The Dance of the Abanico: the Spanish fan in the Arts and Culture of Spain and the Americas

By

Hanya Wozniak-Brayman

NYU University, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, Senior Lecturer in Spanish and Translation.

5137 Skyline Drive, Syracuse, NY 13215

hwb1@nyu.edu

The Dance of the Abanico: the Spanish fan in the Arts and Culture of Spain and the Americas

Late one night, about 1300 years ago, according to a Japanese legend, a fan maker was awakened to strange sounds in his home. He got up from his bed and lit an oil lamp to see what was causing the noise. It was a bat that, trapped and frightened, fluttered around, knocking utensils and tools off their perches, as it searched for a way out. The fan maker tried to guide the bat to the door with his outstretched arms but the bat was disoriented and flew into the flames of the lamp instead. Badly burned, it fell to the floor and, as it lay there dying, slowly folding and unfolding its delicate, webbed wings, the fan maker watched in fascination. Then he started thinking…

And so, the story continues, the idea for the modern folding fan, what in Spanish is known as the "abanico plegable," was born. When people hear the word, "fan," most immediately envision this modern form and assume that it has been around forever. But the folding fan has a relatively recent past: it did not appear until the 7th or 8th century. Nobody knows for sure

exactly when it was created, but most experts agree it was invented in Japan. The first fans, in fact, were known as the "komori" or "bat" fans, a fact that supports the veracity of the fan maker's tale. Let us now take a few minutes to examine its history and understand better the fascination it continues to exert in Spanish arts and culture.

Fans, in one form or another, have been in common use since the beginning of history. The fan was a practical tool for both nomadic and agrarian lifestyles and had two primary functions: it was, first of all, utilitarian and secondly, ornamental. These early implements were typically flat and "fixed." They were constructed to form one solid piece, and were originally most likely large leaves like those of the palm tree or long, colorful bird feathers tied to sticks for easier handling. They were practical utensils at first, but at some point early in history they took on a ceremonial role in religious and state affairs, becoming a symbol of divinity and authority. They had several forms ranging from circular to square and were beautifully crafted of feathers or expensive fabric, and fastened by handles made of ivory or precious wood encrusted with jewels. The earliest known ceremonial fan is depicted on the bas relief of a building excavated at an archeological site in what was once Assyria and dates back 5000 years. Ceremonial fans existed in diverse parts of the world, including India,

China, Hawaii, and the pre-Columbian Americas. The Aztec emperor Montezuma gave Hernando Cortés numerous elaborate fans called "tleoatzehuaquetzali" (tleo-watze-waket-sally) as welcome gifts and Columbus returned to Spain with a similar one for Queen Isabel. It is currently part of the permanent collection of the Historical Museum of Vienna.

In China and Japan, the fan was part of strict social ritual and served in many daily functions and on many levels as early as 2000 years before the birth of Christ. Everyone had a fan, from the emperor down to the servant. Commerce with the Far East by the Silk Route introduced the sumptuously crafted Chinese fan to Persia, the Mid East, and the Arab lands as early as the 1st century. Islamic taboo soon reduced designs to geometric patterns, an aesthetic that was to greatly influence Spain during the Moorish occupation. The Crusades brought the oriental fan to Europe, but it remained rare because the materials used to construct it -- ivory, silk, exotic woods-- had to be imported and so were costly and difficult to obtain. Only the very rich could afford them. During the Middle Ages, it was customary to install large fixed fans also called screen fans, in the homes of wealthy noblemen to provide ventilation in the summer months. Typically made of fabric and leather, they were called "ventalls," from the Latin "ventum," or "wind," and

are often listed in estate related inventories from that period. Meanwhile, smaller rigid fans, also called ventalls, became commonplace in the lives of ordinary people and served a variety of household and personal needs. They were, for the most part, as unassuming as they were functional. It was not until the rise of the European middle class during the Renaissance, when more people could afford to buy small luxuries, that fans became personal accessories. We see from the paintings of this period that both men and women used them, dangling them from their waistbands. The fan, in other words, became something of a status symbol for the self-made man.

