

FANS. THE RESTORATION OF AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FAN MADE OF PAPER AND IVORY SPOKES

Abstract: With a history of over 5,000 years, fans – these frail objects, whether foldable or not – are still used today especially to protect us from heat. They are used particularly by women, being considered not just functional objects, but also fashion accessories.

A painted fan dating from the second half of the 18th century, belonging to the collections of the old Transylvanian Museum, made of paper and featuring an ivory structure, in a poor state of preservation, has been restored and returned to the museum and exhibition heritage.

Keywords: fan, degradation, restoration, conservation, consolidation.

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Fans have lately become highly stylish accessories, used increasingly more often by women at various cocktails or social events. Originally, they were very useful instruments, meant to cool the air around those who used them, but in time they became a refined and elegant, classic and nonconformist accessory, a genuine piece of jewellery. There is evidence attesting the fact that fans were discovered and first used in Egypt, at the time of the Pharaohs, when they were considered to be sacred, since they were used in various religious rituals. These fans were made of the rarest and most expensive diamonds and jewels. The most frequent were large fans, made of herbs and leaves,² used by the servants to protect their masters from the scorching heat outside.

With a history of over 5,000 years, fans – these frail objects, whether foldable or not – are still used today especially to protect us from heat. They are used particularly by women, being considered not just functional objects, but also fashion accessories. A fan is an accessory used to produce a current of air that is meant to cool off the one using it. Along time, the spikes of fans have been made of bone, wood, bamboo or plastic, bound together with a thin material such as paper, silk, lace or veil and ornamented with various accessories, such as ostrich or peacock feathers, sequins or jewels.

Opinions are divided when it comes to the origins of fans. Archaeological ruins and ancient texts suggest that fans were used in Ancient Greece at least in as early as the 4th century BC, when they were known as “rhipis.” In the beginning, fans could

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² Elena-Andreea Badica, BA dissertation “Evantaiul. Istoria obiectului în durata lungă și reprezentările lui în diverse arte” (Fans. The History of this Artefact in the Long Durée and its Representations in Different Arts), supervisor: Lecturer Cristina Bogdan, PhD; defended in June 2010, World and Comparative Literature Department, Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest, p. 11.

not be folded: they had a rigid shape and the most ancient testimony of the existence of such an object has been found in Egyptian tombs. Fans were, back then, a symbol of the royalty, specific to certain religious ceremonies.

Moreover, in the tombs of the ancient Pharaohs there have been found fans that slaves used for keeping their masters cool. The Egyptians' fans were made of large palm tree leaves or feathers, to which a long tail was attached. Some fans made of gold trimmed with ostrich plumes have been discovered in the tomb of Tutankhamun, the "child Pharaoh."

The first fans created by the Romans were made of wood. The Chinese used paper and feathers, while the Greeks used nothing but a piece of canvas stretched over a frame.

The oldest Chinese fan that survives to this day dates from the 2nd century BC. It is made of bamboo. For the Chinese, fans were markers of their owners' high social status and wearing them was a privilege. During the Song Dynasty, famous artists were employed to paint fans. The Chinese dance of the fan appeared in the 7th century.

In the 6th century, the Japanese invented the folded fan, called *sensu*. The main sources of inspiration were the wings of a bat that folds its wings.

Between the Japanese and the Chinese, there was a competition in this regard, each of these two peoples considering that they had invented the folding fan. Although the initial goal of fans was as practical as possible, in time women began to use it as an embellishing item of their attire, to greet or even to flirt with their lovers. Once they reached Europe, fans became very modern fashion accessories, but also a symbol of social status. In Japan, fans were part of the traditional costume and the choreography of specific dances.

During the Middle Ages, fans were absent from Europe. The oldest fan of Christian Europe was a ceremonial fan called "flabellum," dating from the 6th century. Hand-held fans were reintroduced in Europe in the 13th and 14th centuries and were brought by the crusaders knights from the Middle East. In the 15th century, Portuguese traders brought fans from China and Japan and these objects become very popular, given the fact that in Spain, Flamenco dancers use fans during their performances.

