

The Victorian Fan – A Socially acceptable flirting Tool

By Judy Haynes

Hand-held fans can be traced thousands of years back when it was a simple implement to use for cooling one's body or to clear the air of insects. The hand-held fan is believed to have originated around 2000 B.C. and archaeologists have determined that in later years, it became a symbol of status and power. The pharaoh would have his servants or slave waving a large piece of cloth, leaves, palm branches, known as *lotiform* and *palmiform*, imitating the leaf of the blue lotus or the frond of the date palm. The ancient Egyptian fan was referred to as a *shuwt*, which technically means shade or to push forward hence to move air back and forth to create a pleasant breeze on a hot day. As with many functional goods, designs, color and fabric changed a simple useful item to a status symbol. Hand held fans of royalty and wealthy classes were made of expensive textiles of silk, feathers, lace, and specialty goods, attached to a stick, also known as the guard or monture. The monture was made of a solid such as ivory, wood, horn, tortoise shell, or bone and could be decorated with gold or inlaid gems. Fans made like this in the earliest days were considered items of luxury. Before the folding fan was created, fans were fixed and open as one piece, composed of large feathers or a large circle cut of wood and decorated with painted scenes. One of the most unique purposes for hand held fans in ancient times was with the aristocratic Japanese warriors, the Samurai, who carried fans of a sturdier material to ward off arrows and to use to signal to their troops.

The Chinese were importing to Europe huge quantities of exotic fans in the 17th century and both China and Japan claimed to be the first or originators who invented the folding fan that we know as the Victorian fan today. It is composed of a set of thin spaced sticks called ribs (about 15 -20) placed an inch or so apart, made of a wood, ivory, or a solid material, which held a pleated textile, typically silk, tulle, lace, paper or other light weight product, that was attached with glue or other means to each rib and was then held together at the base with a rivet thus creating the fan that could be opened or closed as each pleat was folded one on top of another.

By Victorian times, the 1860s and later, a beautifully decorated hand-held fan was a fashion accessory that no well-dressed lady would be without when outfitted for a ball or special dance. Her fan might be hand painted and artistically designed. Some artists even signed their fans. The ones in our collection, donated by Marian Brigham Newell, had been used by used by Nancy E. Falby (1838-1924) a resident of Boylston, Massachusetts in the late twentieth century. These vintage fans are not signed. One is beige in color with no painted design and is of a delicate textile shaped similar to several feathers. Its ribs



Figure 1 Vintage Victorian Fan
BHSM Object Collection



Figure 2 Vintage Victorian Hand Painted Fan
BHSM Object Collection

appear to be of ivory or bone. The second one has a beige background and is beautifully hand painted with pink dogwood blossoms on thin paper. The ribs on this fan are painted wood.

It wasn't until the early 20th century that the fan declined in use, though in the hotter climates they remained a practical item. In Spain they continued to be used to cool one's face and are also an important part of the flamenco dancer's costume. Since the flamenco is an important dancing art form representing a way of interpreting life for the

Spanish, the fan remained vital to its transmission. In churches, a fan was used to keep insects away from the consecrated bread and wine, and this practice is said to still be in use in the Eastern Orthodox and Ethiopian churches, but has died out in western sects.

Ladies and men of the Victorian era created a most socially acceptable way to flirt and communicate discreetly with the fan. It was a language of love used in a special way between two people. The language art of the fan was taught as a special way to converse, similar to how gloves and parasols were carried, items that also sent signals. Messages depended on how each of these items were held, dropped or worn. There are many meanings in the fan language dependent on how one held a fan, and where and how it was held. Messages conveyed depended on which hand held the fan, whether it was open or closed. Some were:

- ❖ Carry it in your left hand, open, equaled “Come and talk to me.”
- ❖ Wave your fan slowly indicated “I am married”
- ❖ Fanning quickly says “I am engaged or it could be used to signal to your loved one that, “I love you so much.”
- ❖ If one dropped the fan, it meant you could be friends
- ❖ If you placed the fan on your heart, it meant “I Love you.”
- ❖ If one touched to the right cheek this, too, signaled ‘yes’ and love.

There were many more ways to signal one’s intentions. Twirling in the left hand signaled ‘We are watched.’ The fan was not only for romance it continued to have practical uses, too, such as the fanning oneself for comfort and cooling, hiding a blush, keeping the flies and insects away. One could use it to keep from exposing your face to too much sun or fire from the fireplace. A tanned face was not considered the mark of an elegant lady during 17th and 18th centuries. A tanned skin would imply you are a peasant or outdoor farm worker, not a lady of leisure.

Fans were purchased as gifts by gentlemen wishing to bestow a thing of both practical use and beauty to the ladies in his life and family. Perhaps as Valentine’s Day approaches you might find a lovely fan for a special person. When we are open again, we hope you will come to see the many beautiful items we have in our collection.

Acknowledgements:

[Angelpig.net/Victorian/fan language/html](http://Angelpig.net/Victorian/fan%20language/html)

Fans and Sunshades in Ancient Egypt, Jimmy Dunn <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/fans.htm>

Editor, Nancy Filgate, Director, Boylston Historical Society

Google: Victorian fans

[https:// www. wallswithstories.com/ancient/hand-fans-a-functional-and-decorative- ancient-art.ht ml](https://www.wallswithstories.com/ancient/hand-fans-a-functional-and-decorative-ancient-art.html)

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Wikipedia.org