



# Fans

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“My body is but composed of long bones,  
And I had all the time but skin on the  
bones,  
I shine in company, and without any rest,  
In the height of the summer, I am at all  
the parties.”

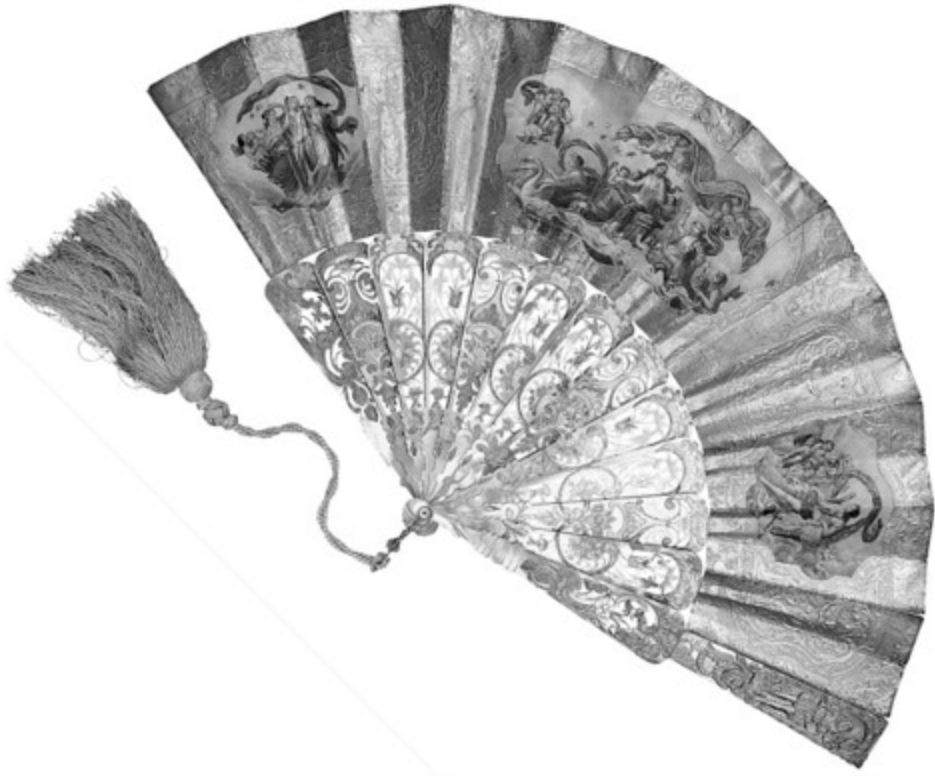
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## **The Language of the Fan in the Eighteenth Century**

To yawn behind one's fan: *Go away, you bore me.*

To lift the fan towards the right shoulder: *I hate you.*

To lower the closed fan towards the floor: *I scorn you, I despise you.*

To lightly touch the closed fan to one's right eye: *When shall I see you?*

To signal towards oneself with the fan closed: *I always want to be with you.*

To threaten with the fan closed: *Do not be too bold, audacious.*

To raise the fan with the right hand: *Are you faithful to me?*

To hide the eyes behind one's fan: *I love you.*

To offer a fan: *You please me very much.*

To conceal one's left ear with the closed fan: *Do not disclose our secret.*

To hold the fan over one's heart: *I am yours for life.*

To slowly close one's fan: *I agree completely, I accept all that you say.*

V. Pokrovski: *Elegance in the Satirical Literature of the Eighteenth Century*, p.43 Moscow, 1903.

## **The Language of the Fan in the Nineteenth Century**

To completely open one's fan: *I am thinking it over.*

To place one's hand over the heart while holding the fan open in front of the eyes: *I love you.*

To indicate the floor near oneself with the fan: *Come close to me.*

To press the open fan with both hands against one's breast while slowly lifting the eyes: *I humbly request forgiveness.*

To lightly touch one's mouth repeatedly with the closed fan: *Could I speak with you in private?*

To completely open one's fan and wave it in the direction of one's interlocutor: *I would hope to always be with you.*

To look at one's closed fan: *I think of you all the time.*

To hold lightly with the left hand the closed fan over one's heart: *Are you faithful to me?*

The number of unopened blades indicates the time of a rendezvous: *At the agreed hour.*

To turn the inside face of the fan towards one's interlocutor: *I shall not be able to come.*

To move the end of the fan on the palm of one's hand, as if writing a letter: *I will let you know by mail.*

To wave away one's interlocutor with the closed fan: *I do not like you.*

To direct the open fan towards the floor: *I despise you.*

To open and close the fan repeatedly: *You are too bold, audacious.*

To angrily close the fan and turn it feverishly in one's hand: *I am angry with you.*

To press one's chin against the closed fan: *I am sulking.*

To write with the finger on the outside of the fan: *Let me know by mail.*

To look at one's open fan while rocking the head from side to side: *You do not want to know me at all.*

To turn with the right hand the end of the closed fan held in the left hand: *You are being deceived.*



To hold the two ends of the closed fan between the palms: *I require an answer.*

To indicate a seat with the fan closed: *Sit next to me.*

To indicate a seat with the fan open: *That's enough!  
You are boring me.*



To point several times to one's forehead with the fan closed: *Are you mad?*

To press one's chin on the open fan: *Stop your repugnant pleasantries.*

To press the closed fan against one's right shoulder: *I detest you.*

To repeatedly drop the closed fan half open into the left hand: *Not another word.*

To flutter the open fan towards oneself: *Dance with me.*

To cover the palm of the left hand with the open fan held in the right hand: *Keep it secret.*