In Spain, fixed fans had a long history as well. The climate contributed greatly to their popularity as did contacts with cultures like those of the Phoenicians, Romans, the Arabs, and Japanese. The Spanish word "abanico" is derived from "vannus," one of two Latin words for fan. The other, "flabellum," refers to the banner-like ornamental fans used first by Roman legions and later by the adopted by the Catholic Church in liturgical rites. "Vannus" is utilitarian in origin and refers to the primitive farm tool that was used in winnowing to separate the wheat from the chaff and literally means "mover of air." The terms "ventall" and "abanico" were interchangeable for several centuries. One of the earliest mentions of the Spanish fan is found in the Chronicles of Pedro IV, regent of Aragon from 1336 to 1387, in

a reference to the duties that the king's noblemen performed during mealtime: one carried the "trinchante" or the meat carver while another held the "abanico." A later document that inventories the belongings of the Prince of Viana, includes two fixed fans, there called "ventalls," made of satin. By 1503, practically everyone who could afford a fan had one and its popularity caused a shortage of paper, essential for manuscripts. The Spanish king was forced to issue a decree prohibiting the use of white paper in the manufacture of fans.

The Japanese folding fan is introduced to the Iberian Peninsula in or about 1542 by trading ships returning from East Asia. The next year, one of the earliest historical references to the folding fan appears in the Spanish Codex. This reference is important for two reasons. First, because it marks the transition from the use of the fixed fan to the folding fan within the royal court and secondly, because there is a lexical attempt to distinguish between the two types of fans. The entry recounts the arrival of Maria of Portugal to Salamanca for her marriage to Phillip II. As she passes through the city, the Princess shields her face from the public, in an echo of the Islamic tradition brought to Spain by the Moors, with what is called and "avanillo." Soon after the royal wedding, a factory is established in the city of Huelva to manufacture folding fans. It will be the first supplier to the future queen and

noble ladies of Spain. More importantly, it is, in all likelihood, the very first factory of its kind in Europe.

The folding fan, what today we call the "abanico plegable," was an immediate success and quickly replaced the fixed fan, not only in Spain but in the rest of Europe. There are three likely reasons for the fan's overwhelming popularity. Unlike the rigid fan, the frame of the abanico consists of many moveable parts-- sticks, guards, leaves, rivets and loops -- and offers limitless possibilities for decorative ingenuity. Second, the folding fan is compact and easily stored in a pocket or purse, therefore, easily transported; and lastly, and likely the most important of all, the abanico is by its very nature, playful. Handling it is synonymous to playing with it. It has to be opened, moved about and closed again. And again and again. It is coquettish and charming. And it is seductive. The fixed fan had been popular with men as well as women, but the folding fan, elaborate and alluring, is (with a few exceptions) a feminine accessory right from the beginning.

By the early seventeenth century several master fan makers have established factories in Madrid. They employ artisans to make and assemble the different parts of the abanico and artists to paint the scenes for the "cara" or leaf. Because fan making is a craft, and until 1677 painters were

officially classified as craftsman and not artists, these paintings were rarely signed and remain anonymous. Abanico leaves from this period are usually small and supported on wood or marble sticks. The leaves might be cloth, fine paper or vellum, which is a thin but durable (and expensive) fabric made from the skins of calves. Some fans are made entirely of sticks looped together with decorative string and either painted or carved. These are called "brisee" fans and are often made of fragrant sandalwood or exotic woods infused with perfume.

Under the Hapsburgs, the last decades of the 17th century are a difficult time for Spain on many fronts. Politically, it is no longer a supreme power. Financially, it faces ruin. Domestic fan manufacturers, already suffering from competing imports from Italy and France, now face a new problem as government subsidies become increasingly difficult to obtain. Shops close, supplies dwindle, and the quality of the artisans and the product rapidly deteriorates. Carlos II tries to remedy the situation by limiting imports in 1679 and by stealing manufacturing secrets from master fan makers in Italy. Despite his efforts, the Spanish consumer is forced to rely on foreign production. Then, in 1700, after years of war and social protest, the Hapsburg dynasty in Spain comes to an end as a French Bourbon king, Phillip V, ascends the Spanish throne.

