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Left: Henry Gillard's "Fan Flirtation" humorously captures the bygone fashion for fans. Below: A handscreen fan. Below left: Fans depicting theatrical scenes and abstract patterns.

probably brought here by Portuguese sailors. Previously, fans had been made from stiffened material, paper or vellum, or feathers attached to a stick. But the folding fan heralded its acceptance as a fashion accessory among royalty and the well-to-do.

Queen Elizabeth I popularised fans at court and a flourishing industry grew up. Different parts of the fan were made by different people – one might be a stick maker, another a fan painter or ribbon weaver. The person who put the various parts together was the official fan maker.

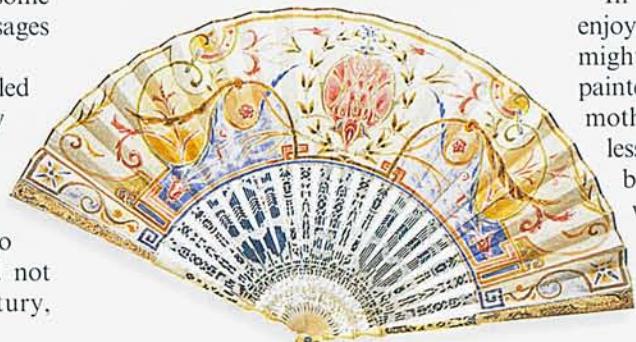
Fan leaves were often made of leather,

Fans & Fancies

Fashionable and flirtatious, the versatile fan has been an invaluable accessory, says **Olivia Temple**.

*I*N 1711, *The Spectator* claimed that "women are armed with Fans as Men with Swords, and sometimes do more Execution with them." Certainly, elegant 18th century ladies fluttered their fans to effect as they peeped flirtatiously over their brims. Like masks, their fans hid laughter or anger, and like some elaborate semaphore sent out messages while my lady remained silent.

The versatile fan has indeed fulfilled a variety of purposes and its history stretches back at least 3,000 years. The earliest remains of fans were found in Egyptian tombs. The Etruscans, Greeks and Chinese also made fans, but the folding fan did not reach Europe until the 15th century,



which was sometimes perfumed, while dark purple vellum allowed painted colours to glow. The leaves were painted in styles according to the fashion and era, and England was the first to produce printed fans.

Some scenes were baroque; some biblical; many were pastoral; yet others were inspired by mythology.

In the 18th and 19th centuries fans enjoyed their heyday. While the wealthy might toy with exquisitely carved and painted fans, and ivory sticks inlaid with mother-of-pearl to catch the light, the less well-off contented themselves with brightly printed fan papers on plain wooden handles.

Also popular was the rigid, "handscreen" fan. This was used indoors as a protection from fireside heat,

and outdoors as a shield against the sun. Complexions were preferred pale!

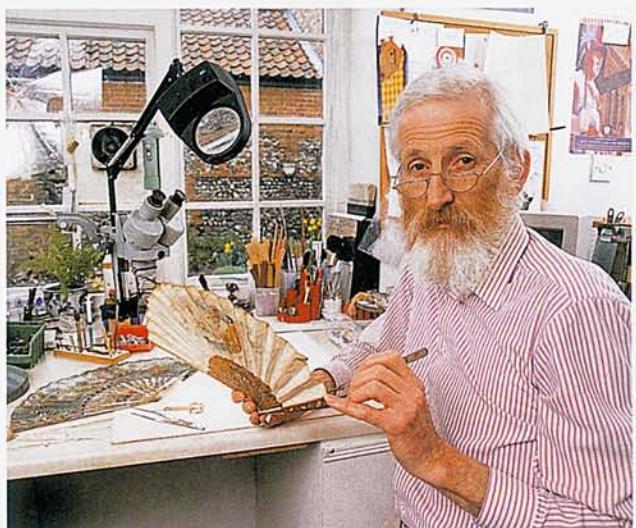
The English garden was among the big influences on 18th century fan decoration, creating a miniature landscape in all its detail. The excellence and precision of English artists was widely renowned, especially their skill and eye for the detail of foliage and flowers.

Love was another popular subject, and brides would carry a fan and be given a fan as a gift. The souvenir trade offered commemorative fans depicting royal weddings, while significant events – a military encounter, the Great Exhibition of 1851 – provided themes which are a fascinating window onto the social history of the period.

With the mechanisation of fan production in the 19th century the quality declined and gradually fans became mass produced, although designers associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement still created some fabulous individual examples.

One professional fan maker in England who still makes fans in the traditional way is John Brooker. He and his wife, Pippa, run a thriving small business at East Rudham in Norfolk, repairing and restoring antique and modern fans, and creating fans for period film and television dramas.

Right: John Brooker at work on a traditional fan. Below left: The author's mother is presented at court in 1928, accompanied by her father and mother – with fan. Below right: A 1920 dove in flight; marking the Great Exhibition; 19th century views.



PAUL FELINS

John learnt to make the sticks from ivory but now uses London plane, or lace wood, which is slightly pink and resembles lace when cut at a certain angle. He buys it already air-dried from a supplier in Norfolk.

Most recently the Brookers made the elaborate feather fans for the film *Elizabeth I*.

The social etiquette and subtle language of the fan was as complicated as any code. Fans had a variety of uses in company and often provided a reliable alternative to blushes and lack of conversation. A Frenchman visiting England in the 1720s remarked that "the main conversation is the fluttering of fans."

Many 18th century fans had "peep holes" through which a lady might observe the object of her affection. Fans would be opened delicately and fluttered, not only to procure a welcome breeze but also to display the decoration and quality.

Fans were put to more mundane and practical use, too, concealing bad teeth and breath, and offering token protection from foul air. On occasion they might even be used to conceal a weapon or be attached to a monocle. And one was even devised to hold an ear trumpet.

In the 1920s and 1930s when young ladies were presented at court, these debutantes would hold a bouquet while their proud mothers held a fan, often of ostrich feathers. One was not fully dressed without a fine fan and fashionable elbow- or full-length kid gloves!

London's Victoria & Albert Museum possesses a world-famous dress collection which includes

many stunning fans, but the only museum in the world dedicated to their history is The Fan Museum at Greenwich. With more than 2,000 fans in its collection, the museum is a welcome reminder of a stylish accessory which was useful, decorative and flirtatious – all at the same time. ●

Turn to our Travel Guide on page 81 for further details.

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