

PANNEBAKKER FAMILY NEWS



NEWSLETTER OF THE PANNEBAKKER FAMILY ASSOCIATION

Plague Doctor Costumes



Today, with the coronavirus now officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization, images of hazmat suits and medical professionals in full-body scrubs and surgical masks are flooding the news. The sight of so many in these outfits makes many of us more than a little anxious — but we *do* recognize them as effective attire for limiting the spread of disease. Indeed, there’s now a global surgical mask shortage because of the number of people outside the medical profession who’ve purchased these items.

In the seventeenth century, during the epidemics of bubonic plague that swept western Europe, plague doctors (who exclusively treated the infected) took to wearing a very different kind of costume to protect them from the miasma, or “bad air”, then believed to carry disease. This fanciful-looking costume typically consisted of a head-to-toe leather or wax-canvas garment; large crystal glasses; and a long snout or bird beak, containing aromatic spices (such as camphor, mint, cloves, and myrrh), dried flowers (such as roses or carnations), or a vinegar sponge. The strong smells of these items — sometimes set aflame for added advantage — were meant to combat the contagious miasma that the costume itself could not protect against.

Plague doctors also carried a “wand with which to issue instructions”, such as ordering disease-stricken houses filled with spiders or toads “to absorb the air” and commanding the infected to inhale “bottled wind” or take urine baths, purgatives, or stimulants. These same wands were used to take a patient’s pulse, to remove his clothing, and also to ward off the infected when they came too close. (A potent tool for social distancing if ever there was one!)

In fact, however strange this early-modern hazmat suit looks, it was not entirely useless. The ankle-length gown and herb-filled beak designed to fight off harmful miasmata would also have offered *some* protection against germs.

The invention of the plague doctor costume, complete with beaked mask, is credited to the French physician Charles de Lorme (1584–1678), who’s thought to have developed it in 1619. By 1636, it had proved popular enough that it was worn as far away as Nijmegen (in the east of the present-day Netherlands); but it became ensconced in European culture once and for all during the Plague of 1656,

PANNEBAKKER FAMILY NEWS

which killed nearly half a million people in Rome and Naples. Plague doctors at this time were *required* — by the contracts they signed with municipal councils — to wear the costume. The appearance of one of these human-sized birds on a doorstep could only mean that death was near.



Photograph of 17th-century plague doctor mask from Austria or Germany on display in Berlin's Deutsches Historisches Museum.

As the costume came to be adopted by plague doctors throughout western Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it more and more entered the collective imagination. Plague doctors were such a common sight in Venice, their costume was taken up as a Carnival outfit, effectively incorporating this symbol of mortality into the annual celebration of life.

One of the most intriguing of the plague doctor images found is a painted coat of arms belonging to Theodore Zwinger III (1658–1724), a Swiss doctor and descendant of Theodore Zwinger I (1533–1588), the Swiss doctor and humanist whose *Theatrum Humanae Vitae* is considered, the historian Helmut Zedelmaier writes, “perhaps the most comprehensive collection of knowledge to be compiled by a single individual in the early modern period”. The painting depicts a plague doctor on one side of a blazon and a man in a ruff on the other — perhaps representing both the medical and the scholarly traditions of the Zwinger clan? *Some* sort of duality is being represented, at any rate — and the extraordinarily avian plague doctor (even his eyes look birdlike!) lends something mysterious to the picture.



PANNEBAKKER FAMILY NEWS

Perhaps even more intriguing is a photograph taken on Poveglia, a tiny Venetian island which, for more than a century from 1793, acted as a plague quarantine station (and eventual grave) for an estimated 160,000 people. According to Theodor Weyl's *On the History of Social Hygiene* (1904) — where it was originally printed — the photo shows one man wearing a vintage plague mask (found on the island in 1889) while the other holds a kind of “waffle iron” used in the disinfection of a cache of letters (also found on the island). This raises the question: is the man on the right actually trying to protect himself by donning this centuries-old mask (the smells of which can only be imagined)? Or is it all staged — done in fun — a demonstration of antiquarian findings? One can't help but wonder.



A Plague Doctor, from Jean-Jacques Manget, *Traité de la peste* (1721)

PANNEBAKKER FAMILY NEWS



Doctor in plague costume during the plague epidemic of 1720 in Marseille. Drawing first published in 1826 in the *Guide sanitaire des gouvernements européens* by Louis-Joseph-Marie Robert.



Jan van Grevenbroeck (1731-1807), Venetian doctor during the time of the plague. Pen, ink and watercolour on paper. Museo Correr, Venice.

PANNEBAKKER FAMILY NEWS

If you would like to make your own Plague Doctor Mask to wear to the super market, or for a walk around your neighborhood, there are instructions on the Internet. Just type in, "plague doctor mask". There is also a You Tube video. You can find almost anything on the Internet, which is a bit scary!

I, personally, will be sticking to my dust mask or the mask I made out of an old handkerchief. Apparently, it's okay these days to walk into your bank wearing a mask and gloves, but... I'm sure it won't be long before an actual bank robber gives it a try.

The other day, my wife and I were walking down the sidewalk, and another couple was coming toward us. At about a distance of 50 feet, the other couple stepped into the street and continued past us. Now, if this were any other time, I would have taken offense to this blatant act of snobbery, checked to see if I had indeed used deodorant, or tried to remember how I had offended these nice people, but it was just a case of social distancing. We smiled, waved and wished them good health.

We here at *Pannebakker Family Association Central*, also known as Bruce's house, wish all of you good health, ample toilet paper and the stamina to get through these trying times, especially if you're home schooling you children.

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Pannebakker Family Association



The Pannebakker Family Association is an outgrowth of the family reunion held at Pennypacker Mills, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania on July 2-4, 1999. The reunion celebrated the 300th year wedding anniversary of Hendrick Pannebecker and Eve Umstat, in Germantown, Pennsylvania in the year 1699. In the words of the Steering Committee of the reunion, "We hope that the 1999 Pfannebecker-Umstat Reunion will lead to the growth of a family association, which will provide a forum for conversation, collection and preservation of information, and a sense of lasting community among the heirs of this rich cultural heritage."