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All is Fan in Love and War

The hidden language of fans

by Heidi Maldonado



The attractive lady in the corner of the crowded cafe makes eye contact, smiles, and deliberately opens her fan. Keeping her gaze fixed, she lets the painted edge of the fan barely touch her face as she slowly fans herself. What is she trying to say? Is she flirting and announcing her interest in furthering the communication? Is she gently letting us down by signaling her married status? Is she sending a warning that others are watching our every move?



Aside from their utilitarian origins, fans have been used throughout history as a medium for secret communication. Since prehistoric times, fans made of feathers or leaves have been featured as status symbols and liturgical aids in artistic representations. The use of these elegant implements as encoding devices began with the invention of the foldable fan in Japan, which legend suggests was inspired by the folding of batwings.

From this 8th-century folding design, it would be a thousand years until fans reached their golden age and the form we most commonly associate with them today: delicate hand-painted pieces of silk sewn onto ivory or mother-of-pearl handles, gently waving in the hands of courtly ladies, conveying romantic messages to potential paramours. Before their use as weapons of flirting, fans acted as deadly weapons in Japan, Korea, and China—and not only as conveyors of hidden messages. During feudal warfare periods in these countries, folding fans were used not only to direct troops, but also as shields, sunshades, swimming aids, and throwing weapons. Even in Europe fans had bellicose connotations: The French-Algerian war of 1827 allegedly started when the king of Algiers broke a fan on the person of the French consul.

It was not until the late 15th century that traders brought folding hand fans to Europe, where they quickly became known as feminine objects of grace and status. From an exotic import, the popularity of the fan in Europe grew and production expanded to the European continent along with increasing cost and higher levels of craftsmanship. Lacquered wood, precious stones and silks, renowned painters and expensive lace made fans objects of art and one-of-a-kind, prized personal possessions. During the 18th century, fans began to be printed and mass marketed. With this wide availability, status no longer was derived simply from the possession of these implements—one had to skillfully use them as well. It was said that a lady could be distinguished from commoners by the movements (and quality) of her fan.

Towards the end of the century their use as ciphers arose; some argue that this use of fans as conveyors of secret messages was started by the manufacturers themselves as a marketing tool. Another possibility is that the secret language of fan movements came out of the increasingly restrictive social roles of the times. While all interactions between men and women occurred under scrutiny of the public eye, the subtle movements of such a





quodidien implement would not attract onlookers attention. Yet it could still convey romantic interests to the attentive observer. Fear of fans' use for communication and flirting quickly followed: English writer Joseph Addison remarked that while "men have the sword, women have the fan, and the fan is probably as effective a weapon." During the reign of Louis XV of France, protocol forbade ladies of the court from opening fans in the presence of the Queen unless it was to use them as trays for offerings to her highness.

Surviving decoding manuals from that time indicate that communicative fan gestures were extremely subtle. They also were associated with different meanings across cultures. In Spanish culture, the slow fanning from our lady of the cafe conveys her married—and unavailable—status. Covering her face may indicate a warning that others are watching. If she is holding the fan with her right hand, it may indicate an affirmative response or reception; with the left, a negative one. Meanwhile, Victorian English fan language says the partial covering of the face while holding the open fan with the left hand conveys a desire to be introduced. Or is she covering her left ear with the open fan? Then it is a plea to keep the communication secret. But wait! Is the fan fully opened or are only some sticks

showing? Then we should count them to reveal the time of the rendezvous.

Understanding fan messages across a crowded room may have been as challenging as deciphering the enemy commanders' fan signal across a battlefield, and it was this need for a shared understanding that made fans so effective as communication tools (which cryptographers today would call symmetric key encryption). As mass production of fans brought increased use by all sectors of society, the possibility of these messages being decoded by other parties increased. Simultaneously, electrical air circulating machines appeared commercially, and the need for fans as utilitarian implements decreased. In the 19th century, less common means of courting eclipsed use of fans as romantic ciphers. In England, another equally subtle imported form of communication took forefront: the language of flowers, which originated in Japan. Today, we may only see fans as an accessory in countries where their popularity never faded, such as Spain and Japan, although their influence on everyday life and worldwide romantic imagination continues.

