



Christian Dior by John Galliano  
S/S Haute Couture 2007.

Van Cleef & Arpels Bals de Légende, Le Bal du Siècle, Eventail decor clip in white gold with pink sapphires and diamonds, POA. *BELOW* Van Cleef & Arpels Collection Dancer clip, 1941, in platinum and yellow gold with emeralds, rubies and diamonds.



# fan favourite

Rich with echoes of old-world glamour, the fan is firmly back on the fashion landscape. Then again, perhaps it's been there all along...

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE

For the closing look at Giorgio Armani Privé's Fall 2025 Couture Collection, a model swept down the runway in a black evening gown, wielding as her only accessory a sheer fan, studded with sequins. At the 2024 Grammy Awards, Taylor Swift deployed a black lace fan to shield her private conversations from would-be lipreaders. London's Victoria & Albert Museum is currently holding its blockbuster exhibition Marie Antoinette Style – dedicated to the centuries-spanning sartorial influence of the last queen of France – in which a collection of 13 intricately detailed fans, like works of art wrought in miniature, play a starring role.

A fan renaissance is well and truly in full swing. "Fans in some form have existed across the world, from simple palm leaves used for cooling to elaborate crafted devices," says Vidita Gupta, museum assistant at The Fan Museum in London. "One of the earliest surviving examples comes to us from the tomb of Tutankhamun" – namely, the 'Golden Fan', coated in gold leaf and originally intended to hold ostrich feathers. "The folding fan, however, is believed to have been invented in Japan and reached Europe only in the 16th century.

"Importantly, fans were never solely a women's accessory," continues Gupta. "They were used by all genders, though largely restricted to the wealthy." Technological advances and the spread of printing helped to

democratise the object. "Paper fans with wooden monture became affordable to the middle classes, decorated with everything from everyday life and fashion to political themes and war heroes."

Fans have tended to follow in the slipstream of women's fashion. "As women's dress styles shifted towards slimmer silhouettes, fans, too, grew smaller," says Gupta. Romanticism saw skirts widen and fabrics and embellishments become increasingly opulent – and fans followed suit.

"The introduction of sewing machines, department stores and accelerated marketing revolutionised fashion," notes Gupta. "Fans reflected these changes, continually adapting in scale, design and decoration. Since then, there has been no looking back for either the makers or sellers, both of whom have continued to experiment with the form and aesthetics of the fan."

A so-called 'language of fans' is said to have developed in Britain during the Victorian era, when a lady's intentions toward her suitor were communicated via a flick or flutter of her hand (fanning quickly, for example, indicated,

Romanticism saw skirts widen and fabrics and embellishments become increasingly opulent – and fans followed suit





“I’m engaged”). Although the existence of a formally codified system of communication appears to be apocryphal, the very idea hints at the fan’s appeal as a powerful tool of self-expression. Fans, too, have long been associated with performance. “Think of the dramatic snap of a fan in flamenco dance or the stylised gestures of Japanese Noh theatre,” says Gupta. “Burlesque performers have also made feather fans iconic.” Likewise, filmmakers across the decades have recognised the object’s cinematic potential, with eye-catching fans sharing the screen with acting royalty including Audrey Hepburn, Nicole Kidman and Michelle Yeoh, and, more recently, appearing across three seasons of the zeitgeist Regency romance drama *Bridgerton*.

“Fans have always endured because their function is timeless. Much like the wheel, their form may change but their presence remains”

– Vidita Gupta

At Dior, fans are firmly embedded in the house vocabulary. At its 2023 Cruise Collection unveiled in Seville, lace fans were clipped to models’ belts in tribute to the art of traditional Spanish fan making. Elaborate headpieces decked with fans, as well as coquettish hand fans, featured in their Spring Couture Collection in 2007. The fan lent its silhouette to Dior’s ‘Francis Poulenc’ gown, first created for their S/S Collection in 1950, in which fan-shaped panels of silk taffeta were layered upon the skirt to dazzling effect. Jennifer Lawrence wore a reimagined version of the dress on the Cannes Film Festival red carpet back in May.

Van Cleef & Arpels has long fashioned jewellery shaped like fans and set with diamonds and precious stones. “The links between women’s wardrobes and jewellery are close [and] Van Cleef & Arpels’ creations regularly draw their inspiration from couture,” says the house’s director of patrimony and exhibitions, Alexandrine Maviel-Sonet. “Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the fan, an essential accessory in women’s wardrobes, was often referenced in jewellery form. Some pieces could also evoke Asian cultures, like the long necklace created in 1924.

“Despite the decline of the fan after the Second World War, Van Cleef & Arpels continued to interpret this accessory in the late ’30s when historicism was in vogue, as seen in various clips and double clips from that period,” Maviel-Sonet continues. “In addition, a few



ABOVE, FROM TOP Audrey Hepburn in *War and Peace* (1956); Phoebe Dynevor as Daphne Bridgerton in Season 1 of *Bridgerton* (2020).



FROM TOP Gucci fan; Louis Vuitton fan bag (shown twice); Nicole Kidman in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996).



fluffy feathers – a perfect fashion accessory,” recalls Gilles.

Demna Gvasalia, then creative director at Balenciaga, tapped Duvelleroy for the fashion house’s 54th Couture Collection this past July. “He chose fans from [our] archives and reedited them,” explains Gilles. The result was two silk organza models referencing archival pieces dating from 1895 and 1905 that required near-on 200 hours of work each.

The Frankie Shop worked with Duvelleroy in 2023 on a limited-edition fan, crafted from cotton and sycamore wood in the former’s signature Kelly green hue, and attached to a cord that could be worn around the neck or crossbody. “You can wear it as a charm, you can [attach] it on your bag or on a belt,” says Gilles.

The enduring appeal of the fan reflects an appetite for true craftsmanship among customers. But the art of fan making is in jeopardy. “In the UK, it is now recognised as an endangered craft,” notes Gupta. The Fan

Museum is nurturing the skill, organising workshops alongside the Worshipful Company of Fan Makers, the 316-year-old livery company that represents the art and its artisans.

Nonetheless, Gupta’s outlook remains hopeful. “Almost everyone I meet at the museum has a personal story about fans – one brought back from a holiday, a family heirloom or a childhood memory [playing] with their grandmother’s fan,” she shares. “Fans have always endured because their function is timeless. Much like the wheel, their form may change but their presence remains.” HB

ballerinas, other emblematic creations of the maison, are portrayed using a fan, whether they are Spanish dancers or classic ballerinas.”

Duvelleroy, one of the world’s most storied fan-making houses, was founded in Paris in 1827 by Jean-Pierre Duvelleroy; at its peak, the original maison had two stores in the French capital, one in London and a loyal and well-heeled customer base. Entrepreneurs Eloïse Gilles and Raphaëlle Le Baud relaunched the brand in 2010, having delved into the rich tradition of French fan making. “We discovered 19th century Parisian fans made in sequin, in tulle, in organza and [from]