



On the Fan

“Spain is just beyond the dyke”

That's what visitors to my exhibition in Josiaskoog in the Föhr village of Nieblum tease me about as they start counting the many fans in my paintings. When I begin explaining what these fans mean, everybody suddenly wants to open one ‘properly’.

When the folding fan was brought to Europe from the Orient in different ways in the 16th century, a genuine ‘boom in fans’ began that lasted for around 300 years. Until then the fan had been a symbol for the dignity of rulers and high officials. It was particularly used by men. But this was to change in Europe.

At the beginning of the 17th century, the fan became a fashionable accessory and a means of coquetry and gallantry in Europe—a plaything in the hand of a beautiful woman. The world of intrigue and deception could begin in all its many ramifications, but also with the carefreeness and impishness of Eros. There was a fan that befitted every occasion.

There is a secret concealed in and behind each fan. This has not only inspired poets but also painters, in particular the French avant-garde. Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, Manet, Monet, Gauguin, to mention just a few, did not only paint graceful dancers and women with fans but also decorated this jewel itself. Pissarro adorned at least 49 fans. The choice of motifs was vast. Almost anything was allowed.

Fans have always had their own history and stories and their individual expression in every region and in widely differing cultures. Goethe's estate contained a short letter in Italian that a young Roman lady had had written by a scribe:

“Carissimo Amico [...]” Translated: “I was given a most elegant fan yesterday evening; then it was taken away from me again. May I request you to find a new one for me forthwith to show the other person that there are other and perhaps even more beautiful fans. Forgive my boldness, I remain yours faithfully, Constanze Relier.” (from: Zapperi, *Das Incognito*)

To present a fan meant to propose marriage at the time.

Women in Europe also used the fan to send messages, a sort of mobile phone of centuries past. There was a *Fan Language* that could be consulted in women's journals and books.

The alphabet and the numbers were divided into 5 sections. What mattered was whether the fan was open, half or entirely closed, in which hand it was held and whether it was moved towards the left or the right arm—all in all a complicated matter. These are a few basic examples of practices in France and Spain in the 19th century—to get the general idea:

Wherever and whenever the folding fan was or is used, the way it is opened is always the same: with a slight movement from the wrist. The costly decoration, the beautiful picture on the inside comes into view as it is turned outwards so that others can see and enjoy it.

- opening the fan slowly and gracefully: serenity
- calm and gentle to-and-fro movement: contentment
- opening it abruptly and sharply: irritation, impatience
- sharp, loud movement: discontent

- holding and turning it slowly: bliss
- holding the fan in the right hand in front of the face: follow me
- holding the closed fan against the left cheek: NO
- holding the closed fan against the right cheek: YES
- deliberately slow to-and-fro movement: let's be friends
- dropping the fan: I would like to get to know you
- stroking the left cheek with the closed fan: I love you
- drawing the closed fan through the fingers of the left hand: I hate you
- placing the half-open fan against the left ear: beware we are being watched
- placing the open fan against the left ear: don't betray our secret
- drawing the half-open fan to the mouth: you may kiss me
- biting the fan: jealousy
- tearing up the fan: great danger!
- There were also the small, hidden signs on the left or right thigh, a highly intimate and private sign language, to agree the place, the date and the time. It is said that the origin of the fan goes back to Venus, who had it created for her by her cupids—a luxury item of protection, of coquetry and human interaction.

Since 1987, countless Föhr residents and visitors to the island have come to both my annual exhibition openings and the exhibitions themselves. Regrettably neither will take place this year. However, I very much look forward to seeing you next year at the festival event on July 15th, 2006 and during the exhibition taking place from July 9th to September 2nd.

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