In the eighteen century, France, with England and Italy close behind, becomes the leading producer of the folding fan. Watteau and later Boucher head the list of French painters who turn fan painting into a high art and the French fan becomes the standard by which all fans are measured. Ironically, fan manufacturing returns to Spain under the auspices of French masters like Eugene Prost and illustrious companies like the House of Colombert. Shops reopen throughout the country, but many of them are hampered by the scarcity of good material, especially paper and wood. Madrid, once the capital of fan production, is quickly supplanted by Valencia as the center of Spanish fan manufacturing. A busy port, it has better access to supplies and attracts the most competent and gifted artisans. By 1830 the Spanish industry once again becomes competitive with its European competitors. In the late 1800's technical innovations like mechanical cutters modernize fan production and make it more profitable and the abanico more affordable. Factories print fans that record historical events like the Carlist Wars, the coming of the railroad, and the world exposition in Barcelona in 1888. The abanico has become a mirror that reflects not only the grandeur of history but also society in general, with its changes in taste and attitude. Advertising and souvenir fans, also known as "aid to memory" or "trip" fans, are a big hit with travelers and the abanico is a collector's dream. Mass production

enables Spain to satisfy its own demand and even to export its product to other countries, in major part to Latin America. Spain's output never catches up with the rest of Europe but it has a first rate industry that meets the highest standards.

The 19th century is a glorious one for the Spanish fan in art and fashion. Goya is one of the first artists to immortalize its beauty and record its popularity in his portraits and etchings. His women subjects, young and old, gracefully point their fans, open and closed, in varying directions. Artists like Mariano Fortuny of the Spanish Academic School and Joaquin Sorolla, Spain's greatest Impressionist, contribute their genius and skills as well, painting scenes that reflect the aesthetic and manners of Spanish society in the latter half of the century. The fan is everwhere. In 1871, Teofilo Gautier, French traveler and man of letters, observes on a trip to Spain: "I have never seen a woman without a fan. Even in churches I see women of all ages, in groups, kneeling or sitting, praying and fanning themselves with the same fervor." The abanico is an indispensable accessory in Europe and the Americas, as the portraiture of this time indicates. European women flaunt their social roots with fans; American women flaunt their wealth. Unfortunately, fashion, then as now, is fickle. Just as Spain regains its former reputation as a premier fan manufacturing center of the world,

women elsewhere-- after almost four hundred years-- decide to abandon the fan in favor of a new, more adventurous accent: they begin to gesture with cigarette holders instead.

By the start of the 20th century in most of Europe and the Americas, the fan's popularity diminishes and fan making is slowly limited to Spain and the Orient. China, long an exporter of fans, is a major competitor in the production of cheap versions and Spain realizes that, in order to survive she must make some hard choices. Those changes save money but affect quality: the abanico suffers from mass production, low grade cloth and wood, clumsy plastic sticks, and inferior craftsmanship. It is brought to its lowest common denominator. In addition, internal political upheaval, civil war and economic depression do little to stimulate the industry during the first 5 decades of the twentieth century. Valencia continues to be the center of fan manufacturing, producing a small number of high end abanicos alongside a large quantity of low priced ones aimed at the general public. The appetite for the fan never disappears although its popularity does wane from time to time. Younger women in the 1960's, puffing cigarettes and reevaluating their role in society, regard the fan as old-fashioned. There is a renewed interest during the 70's, helped no doubt by the fan exhibition held in Barcelona in 1971. The exhibit features fans whose leaves are painted and

imprinted with the works of 57 contemporary painters and writers, among them Salvador Dali, Joan Miro, Pablo Neruda, and Rafael Alberti. The publicity helps to turn the designer's eye back to the artistic value and possibilities of the abanico. Grammar schools begin to teach young girls the proper way of handling it, just like their instruction in the "sevillanas," a flamenco style of dance. The fan reappears on city streets and in nightclubs and its visibility inspires a second exposition in 1980 in Madrid. Today, after some neglect during the last decade, the Spanish abanico is experiencing another rebound. At the 2004 royal wedding of the crown prince, the bride, Leticia, carried a traditional marriage fan down the aisle. Even her brother-in-law Jaime Marichal, the husband of the Infanta Elena, was videotaped fanning himself with a simple black abanico while waiting for the ceremony to begin. Leticia is often photographed in public holding a fan and is an inspiration for the current generation of women in style and comportment. European royalty have always exerted a strong influence on fashion there in much the same way that movie stars do here in the US.

