewed with disdain and worry by the American powers; the *Gazette* became the city's first English-language

newspaper in 1823 and editorialized the following year: "As New Orleans has been famous for keeping out enemies of our republic, we cannot conceive why it should permit a gate for the introduction of this rotten relic of European degeneracy." Protestant Anglo-America, having won a great battle against the British a mere decade earlier in New Orleans, solemnly went about the business of securing its Manifest Destiny. However, the Creoles of Louisiana possessed none of the American passions for revolution, democracy, or progress; their colonial status may have ended with the Purchase, but Creole cultural allegiances remained unabashedly French and Catholic, and the relics of Europe were held dear.

An insatiable appetite for music and parades permeated nineteenth-century New Orleans. Parades with marching bands were frequently staged by the city's numerous benevolent societies, fire companies, and military organizations; funeral processions were already an established custom when Benjamin Latrobe, writing in *Appearance of New Orleans in 1819*, called them "peculiar alone to New Orleans among American cities." Latrobe also noted, "As it

is now the Carnival, every evening is closed with a ball, a play, or a concert.”

The early Creole Carnival was a season of festivities and masquerades that began every year on Twelfth Night, the Feast of Epiphany, and culminated with numerous masked balls, public and private, on Mardi Gras night. There was little gaiety and no Mardi Gras in the uptown American sector, but on Mardi Gras the streets of the old Creole city were transformed into a magical, carefree, open-air theater and parade ground. On this final day of Carnival, maskers from every walk of life cavorted with joyous abandon, for the following day was always Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten season of penance and fasting.

Maj. James R. Creecy, writing years later in *Scenes in the South, and Other Miscellaneous Pieces*, recalled the Mardi Gras of 1835: “Men and boys, women and girls, bond and free, white and black, yellow and brown, exert themselves to invent and appear in grotesque, quizzical, diabolical, horrible, strange masks and disguises. Human bodies are seen with heads of beasts and birds, beasts and birds with human heads; demi-beasts, demi-fishes, snakes heads and bodies with arms of apes; man-bats from the moon; mermaids; satyrs, beggars, monks, and robbers parade and march on foot, on horseback, in wagons, carts, coaches . . . in rich profusion up and down the streets, wildly shouting, singing, laughing, drumming, fiddling, fifeing, and all throwing flour broadcast as they wend their reckless way.”

The year 1837 brought the first mention of a Mardi Gras parade by the press, in the new American paper, the *Picayune*. The larger display of the following year was applauded by Creole and American papers. *La Créole* announced, “The whole town doubled up with laughter . . . the beautiful and joyous cavalcade wound its way at full speed. . . . What noise! What hubbub! And what fun.” The *Picayune* declared:

The grand cavalcade which passed through the principal streets was an entertaining sight—being remarkable for numbers, for the splendor of their equipage, and the ludicrous effect which they produced . . . great pains were taken to get up the

affair in proper style. A large number of young gentlemen, principally Creoles of the first respectability, went to no little expense with their preparations. In the procession were several carriages superbly ornamented—personations of knights, cavaliers, heros, demigods, chanticleers, and punchinellos, all mounted. Many of them were dressed in female attire, and acted the lady with no small degree of grace.

The young Creoles who organized these early marches modeled their efforts on the Mardi Gras they had enjoyed as students in Paris, and like the raucous procession of Parisian maskers, the New Orleans parades were noted more for their joie-de-vivre than for organization or artistry. The cavalcade of 1841 was preceded by announcements in the press, and thousands of maskers and spectators lined the streets and crowded the cast-iron balconies to view the “Bedouins.” Louis Fitzgerald Tasistro, an Irish actor and writer, was in the city for Mardi Gras:

There was one remarkable feature connected with the celebration which is strongly characteristic of that love for the embellishments and elegances of life which prevades all the better class of Creoles. This was a procession, composed of between two and three hundred of the first gentlemen of the city, all dressed as Bedouin Arabs, and forming altogether one of the most imposing sights I ever beheld. . . . When Carnival frolics are made subservient to the display of so much taste as was evinced on this occasion, folly is indeed wisdom.

