With modern means

Fans seem to be a thing of the past

By MARY COMBS
Smithsonian News Service

The first fan was probably a leaf, clasped by a human seeking relief on a pre-historic summer day. Today, on the rare occasions when modern air-conditioning fails us, we make do with theater programs, hats, newspapers - and convenient vegetation. The sight of a woman with a fan in her hand is rare indeed. But it was not always so.

"Fans are fascinating," says Lenore Gershuny, curator of "Fanfare," an exhibition at the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C. "They are really very practical devices, yet they have such charm and beauty - and such a romantic history."

The oldest type of fan is the rigid "handscreen" - probably evolved from that prehistoric leaf - made of painted wood or fabric or feathers mounted in a handle. Such fans have been employed through the centuries not only to cool their users in hot weather, but also to shield ladies' faces - and wax-based make-up - from the fire.

The folding fan, with its radiating sticks bearing a "leaf" or "mount" of paper, skin or fabric, came from Europe, also from the East, four centuries later. "Brise" folding fans carry no mount: The sticks, bound together by a ribbon, form the whole fan.

The cockade fan, which dates back to medieval times, is something of a hybrid. It is made of broad overlapping sticks or of pleated paper which can be spread into a full circle; when open, it becomes a round handscreen.

When Pocahontas posed for her portrait in 1616, dressed as the fashionable Virginia planter's wife she was, she held a feather fan of the handscreen type. But in 1675, one John Hall wrote from London to his mother in Ipswich, Conn., in reply to her request for a feathered fan, "none but very grave persons (and of them very few) use it." The folding fan had supplanted the cockade and handscreen as the fan of choice. It was to be an indispensable item in the wardrobes of 12 generations of well-dressed women.

The painted fans from Italy prized in the late 17th and early 18th centuries were not only practical and decorative. "If conversation lagged, you could always talk about the image on the fan," Gershuny says. Fan painters took their themes from paintings and frescoes, and such classical topics as the Rape of the Sabines and Diana and Endymion provided plenty of food for talk.

"By the mid-18th century, a French fan was the thing to have - partly because so many fine Italian craftsmen emigrated to France," Gershuny says. Decoration becomae light, with an emphasis on pastoral scenes, aristocrats at play or romantic subjects.

Europeans also became fascinated with the Orient, although "the Orient they painted was a fantasy," she adds. During the vogue for "chinoiserie" and on through the 19th century, Oriental workmen accommodated the fantasy by creating for export millions of fans and fan sticks - many of them exquisitely beautiful, but bearing no resemblance at all to the fans prized in China and Japan.

Church fans displayed suitable themes from the Bible. "One of the Smithsonian's church fans from the period displays the edifying scene of Abraham sacrificing Isaac - but it also has peep holes in it so the user could look at her neighbors, yet maintain a pious postrue," Gershuny explains. And souvenir fans were common: Many travelers returned from the Grand Tour with fans depicting sights such as the 1789 eruption of Vesuvius.

The 18th century was the heyday of both the painted fan - a perfect marriage of intricately carved and gilded sticks with delicately colored, embroidered and sequined leaf - and of the art of its manipulation. "What daring bard shall e'er attempt to tell, the powers that in this little engine dwell?" asked one poet. "What verse can e'er explain its various partrs, its num'rous uses, motions, charms and arts? Its shake triumphant, its virtuous clap, its angry flutter, and its wanton tap."

Satirist Joseph Addison pronounced in 1711: "Women are armed with fans as men with swords, and sometimes do more execution with them." (The quote remained so timely that Benjamin Disraeli borrowed it more than a century later.) "There is scarce any emotion in the mind which does not produce a suitable agitation in the fan," Addison asserted, and proposed an academy to teach "the exercise of...that modish little machine."

Although Addison's academy was fictitious, no doubt ladies of his day - and their Victorian great-great-granddaughters after them - practiced in front of their mirrors.

