

The Origins of Carnival

Around 600 AD, Pope Gregory I introduced a 40-day period of fasting before Easter, intended to commemorate the time Jesus Christ spent in the desert. According to this regulation, Lent began on the Tuesday after the sixth Sunday before Easter ("Invocavit" or "Dominica Quadragesima," also known in German as "Funkensonntag").

In Germany, the word "**Karneval**" is primarily associated with the Rhineland carnival (mainly the Cologne and Düsseldorf carnivals; in southern Germany, the term is "Fasching" or "Fastnacht"). The origin of the term "Karneval" is not entirely clear.

Derivations point to:

- Middle Latin: *carnelevale* (-levare) the "removal of meat" preceding Lent;
- Latin: *carne valé* the farewell cry "Farewell, meat!".
- In the 19th century, the term was also traced back to the Roman, pre-Christian Latin *carrus navalis*, a "ship cart" a ship on wheels that was paraded through the streets during annual processions marking the resumption of shipping. The tradition of the Ship of Fools is said to have originated from this. However, research has shown that the word *carrus navalis* does not exist in *Roman* Latin.
- Since the Middle Ages, the Ship of Fools has been a common metaphor for a society that indulges solely in its own well-being, eating and drinking to excess, and showing a strong aversion to intellectual effort. Seen in this light, Carnival is a state of exception that brings joy and permits madness. It is, however, temporary and serves as a reminder of the approaching Lenten season.

The painting by Lucas van Valckenborch from 1595 (Source: catalogue "[The Little Ice Age – Dutch Landscape Painting in the 17th Century](#)", Painting Gallery Berlin, 2001) alludes to Carnival: the fish market hints at the winter zodiac sign of Pisces (Feb. 19 – Mar. 20). However, this is also the time when the ice on the major rivers melts and shipping can resume. The large quantities of fish at the market stall and the meat in the ladies' baskets are allegorical references to a life of abundance (meat); yet they also herald the beginning of Lent (fish) and call for self-reflection.

(F. Ossing, Contribution to Art Education, Finow Elementary School SESB, Berlin, 2005)



Lucas van Valckenborch: „Winter“ (1595, Privatbesitz)

(Quelle: Katalog „Die Kleine Eiszeit – Holländische Landschaftsmalerei im 17. Jahrhundert“, Gemäldegalerie Berlin, 2001)