Historically, the Spanish fan is more than a fashion statement. It is and has been from the beginning both a medium for creative expression in the decorative arts and a motif in the fine arts.

Because the fan requires the assembly of many parts, these, in turn, offer the artisan an infinite number of possibilities for both materials and method. In the past, ivory, wood, marble, tortoiseshell, feathers and metal were used in the construction of the sticks and the guards, the outer sticks of the fan. They could be cut, carved, filigreed, gilded with gold or silver, varnished, embossed with lace and embroidery, or painted. Form, color, and texture were combined to produce an ingenious and beautiful product. The fan's leaves offered the artist a canvas, and the themes corresponded to the taste of the consumer and the trends of the day.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, subjects were painted in watercolor on paper or vellum and covered a wide range of topics: court and everyday life, marriage, birth, death, mythology, and nature. These representations often complemented the breeding and education of the bearer. Flowers added color and mystique because of their symbolism: carnations stood for true love; forget-me-nots, memory; poppies, pleasure; the wallflower, fidelity; lilies, purity; violets, modesty; bindweed, uncertainty; and the narcissus, or daffodil, selfishness.

In the 19th century, with the spread of printing presses, reproductions were easy to make, and fans became vehicles of advertisements, current events, and propaganda. In the meantime, artists continued to satisfy the

demands of the aristocracy and the wealthy, who paid good money for fans. There were three major patterns of fans: the imperial, the neo-gothic and the "Christina," named after the Spanish queen who favored lace and mother-of-pearl. Watercolor, gouache, and pastels were the preferred medium. Celebrated painters painted original scenes, and secondary artists were commissioned to reproduce famous paintings of the past and present. Goya was popular as painter and subject in the first half of the century; Sorolla and impressionism dominated the second half. Another favorite topic was Orientalism, with its harems and odalisques.

Today, the abanico inspires a new generation of Spanish and Hispanic artists. While some prefer to paint on traditional frames that can be sold and used for fanning, others rely on the familiar form as a point of departure, utilizing unconventional materials and venturing into abstract realms. I would like to show you some pictures of the abanico so you can see the different ways it has been represented and the many uses it has had: (powerpoint)

"Abanico, abanicame" happily intone the lyrics of a traditional tune. The abanico has long been a subject of song and poetry and is a recurrent symbol in Spanish literature. It perfumes the mystic poetry of San Juan de la Cruz: "Y el ventalle, de cedros, aire daba." Francisco de Quevedo, one of the

foremost poets of the Golden Age in Spain, uses the fan in one of his sonnets to enhance the imperial setting for Jupiter. "Júpiter, con su rayo en la mano haciéndose chispas, cuando fuera mejor hacerse aire con un abanico…" Miguel de Cervantes describes a lady dressed in the Spanish manner: "Collar y cintura de diamantes y con abanico, a modo de las señoras españolas." A century later, Gaspar de Jovellanos, creates an idyllic setting so typical of the Baroque with a reference to the fan: "Por todas partes las aves/ salvas a su nombre hacían;/ sahumábanle las flores,/ le abanicaban las brisas…" The abanico is a perfect compliment to the romantic musings of Gustavo Adolfo Bequer as well: "Los dos amantes permanecen aun bajo el verde abanico de una palmera…" But it is in the Spanish theater of the 19th century, with its colorful emphasis on the mores and customs of the middle class, that the abanico's range of possibilities is most fully realized. Leandro de Moratín, Tamayo y Baus, Juan Eugenio Hartzenbush and Bretón de los Herreros are among the many dramatists who use the fan in theatrical productions. In stage directions, in the form of asides, the playwrights instruct their female characters to fan themselves during certain scenes, to signal a change in emotion. Sometimes fanning emphasizes embarrassment or discomfort, at other times it shows romantic interest. The fan also appears within the text of the plays. Bretón de los Herreros alludes to the