In Spain, for example, the earliest references to fans were in the "Chronicle" of Pedro IV of Aragon (14th century), which details the custom whereby a noble had to "wear" a fan in the presence of the king. In Italy, it appears that the first form of folding fans appeared around the year 1500; fans thereafter spread tremendously, being accepted as an integral part of social life and fashion. Before long, the two countries came to be the main producers of fans throughout the European West, being dethroned, about two-three decades later, by France.

France took over, adapted, modified, reinvented and maintained various fan shapes, elevating fans to the rank of a fashion and obsession in the 16th-18th centuries (the apogee being reached in the mid-18th century). When the Baroque was flourishing in France, fans began to be adorned thoroughly, being designed with increasingly unconventional shapes and materials. Catherine de Médicis, arriving at

the Court of Versailles in 1553, in order to marry, did not forget to put in her luggage as many fans as possible. She kept the most exquisite for herself and she gave the rest to others as gifts. In fact, she remained known in history as a true lover and collector of fans, which she regarded not only as aesthetic objects, but also as genuine weapons of seduction. Fans played, quite often, the role of well-meaning “ambassadors” with the representatives of the elites. Louis XV offered Marie-Antoinette, Archduchess of Austria, a fan that was studded with jewels, as a gift for her marrying the Dauphin. The Grand Duchess of Russia, Countess of the North, received from Marie-Antoinette, at Versailles, a fan studded with diamonds and a corresponding pair of binoculars, to use them during performances. According to the memoirs of the Marchioness of Créqui, fans had to comply with the rigors of etiquette at the Royal Court. For example, such an unwritten law demanded that the object should not be folded out in front of the queen or the sovereign. Furthermore, a lady from a noble family could not be introduced to the king, queen or the entire court society if not did fulfil some essential conditions: she had to be chaperoned, to wear a dress on top of as wide a crinoline as possible, to wear the most beautiful accessories and expensive jewellery she owned, as well as a fan that was appropriate for the occasion. Those who wanted to really make an impression chose fans with painted scenes or moments of royal life.

In England, the merit of shaping the taste and establishing a preference for fans belonged to Queen Elizabeth I. After her reign, the English – crowned heads or nobles – regarded fans as an essential accessory and adopted and transformed them according to the fashion of the time. Although Great Britain never reached the level of France in terms of the production or consumption of these artefacts, it was among the first countries to set up a guild of fan producers, “The Worshipful Company of Fan Makers,” founded in 1709, which has survived to the present day.

Up until the early 20th century, fans were compulsory accessories in the wardrobe of a lady. The materials they were made of and the precious stone decorations turned them into a symbol of social status, of refinement, and into a symbol of femininity.

In recent years, Europeans have relinquished the use of fans, but Asians continue to wear them – women and men alike – as useful and indispensable accessories. Workshops producing fans can still be found today in Paris, in London, but also in Spain, where particularly traditional Flamenco fans are produced.

The language of fans

This delicate object could become the main ally of women and young girls in sending a secret message to their suitors, lovers or even their spouses. It is assumed that such an encoded language might have been invented in the late 17th century in France, the country which had propelled this accessory fashion throughout Europe. Aside from a few passages in fiction or memoirs, the first definite mention of the existence and widespread dissemination of this non-verbal language dates back to 1787, when William Cock published, in London, “The Original Fanalogy,” a guide which could help women convey a whole sentence through the single movement of a

fan. Thus, a fan kept wide open meant “Wait for me!”; a closed fan, positioned near the right eye, meant “When can I see you?”; spreading out the fan in the right hand – “I love someone else; twisting the fan in the left hand – “We are being spied on.” When ladies slowly moved their fans, it meant that they were married, and when the gesture was performed at a fast pace, it meant that were engaged, etc. Fanatics also invented a second code in the next century, much more complicated and harder to follow than that proposed by Cock, involving the alphabet, divided into five sections, each section corresponding to a movement of the fan. Many other “games” involving a fan generated genuine non-verbal conversations between couples, innocent statements or confessions of love. However, no matter how charming this gestural language might have been for the women and young girls in 18th-century Western society, the publication of William Cock’s volume did nothing but spread this practice, providing also the necessary means for its decipherment, which ultimately rendered this type of communication unusable.