To give the closed fan to one's interlocutor: *You please me very much.*

To place the open fan against the right cheek: *Yes.*

To place the open fan against the left cheek: *No.*

To place the closed fan against the right ear: *I'm listening to you.*

To hold the closed fan to the right temple: *Stop being jealous.*

To gracefully open and close one's fan: *Your desires shall be fulfilled.*

To lay the closed fan in the fold of the left hand: *I do not understand you.*

To gracefully hold out the open fan to one's interlocutor: *Welcome.*

To impatiently pass the closed fan from one hand to the other: *I am very worried.*

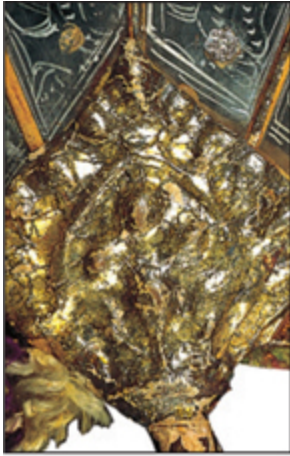
While holding the open fan with the right hand to make it turn with the left hand: *My parents do not wish it.*

To tap with the closed fan between the fingers of the left hand: *We must interrupt our conversation.*

To press the closed fan to one's heart while holding it with both hands: *Spare me this unbearable company.*

To hang the closed fan from the right hand: *Adieu, good-bye.*

V. Pokrovski: *Elegance in the Satirical Literature of the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 44-46 Moscow, 1903.



The history of the fan has its roots deep in antiquity. In the beginning, this accessory served as protection from the sun, as refreshment, and to swat away annoying insects. The first prototypes that we know of today were probably gifts of nature: a branch, a large leaf, a tuft of feathers. Numerous legends and myths from diverse cultures and countries all claim to be the first witness to the distant origin of the fan.



## Untitled Screen in mica representing two female figures

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Holland (Colony of Indochina?),  
end of the 17th century-beginning  
of the 18th century

Wood, mica, paper-maché,  
cardboard, leather,  
silk, painting, sculpture, gilding,  
36.3 x 33 cm

Museum Estate Ostankino,  
Moscow





However, we can probably consider a medieval European legend as the one describing the most distant epoch of the birth of the fan. This story recounts how Eve, bothered by the attentive gaze of Adam, once awakened, pulled down the branch of a tree and began to fan herself all the while contemplating with curiosity the marvels of Eden.



## Renaud and Armidia Double-leaf fan, decorated on both sides

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Russia, beginning of the 18th  
century  
Parchment, paint, 14.5 x 55 cm  
Museum Estate Ostankino,  
Moscow







Our epoch has conserved some of these written accounts from antiquity, just as some images confirm the usage of fans among different cultures. For Chinese poets, the screen fan appeared in their country near the beginning of the second millennium BCE. As for the folded fan, it appeared in China during the tenth century BCE. It seems very likely that it came from Japan.



## Untitled Double-leaf fan, decorated on both sides with three painted cartels



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Russia, around 1750  
Frame with 23 openwork bone  
blades.

Paper, bone, taffeta, paint,  
sculpture, weaving, gilding,  
38 x 65 cm

Museum Estate Ostankino,  
Moscow





One finds references to the fan in the epic Indian narratives such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.

For the people of ancient Egypt, the fan was the symbol of happiness and celestial calm, and was a sign of great merit. This is why fans with long handles can be seen on the frescoes and papyrus sheets representing victorious processions and ceremonies.



## The Wine Harvest Reverse of a double-leaf fan, decorated on both sides



Germany, middle of the 18th  
century  
Frame with 21 mother-of-pearl  
blades.  
Paper, mother-of-pearl, paste,  
painting, sculpture, inlaying,  
gilding,  
26.5 x 44.5 cm  
Museum Estate Ostankino,  
Moscow





Fans were equally widespread across the Aegean Sea. In Rome, the *flabellum* (fan) was an indispensable accessory to women's fashion. The most prized fans were those made of peacock feathers, very expensive and imported.

For the first Christians, fans were also indispensable everyday objects. They were used in sickrooms as well as in ceremonies in the churches.



## Abigail Facing David Single-leaf fan

France, around 1759

Frame with 20 mother-of-pearl blades.

Parchment, mother-of-pearl, gold and silver sheet, painting sculpting, inlaying, 29 x 54.6 cm  
Museum Estate Ostankino,  
Moscow







Originally their use corresponded to their first function: they were used to cool off and to swat away insects from the ritual wine and bread. Eventually they became an integral part of the ritual; they took on a symbolic meaning during the liturgy, then, having acquired a particular form, they were called *ripis*.



## The Birth of Venus Double-leaf fan, decorated on both sides



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France, around 1760  
Frame with 15 shell blades. Paper,  
shell, painting, sculpting,  
engraving, gold sheet inlaying,  
28.5 x 54 cm  
Museum Estate Ostankino,  
Moscow







We have little information on the usage of fans in high society of the beginning of the Middle Ages, however, according to certain researchers, the fan had not completely disappeared. We think that this accessory spread throughout the entire world from the 11th century onwards. But this probably meant screens, and in Europe, they were most often made with the feathers of ostriches, crows and peacocks, and less often with other materials.



## Venus and Aurora Double-leaf fan, decorated on both sides



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Germany, around 1760  
Frame with 20 mother-of-pearl  
blades. Paper, mother-of-pearl,  
paste, painting, sculpture, gilding,  
27.5 x 59 cm  
Museum Estate of Ostankino,  
Moscow