In the 18th century, courting couples had little if any privacy. A "language of the fan" made it possible for a lady to deliver a variety of specific messages at a distance. For example, letting the fan rest on her right cheek signified "Yes," on the left cheek, "No." Twirling it in the right hand meant "I love another," while putting the handle to the lips said "Kiss me." There wasn't much secrecy, since the signals were common knowledge. But an enterprising couple could certainly have devised a private code.

If the lovers could sit together, a fan with questions and answers - chiefly romantic - inscribed on the sticks or mount made it possible to carry on a silent conversation simply by pointing to the appropriate phrases: "Do you care?" "Perhaps."

Good quality printed fans became available in the mid-11th century. These were especially suited to commemorative or ephemeral subjects. Whatever was news, from ballooning to the bloody events of the French Revolution, appeared on fans. They bore political cartoons, plans showing who sat in what box at the theater, advertisements, horoscopes and instructions for complicated dances like the quadrille, where a misstep meant disaster.

Puzzle fans were also popular. Opened in the "wrong" direction, these revealed hidden images - sometimes salacious, sometimes politically dangerous. After the French Revolution, a Royalist lady might carry a fan which displayed the motto "Vive le Roi" - but only when open to a specific point - or a plain paper fan which, when held to the light, revealed in the watermark portraits of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.

The Revolution meant the demise of the luxurious, painted fan, but France continued to dictate the fashions. In the very early 19th century, spangled textile and gauze fans had all the glitter - and none of the politically dangerous connotations - of jewels. Fans also dwindled in size as well as importance with the advent of the narrow, high-waisted neo-classical fashions.

"Some were so small - two to four inches long - that they were called 'imperceptibles,' " Gershuny says. Other fans were cunningly designed to fold up or telescope; cockade fans could be slipped into a small handbag or carried unobtrusively. Ivory brise fans, carved or plain, were much in vogue - tiny ball fans with uncarved sticks and a pencil attached served as dance programs.

When fans again became important to fashion in the 1840s, they returned to the Victorians' delight in variety, profusion and eclectic ornament.

Sticks thickened, partly because of heavier design values, partly to support the weight of elaborate textiles and embroidery. Fans also grew in size. By the 1880s, they were often 16 inches long. That meant a spread of nearly a yard when opened. Needless to say, rapid manipulation of such creations was difficult if not impossible. The artistry of 18th-century coquettes was not revived, although the language of the fan was published by one manufacturer for his customers' enjoyment.

Any fabric or material that could be used in a fan was, from exquisite lace to rubber. Painted fans came back in vogue, and period fans were copied and imitated - some with obvious flaws, some so well that, like one fan in the Smithsonian collection, they have been mistaken for authentic 18th-century work.

Godey's Lady's Book provided readers with instructions for creating handscreens, cockade and folding fans. (Those who recycled old sticks left a legacy of confusion to collectors.) One article began: "Firescreens composed of the wings of pheasant or other game are both pretty and useful...The wings must be cut off when the bird is fresh killed."

The Victorian passion for feathers, which decimated the world's bird populations, was not confined to women's hats. Fan makers stole plumage from the exotic peacock and the humble turkey. One folding fan recreates the spread wing of an American eagle; a screen fan displays a hummingbird mounted in its center. The beautiful ostrich feather fans which came into fashion in the 1880s endured to the end of the fan's span.

The first World War dealt a lethal blow to the way of life that held a place for the fan as a work of art, an ornament and a feminine prop. In the 1920s and '30s, fans were designed for practical cooling, for advertising the virtues of such sponsors as Moxie and Pan American Airways, for special evening costume or the exotic dances of Sally Rand. The flapper had plenty to occupy her hands - her cigarette holder, cocktail glass and handbag - and the working girl's fingers were firmly planted on her typewriter. The change in women's lifestyles proved to be permanent. But one can still be intrigued by the fan's beauty and the days when women were mistresses of that "modish little machine."

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