New Orleans was becoming a great seaport and her population had grown from 8,000 at the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 to 145,000 by the mid-1840s. The old Creole sector enjoyed this prosperity, which saw the construction of grand residences, shops, and the stately St. Louis Hotel. But American entrepreneurs controlled most of the city’s commerce, and as their numbers and their fortunes increased, they moved farther uptown, to what became called the Garden District. Unlike the Creole houses, which opened onto the sidewalks, and whose gardens were enclosed in courtyards, the

Garden District mansions were in the American style. Houses were set back far from the street, in the center of large, tree-shaded grounds. Architectural historian James Marston Fitch called this “an attractive hybrid, a kind of Philadelphia suburb in the tropics.” Not many years later, this Garden District would give birth to another hybrid of styles and arts, a creation whose luminosity in Carnival was never surpassed.

From 1841 to 1844, processions of the Bedouins were mounted sporadically, and without prior announcement. In 1845, the parade failed to appear at all, and the Creole press began to write of Mardi Gras as a memory. This observation from *L’Abeille* offers rich insight into the Creole perspective:

Thousands of persons who yesterday had located themselves in the windows, balconies, and upon the sidewalks of the different streets through which the procession of masquers usually pass, were sadly disappointed in the non-appearance. This long established custom, which in the palmy days of the Ancien Regime was wont to be celebrated with grotesque pageantry . . . has, within the last few years, been gradually falling into disuse, not the less so from the abandonment of the old master spirits who led on the merry crowd, than from the lewd and miserable crew, who, of late years have been permitted to join in the celebration. It is a custom, however, “more honored in the breach than in observance,” and we hope it will be henceforth regarded with “the things that were.”

During the closing years of the 1840s and the early 1850s Mardi Gras was plagued by foul weather and reckless mischief. Boys had tossed flour in the streets for many years on unsuspecting maskers, on one another, and on those unmasked and wearing their everyday clothes. When the flour was replaced by quicklime, dust, and an occasional brick, there were numerous injuries. Each year brought fewer maskers to the streets, and by the midcentury, both Creole and American papers lamented the death of Mardi Gras.

The *Daily Delta* in 1851 commented:

We can remember when the processions used to

extend several squares, and embraced a great multitude and variety of oddities, all duly marshaled and commanded. But alas! the world grows everyday more practical, less sportive and imaginative—and more indifferent to the customs and institutions of the past. Mardi Gras, with all its laughter-moving tomfooleries, must go the way of all our other institutions, and reposing on its past glory, may content itself with sneering at the hard realities of the present locomotive, telegraphic age.

Creole masquerades and private entertainments continued, but the continuing onslaught of flour and lime marked the end of public festivities. In his landmark Carnival history, *The Mistick Krewe*, Perry Young described the cultural alchemy that was about to take place: “1856 was the last year that the Creoles could call Mardi Gras peculiarly their own. Their press had disclaimed it, and in the following year the Saxons assumed leadership and, with organization, persistence, and good weather, brought the festival to a degree of perfection which the Creole soon acknowledged with pride, and in which his spirit and genius have remained predominant.”

Mardi Gras morning of 1857 was calm and relatively free of festivities, but evening brought crowds and carriage loads of revelers to the streets, many of them to satisfy the curiosity stirred by press reports of a mysterious new parade and the Mistick Krewe of Comus. Though the sky was studded with stars, the uptown streets were in darkness. “Suddenly, as if by magic, music sounded, torches were ablaze, and the whole assembly, Krewe and all, seemed to have emerged from the bowels of the earth.” Amid a marching horde of masked and costumed devils rolled the first two floats of scenic pageantry in New Orleans. Preceded by brass bands and surrounded by a ring of torches, the first float carried the masked god, Comus, greeting spectators with his golden cup. The second car carried Satan, “high on a hill, far blazing as a mount, with pyramids and towers from diamond quarries hewn, and rocks of gold, the palace of great Lucifer.”