fan as a device of feminine seduction in *Marcela o ¿a cuál de las tres?* "Cuando voy ya a la cabeza/ de mi veterana tropa,/ y agitando el abanico/con sonrisa que enamora…" In his one act comedy, *La Minerva*, Breton de los Herreros constructs an entire scene around the abanico. The fan represents the heroine who owns it and symbolizes her sacred and private space which is violated by unwanted guests. The action comes to a climax when her fan is mishandled and broken by one of the intruders. Isabel's home and hospitality, her very person, have been abused as she cries out: "No sobes más, te suplico/ no te basta el abanico?" (Don't hurt me anymore, I beg you/ isn't my fan enough?)

More recently, a fresh reserve of essayists, novelists, and poets have added to the collection of praises and musings about the abanico. It was the central theme of Camilo Jose Cela's short story, *Doña Doradita la del pastelero*. The Andalusian writer Antonio Gala sees it as the symbol of his province: "¿No es…el abanico un símbolo andalúz? No es esa levedad, no es ese suave alivio…ese ocupar la mano…una permanente voluntad de afirmarse?" (Isn't …the fan an Andalucian symbol? Isn't that lightness, that soft comfort…that busy hand…a permanent willingness to affirm oneself?) Other prominent names are Rosa Chacel, Carlos Barral, and Angel

Gonzalez. The list of contemporary writers is long, and the fan continues to be subject of song and story, of verse and prose.

Since its appearance in the sixteenth century, the abanico has also been a constant leitmotif in Spanish art. In the beginning it is a simple detail of dress; later it becomes a subject on its own merit. The first known Spanish painting where the subject holds a folding fan was painted by Coadyuba and today hangs in the Prado. It is a portrait of Maria of Portugal, the princess who married Phillip II of Spain in 1543 and who died soon afterward giving birth to their son. By the late 1500's the fan is a common element in court portraiture. The tradition evolves to include women from all classes and continues well into the 19th century, when the fan acquires a broader and more immediate impact. Modern Spanish painters, like Picasso, sometimes build the entire composition around it. Here, in chronological order, are some better known works, a few of them true masterpieces, where the abanico is seen first as fashion and later as theme:

(powerpoint presentation)

In the late 1500's: Alonso Sanchez-Coello and Bartoleme Gonzalez y Serrano; the 1600's: Carreño de Miranda, Claudio Coello, Diego de Velazquez; the 1700's: Lopez y Portaña and later Goya who dies in 1828; the 1800's: Mariano de Fortuny; Ignacio Zuloaga; 1900's: Picasso, ……..

The accessories that we hold dear become a part of us. Today, women rarely leave home without a purse. Indeed, walking empty-handed is almost unnatural. Not that long ago, a cigarette fulfilled much the same function for both sexes. An accessory is often intrinsic to gesture: it facilitates movement, adds an element of self-assurance, and makes communication more expressive. The fan was no different. Opening and closing it required a sudden flick of the wrist and fanning was a graceful movement of the hand. Fingers were displayed, eyes darted furtively behind the delicate lace, and the fan's motion acquired eloquence and meaning in the presence of an admirer. In the latter half of the 19th century, these gestures were developed into an independent language, and the abanico, in social circles, spoke the words of young women escaping the watchful eye of chaperones, mothers, even husbands.

The Spanish abanico is a lone survivor of a long and intricate history. Years after it ceased to be used routinely and devolved back into its original ceremonial role in other countries, even in Japan, where it was born, Spain continues to indulge in the fan's beauty and thrive on its inspiration. The abanico lives on as poem, art, and fashion, enduring the fickle nature of taste and destiny. It has become ingrained in the being of "Spanishness," and touches the nerve of its people. It is the visible icon of an entire nation, just

as flamenco is their recognizable sound. The word itself, imbued over time with so many meanings –architectural, geographic, nautical, mathematical— has acquired another semantic dimension that encapsulates its very essence: the verb “abanicar” is rich with image and meaning and the abanico “fans out” to encompass the whole spectrum of Spanish cultural life.