The bisexuality of this artefact

Fans did not remain specifically feminine objects. On the contrary, they also meant a lot for men with a high “status.” This custom passed from Italy into France and then into England, where, from the time of Henry VIII until the early nineteenth century, it was used quite frequently. Louis XV encouraged his subjects never to show in public without a fan, considering it to be one of the essential features of his royal gown. A credible source, which clearly indicates the “bisexuality” of this accessory, was J. Addison, one of the Enlightenment philosophers. He presented the “Academy for training people how to use fans in line with the trends of the Court,” an institution intended for both men and women. On the other hand, the Order of Fans, created in 1744 by Queen Luisa Ulrick of Sweden, for the ladies at her court, accepted male members, too, after a few years. Following the model of these courts, Empress Catherine II of Russia ordered her subjects to begin to dress in a feminine style, making use of all the related “ornaments” (including, of course, a fan).

In addition to the desire to be in step with fashion or to be to the liking of the ladies they courted, men had another compelling reason for using the object in question: the olfactory criterion. It is known that bathing was not a common practice in those days, because it was thought that it could cause very serious, incurable diseases. Therefore, these artefacts were impregnated with a scent of the finest quality. Spreading a pleasant scent around, fans rapidly increased their popularity.

Restoring a paper fan with ivory spokes

This paper refers to the restoration of a fan dating from the second half of the 18th century, from the collections of the old Transylvanian Museum,³ made of paper on an ivory support. The fan has a height of 32.5 cm (30.2 cm from the clamping point), a diameter of 60.5 cm and a maximum perimeter length of 87.5 cm. The fan has spokes of ivory, carved and featuring gold leaf inlays. The paper is painted with

³ Inventory register of the National Museum of Transylvanian History.

Oriental salon scenes on the obverse (**Fig. 1**) and with a battle scene on the reverse (**Fig. 2**). The upper edge of the paper has two rows of ornaments, a black vegetal ornament and a band of gold leaf. The vegetal ornament continues on the side edges of the fan. The fan has 24 spokes and 25 folds.

State of conservation.⁴ At the time when the fan was introduced in the laboratory, before it was restored, the following aspects were identified:

Physical-mechanical degradation: decreased physical and mechanical resistance, functional wear, deposits of impurities and dust; multiple cracks on the folding lines (**Fig. 3**); point-size holes (**Fig. 4**); small size tears (**Fig. 5**); holes (**Fig. 6**); mild layer exfoliations; the paper is fragile and desiccated; lack of stationary support material.

Physical-chemical degradation: chromatic changes of the vegetal ornament (band of gold leaf), aging paper and the weakening of its resistance as a result of the action of light and acidity.

Restoration and conservation operations. Dusting by brushing with a soft brush, mechanical cleaning with gum powder, toning the support with a view to rendering the physical and mechanical resistance of the paper support with 2% carboxymethylcellulose solution, free drying on filter sheets, reinforcing the cracks and tears with Japanese veil and 2% carboxymethylcellulose solution, cleaning the spokes with an apolar solvent (petroleum ether, benzene) (**Fig. 8**).

After restoration (**Fig. 9, 10**) a Plexiglas casing was made for holding the fan in the storage room in an open position. For exhibition, the casing has two racks that can be attached to the basis, also made of Plexiglas. The conservation recommendations are: keeping the artefact under the micro-climactic conditions specified under the law in force⁵ and avoiding folding the fan, for this would lead to additional mechanical damage.

The aim of this paper is not only to present an overview of fans, which have returned today into the attention of women, who are wearing them increasingly more often, since they have once again become almost indispensable modern accessories on a hot summer day, but also to draw an alarm call regarding the storage manner and mishandling of heritage objects, which may lead to worsening the “health condition” of these artefacts.

⁴ M. Mihalcu – *Conservarea obiectelor de artă și a monumentelor istorice*. București, Editura Științifică, 1970.

⁵ Law no. 311/2003, law of museums and public collections.

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Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.



Fig. 10.