New Orleans, with her passions for theater and parades, was stunned. This first torch-lit procession

of the Mistick Krewe of Comus was hailed as “a revolution in street pageantry, a revelation in artistic effects.” Comus introduced spectacle to the streets of New Orleans, and Carnival was forever changed. Comus would not only reappear every Mardi Gras night; he would do so amid the flames and smoking flares of moving theater, and each year he would present new visions to astonish a population long nourished on masquerades, parades, and stagecraft. With the advent of the Mistick Krewe of Comus, the festivities of Mardi Gras were closed with public pomp—with mystery, artistry, and ritual splendor.

Comus paraded for five years, from 1857 to 1861, with a series of triumphs that included “The Classic Pantheon” (1858), “The English Holidays” (1859), and “The Four Ages of Life” (1861). During the Civil War, Mardi Gras was not celebrated, and beginning in 1862 Comus did not appear for four years. In 1866, only days before Mardi Gras, the press announced that Comus would return “with his sacred mysteries.” In those tumultuous years of war, followed by the ongoing military occupation of Reconstruction, New Orleans began her adjustment to reduced circumstances of wealth and position. It was during this period that Carnival ceased to be merely a beloved festival, and became a counter-kingdom, an otherworldly empire in which the worldly old city still reigned.

The year 1870 brought the first appearance of the Twelfth Night Revelers and the beginning of the Golden Age of Mardi Gras: Rex, king of Carnival, made his first appearance in 1872, and was soon followed by the Knights of Momus (1872), the Phunny Phorty Phellows (1878), and the Krewe of Proteus (1882). From 1870 until the onset of the Great Depression in 1930, this Golden Age of Mardi Gras counted hundreds of pageants with thousands of the shimmering papier-mâché apparitions known as floats. Those fabulous images and the artists who created them are the subjects of this book.

Comus, Rex, Momus, and Proteus are names long familiar and beloved in New Orleans, and several histories of these venerable and highly secretive

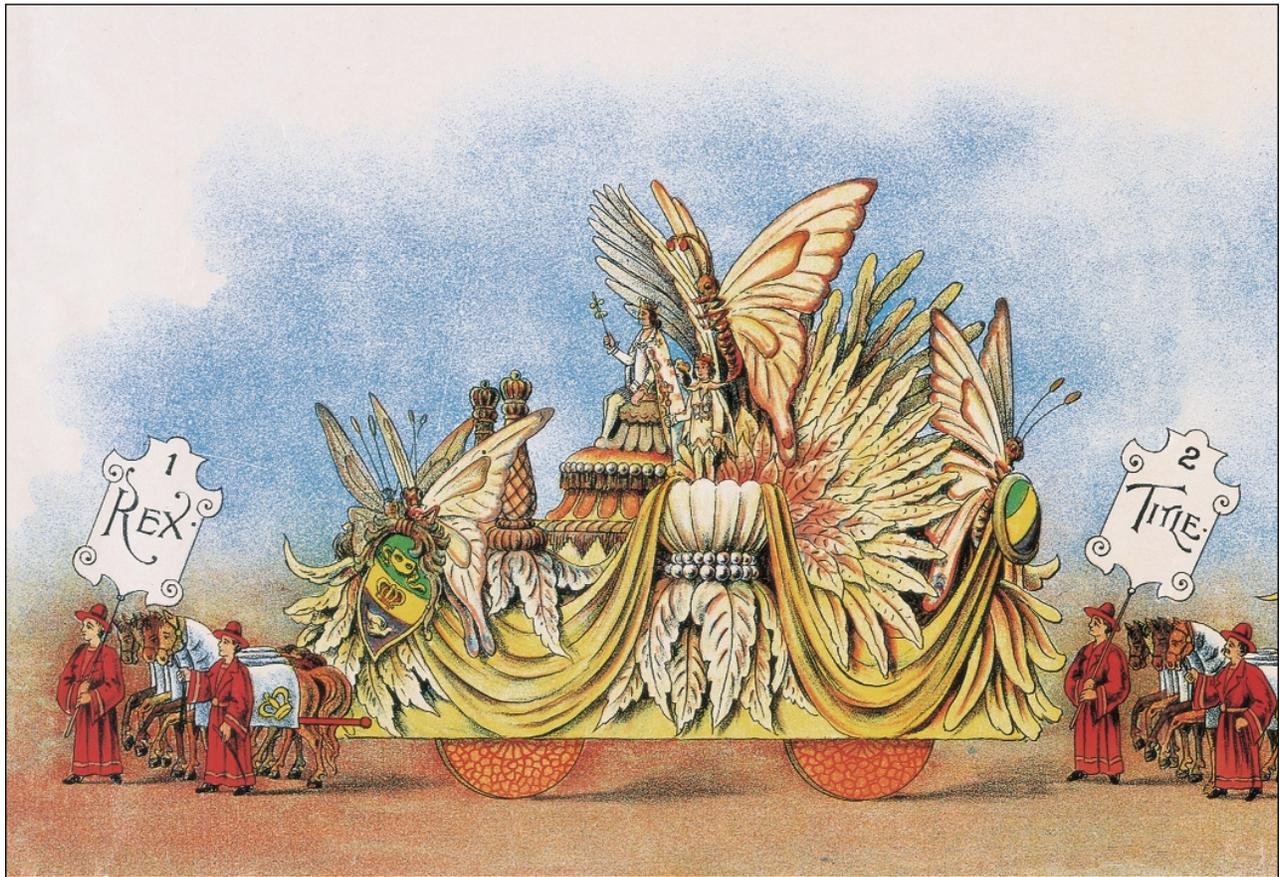
old-line krewes have been compiled. Their lavish balls could be attended only by those fortunate enough to have received invitations, but their processions of floats, lights, and music could be viewed by anyone who cared to, and vast crowds lined the city’s streets. What they saw during this Golden Age was ebullient public art of the highest rank, a series of displays acclaimed then as the finest, most brilliant in the world. The artists and builders who created those fabled pageants have remained obscure or unknown, their amazing body of work largely forgotten. The surviving watercolor float plates and the chromolithographed Carnival Bulletins (which were also known as Carnival Editions) at first impress one as finely rendered illustrations, and many of them invoke comparisons to the work of artists such as Tenniel, Granville, or Wyeth. These Mardi Gras masterworks, however, were not illustrations—they were designs for the rolling theatrical architecture of the evanescent pageants, and there is ample evidence they were built and decorated with great accuracy and attention to detail.

