

Hey, Where's The Monkey?

Angelo Rulli

So this tipsy organ grinder is rambling along and comes upon a group of picnickers in the park. One of the fellows there is roasting a pig over an open fire and says to the grinder, "Hey, your organ's out of tune." Without missing a beat, the grinder replies, "Yah, well at least my monkey's not on fire!"

There is but one animal associated with organ grinders, at least in the minds of Americans familiar with this character. Seems every child somehow reads or learns of the inseparable relationship between the grinder and his monkey. The connection makes sense, from a business point of view. Because the monkey is the only animal with opposable thumbs, it's possible to hold a cup. This was not a big deal in itself, but oh, what a difference it makes when the monkey's primary job was to collect coins for his master. Of course, we also know that monkeys were very capable entertainers, able to learn many tricks and antics; among the most interesting was when the monkey identified and tossed back anything smaller than a quarter! Literature of the day indicates that a well-trained monkey was able to collect upwards of \$5 per day in 1900. Considering the lunch-bucket worker of the day earned 50 cents to \$1.00 a day, it's no wonder grinders sought to have a good monkey.



Figure 1. A hand-carved grinder figure (with dog) made by ANRI.

Though the association between monkeys and grinders is constant, the truth is that few grinders had monkeys at all. Animals of any kind were and are difficult, requiring attention, food, shelter, etc., so it's not a surprise that most grinders chose not to have an animal at all.

Grinders who wished to be successful in making money more often than not chose a monkey for the reasons stated above. However, one can find, depicted in the organ grinder art of today, several examples of grinders who chose animals other than a monkey. Let's examine a few here.

The first of our sample grinders is one of the best known, if not the most popular, of the contemporary grinders available. This piece has been made by ANRI of Santa Christina, Italy, since the late 1970s (**Figure 1**). Hand-carved and standing about 8" tall, it serves as one of the few wooden grinders and clearly among the most attractive available to collectors. The detail of the craftsmanship is clearly evident and the smooth surface almost belies that it's made of wood. Of particular note is the animal accompanying the grinder—a dog. Though it's easy to associate only the monkey with grinders, it's true that the most common pet to accompany a grinder was, in fact, a dog. This would be so for obvious reasons. Of particular interest also is the artwork on the organ front. Though not easily seen in the photo, the artist carved the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem on the night of the Nativity. Thus also making this a Christmas collectible.

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The next piece is a classic portraying the Italian organ grinder scene (**Figure 2**). Historically, grinders in Italy were roaming gypsies, or in the language, "Zingere." For this reason, grinders in the homeland were not and are not seen in a positive light. The woman grinder here is typical. With her tattered dress, she is the perfect stereotype. As a gypsy, her primary goal was to make money as a fortune teller, carrying on generations of legend and lore. In order to draw a large crowd to perform her soothsayer role, she typically had a small crank organ. Ah, but look closer and we see, not a monkey at all, but a parrot! For this was the pet of choice in Italy. Look closer yet and we see the words "O Fortuna" on the paper fortune of the day. It left to the parrot to select, objectively, of course, a fortune from the dish on top of the organ. This piece is of genuine Capodimonte porcelain from the legendary workshops near Naples, Italy. She stands 11" tall and is magnificent in her detail and historical accuracy.



Figure 2. A gypsy organ grinder(ess) with parrot in Capodimonte porcelain.

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Our next example is very unique. Though created and crafted in Italy, this piece shows none of the classic Italian porcelain craftsmanship. Instead, here we see a very modern interpretation, with very slender, almost stick-like figures near a very large street organ (**Figure 3**). The piece typifies the importance of grinders in the culture as this piece is but 20 years old. The detail here is magnificent, with special emphasis on the separated, slender fingers and facial details. Once again we see the

familiar dog. The piece measures about 12" wide and 12" tall. Painted in soft pastels, it's one of the most unusual grinders to grace the author's collection.

Now comes a masterpiece. The Capodimonte Italian style was never more exemplified than by the master Gappe, who more than any artist of the Cappodimonte school brought this art form to its standing the world of porcelain art (**Figure 4**). This figure of the old man has perhaps been copied and duplicated more than any other grinder. The sheer delight of this art is seen in the popularity of such pieces. Though never inexpensive, one can expect to pay upwards of \$1,000 for a signed Gappe piece. Standing 12" tall, this is the best of the best and highly desirable. Note, the animal is a dog again this time!



Figure 3. A modern representation of an organ grinder. The associated animal in this case is a dog.

Lastly, we see a very small grinder, about 4" tall, made in Poland, and again featuring.... a parrot (**Figure 5**). This brightly-colored grinder depicts the character of the grinder in all his glory. Note the heart on the organ front, typifying the best of what we like to think of the grinder.

The next time you're asked, "Where's the monkey?" perhaps you will remember how seldom the monkey ever appeared with a grinder. More importantly, it's not about the monkey, or any other animal. It's about the music!



Figure 4. A grinder made by Gappe, a master of the Capodimonte Italian Style. And, the animal is a dog (with hat).

To take this a step further, the concept of organ grinding, while important to us modern-day grinders, was hardly pleasant or romantic to those shackled with this humbling way to make a living. Those who did the cranking for the 50 years before and after the turn of the 20th century were generally scorned by society and gladly took comfort with their puppy dogs or other creature that may have brought a semblance of companionship. Naturally, dogs were the most popular animal to offer such partnership. It's important to recall that many grinders plied their

trade in rural areas, making a pet companion ever more important.

The grinder was but one of scores of people who made their livelihood on the streets. Though he provided music, so did the troubadour of the day. Mostly, those who were on the streets offered a service of some sort: knife sharpeners, fruit peddlers, scrap/junk collectors, popcorn and other food vendors, newspapers, etc., etc., etc. Then there were those who went house to house in one fashion or another: salesmen of every product known, ice (for the ice-a-box), coal, oil, deliveries from the dry goods store, etc., etc.

The hustle and bustle of the streets was something that defined cities of that era. Grinders were one of the chorus of sounds on the streets. Their image now burned into the stereotype and image of the day, along with that of the ubiquitous, playful, ornery, and oh so helpful, monkey.



Figure 5. A small grinder which was made in Poland and features a parrot.

[Editor's comment: while researching mechanical music in films and movies for a recent presentation at the annual MBSI meeting one movie, "Heidi" stands out in relation to the preceding article. The organ grinder goes up to the current caretaker of Heidi and asks the butler "Where-a is my-a monkey?" at which time the butler states "There is no monkey—this is not the zoo!"]

The author has enjoyed careers as editor, professional organ grinder, circus performer and now Realtor. He has been collecting and researching organ-grinder related memorabilia for over 25 years