

Fan Culture!

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Spanish Tit-Bits



The fan is an integral part of Spanish culture and society. Walk around any street in Spain during the warmer months and you are sure to spot someone discreetly fanning themselves. Immortalised in art by painters such as a Velazquez and Goya, the folding fan even has its own secret language. But where did this fan fascination come from?

Common historical consensus us that the earliest fans originated in Asia around 2000BC, with examples being found in China and India. It was the Japanese, however, who invented the folding fan, which was inspired by a bat's folding wings. "Bat Fan", if you will.

Portuguese pioneers of trade in Asia brought the folding fan to Europe during the 15th century, and fashionable fans were soon all the rage in courts across Europe, including Italy, France, England, and, of course, Spain.

As fans gained popularity in Europe, manufacturing increased, especially in Spain, where abanico - the Spanish word for fan – craftsmen were much sought after. Renowned painters, such as Velazquez, were hired to decorate fans for the nobility. By the end of the 18th century, the Real Fábrica de Abanicos (Royal Fan Factory) was established. This made fans for all social classes, ages, and genders and to occasions ranging from parties to mourning to daily life. Other factories, such as the famous Casa de Diego, which opened in 1823 in Madrid's Puerta del Sol and is still in operation today, established Spain as the centre for fan production.

In the early 19th century, Spain became a popular destination for refined tourists. American author Washington Irving's 'Tales of the Alhambra', published in 1832, had a prominent role in introducing Spain to the world. The opera 'Carmen', which portrayed a love triangle anchored by a Spanish gypsy, made fans fashionable across Europe. In the 1850s, John Bagnold Burgess, a British painter and frequent traveller to Spain, depicted a fan seller, exemplifying the strong association of the fan to Spanish culture by the mid-19th century.

At the same time, the fans themselves had become pieces of art. Valencia became well known for its exquisite and intricate workmanship. Some examples feature the complex intermingling of ivory, painted paper, mother-of-pearl, and metal for the finished product. These fans represented the collaboration of many different specialists, whose combined skills resulted in a product worthy of a well-heeled traveller seeking a memento of their time in Spain.

So the hand fan is not just decoration, but an icon of Spain. It has become an integral part of Spanish culture, and of course, a cheap way to keep cool in the heat! And as the most affordable fan can be purchased from 2€, with prices rising to 500€ for vintage pieces, there is nothing stopping you become a Fan fan!

Once you have your fan, you will be able to try your hand at the traditional 'secret language', employed by women to welcome, or fend off, potential suitors.

A few examples

Open fan over the chest showing the design "Yes"

Open fan over the chest showing the back "No"

Open fan covering one of the cheeks "I like you"

Wave fan very fast: "I really like you"

Wave fan very slowly: "I am not interested"

Open fan covering your nose "I want to see you"

Open fan covering your chin "I want to talk to you"

Closed fan near the heart: "I love you"

Open fan placed over lips: "Kiss me"

As a first time fan user, however, I strongly advise you just to use it to keep cool!