The float chassis were wooden caissons and wagons with steel-rimmed wooden wheels; at the front of each float were two chains that hooked into the harnesses of mule teams. The animals were caparisoned from head to hoof in white robes, as horses had been dressed in the days of chivalry, and they were led by robed and cowled attendants. The floats were drawn at perfect pace for phantom cargo, moving through streets paved with large stones that once had served as ballast. Richly costumed krewe members, their faces hidden behind hollow-eyed masks, rode on the float stage decks; above them rose temples, castles, bowers, clouds, flames, or waves—whatever the subject demanded, all made of papier-mâché, lavishly decorated, and touched with swirls of gold and silver leaf. As the floats rolled, everything on them swayed and quivered with otherworldly grace and strangeness; they would *appear*, emerging through glowing fogs that billowed from acrid, smoking calcium flares. The incomparable lights were reflected from polished, rectangular metal plates atop torches called “flambeaux,” which were borne aloft by bands of robed

and hooded Negroes—these ceremonial fires ringed every float, bathing them in clouds of intoxicating, pulsing magic.

The processions of Carnival were belated messengers of the baroque world, where order in the secular realm and ecstasies of the religious were revealed in theaters of spectacle, pageantry, and

pyrotechnics. The architecture of the floats, like baroque palaces and altars, overwhelmed the viewer with wonder, to which was added a panoply of glorious effects they alone could summon. To revel in their trappings was to abandon one's sense of self, time, or place—to experience the transforming power of art in a festive exaltation of the senses.



Bror Anders Wikstrom, "Rex, No. 1 Car," chromolithograph of float design for Rex pageant, 1910: "The Freaks of Fable."

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Charles Briton, "Iguana," watercolor design for papier-mâché walking figure in Comus pageant, 1873: "The Missing Links to Darwin's Origin of Species."