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Fashion History

FASH200 A

Hand Fan Short Story



42.48.1

1820-1829

Hand-painted skin leaf. Recto: depicting Psyche borne aloft by Cupid and two putti over a landscape. Verso: depicting two 1820s-costumed women and one man within a garden setting. Gilt stylized floral motifs border top and sides on both sides. Incised steel sticks studded with green stones.

Online Collections: Museum of NYC

The Fan and Eudora

While I stand aside and watch Mother introduce herself to every man and woman at the ball, I cannot help but to imagine the animals that could nest their young within the elaborate ringlets that these women bore. The large hats that engulf their heads and the feathers that tickle their faces mid-conversation with Mother make me laugh, but I hold my snide remarks as I know this is the only time she gets to show off her young and eligible daughter. Ever since I grew into my womanhood, Mother has made great efforts to prepare for these nights. Even hours prior to this evening, I hear, “Geneve! The ball will be approaching us soon, so I need you on your best behavior for *this* is the night you find your true love.” It has been taught to me for so long that I must fulfill my duties as a young woman to find the man who will ensure my happy future once I am able to bear children. I have had the notion engraved into me since I could speak my first words.

After father passed, Mother has brought me to these regency balls in hopes to find a family that would agree to bring me in as their duchess, but she has yet to find luck. These sort of evening events never interested me though, because where is the life and fun in spending hours getting into layers and layers of puffs and ribbon in the name of King George IV, to participate in longways dances like the Quadrille all night (Clarke, 1981.) Not to mention there was never really enough room on my Marie sleeves, and so I tended to wear my heart directly on my face. In other words, my disinterest in the Regency balls along with my disinterest in the young men was very clearly unhidden. My hand fan was a savior in these situations too, because if I started to feel like these events were getting a little too ridiculous, I would simply use my fan as a barrier between those around me and the facetious looks I’d give them. Some might even say it was a gesture of kindness on my behalf.

Tonight seemed to be just like any other one of those nights, where I would spend countless hours getting into tightly fitted corsets and inserting ornaments into my hair for the likeliness of Mother, just for her to wander off as I stood aside and analyzed the room until it was time to participate in the dances. Before the lines of couples formed, I happened to have caught the glimpse of Eudora. I remembered Eudora from previous greetings with her family, and although we had never had full conversations because our mothers were too busy advertising us

to other families, I had always felt some sort of pull to her. Not too long after we kept locking eyes from across the ballroom, I found her standing right next to me. We missed the cue of the first dance, so we watched together as the couples danced on the floor, fanning ourselves to the tempo and talking about all the things we would rather be doing. In the midst of our conversation that felt to have been lasting forever, I found myself hyper focused on the scene that was depicted on her hand fan. It was Cupid and Psyche, being depicted as two women, and they wrapped in a beautiful blue ribbon held by two putti. The beautiful garden scene along with the green stones that were studded along the steel sticks of the folding fan made it all the more compelling and I began to ponder the meaning. I asked Eudora the reason for there being two women, to which she amusingly replied, “Well, it is up to you what that answer may be, but I like to think it is a representation of love in different forms. It is challenging the expectations we have for stories we are familiar with.”

I paused for a bit of time after she said this, as if a wave of emotion and self-realization poured over me. Was all I know all that is, or was Eudora trying to communicate something to me? Before I could finish my thoughts and quickly push them aside, I felt Eudora grab my ungloved hand, pull me to the line of couples, and we danced! We danced and danced while the others around us tried to keep up. My eyes were fixed on the way her evening dress hugged her waist just below her chest, and the swaying of her bell-shaped skirt was flowing with the music. I even noticed those same green stones around the hem that were complimented by her fan. I also could not help but fall into deeper thought of the art on her fan.

After we pulled away from the floor, breathless and laughing, I felt compelled to ask Eudora more about her fan, as something was eating away at my curiosity. “What do you think these women are thinking,” I ask. Eudora then says to me, “I think they are thinking about all the expectations that have been set for them, and maybe they feel...free.”

The night continued on, and before I knew it, the ball was over, as if the rest of the night formed into a blur. My body was feeling euphoric after the hours of dancing, adrenaline still running through me. Not even Mother’s comments about my failure to dance with even one young man bothered me at this moment, because I had never left these events feeling as good as I did now.

It dawned on me after the ball was over that what had left me feeling so unfulfilled before were the expectations that were set during these events. The art on Eudora’s hand fan, and the

layered meanings that I pulled from it will be engraved in me for a long time. I believe the time we spent together that evening, breaking the rules and enjoying the time has made me look at life a lot differently now. It became apparent to me that all that time of feeling lost in the world of love was the lack of romance I had with life and my experiences. Tradition and expectations led to unfulfillment, but Eudora reminded me to unravel the layers and analyze further, find what fulfills me. At times, I close my eyes and visualize the blue ribbon that intertwined around the two women on that fan; I think of the artist that created it, or I think of Eudora, and I still wonder why the world gave me that sign, but to this day I am thankful it did.

References

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