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A Short History of Fans

by Janet Koda

The first evidence of the use of hand fans was found in the ruins and in written text of ancient Mesopotamia dating from the 4th century BC. The Chinese were not only using fans but also as a decorative accessory in the 2nd century BC which was developed by a Chinese emperor. Like everything else, the Chinese introduced these devices to Japan in the sixth century AD. The Japanese are credited with having originated the 'folding' fan. This



idea got back to China, who made more styles of their own. During the early Middle Ages, fans were brought back to Europe by the Crusaders. Sea traders also brought them to Europe from Japan and China. Fans of every kind became quite popular during the 16th and 17th centuries. Simple hand fans were made from woven palm fronds. More intricate fans were fashioned from silks and papers or precious materials /metals and gems.



Besides being used for cooling and shooing insects away, the uses of these hand held instruments run the gamut from weather protection, as offering and receiving trays, in greetings/social graces, for secret signals/personal notes, advertising, as toys, to hiding bad teeth and entire faces.



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Even to this day, hand held implements are important to these cultures and are used in every aspect of life. Since their invention, interest in hand fans and their uses remain relevant to this day. Like buttons, there are also fan collecting organizations and abundant information on the internet and in books.

References:

Country Home Magazine, July 05, 1987

De Vere Green, Bertha. Fans Over the Ages: A Collectors Guide. New York: A. S. Barnes, 1979.

Fans-Encyclopedia.com <https://web.ics.purdue.edu>

Fan images courtesy of Byson Buttons, Gil Biggie, M. Schenkenberger



Realistic shaped enamel fan button depicting a "Geisha Holding a Fan", courtesy of Gil Biggie. A button that can be used in multiple categories in competition.