

If you look closely at artworks and  
portraits of certain Victorians,  
you might notice a recurring image.

Green carnations  
attached to the lapel of a jacket.

The green carnation was  
something that Oscar Wilde  
brought into the public.

A signifier of their identity  
and encouraged his circle of friends  
also to wear the green carnation.

It was a special shop in London  
where you could get green carnations from.

They were dyed green.

They weren't a natural green colour.

Most people would always go for a  
white carnation, but a green one  
is something very strange,  
very queer.

But these flowers are just one  
example of the many visual symbols  
throughout history  
that hinted at secret sexualities  
and identities that had been hidden.

So what other coded  
symbols can we find in the history  
of queer artwork?

How did today's artists reference and  
re-use them?

And how have hidden symbols  
transitioned to a wider and more

expressive queer visual language?

Around the same time as the Green Carnation,  
there was another queer  
symbol in use too.

Peacock feathers as a sort  
of symbol of queer identities.

Because it's the male peacock  
that has incredibly flamboyant tail feathers.

Check out this painting of the  
couple Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon  
by Edmund Dulac.

They're painted as medieval saints,  
but Shannon is holding a peacock feather,  
juxtaposing religious imagery with this  
knowing symbol.

We see people holding them  
and looking out into  
the viewer to make some sort of  
connection.

Peacock feathers were commonly used  
in Art Nouveau at the time.

They're seen in Whistler's famous  
Peacock Room and recur through  
Aubrey Beardsley's black and white artworks.

Nowadays we have plenty of ways of  
anonymously communicating our sexual  
desires with different tribes.

But on the dance floor of the 1970s  
San Francisco, men relied  
on a secret visual code.

A handkerchief hanging from

a pocket.

Men would wear different coloured  
handkerchiefs to denote their sexual interests.

You can't really get into examples  
of the hanky code without getting a  
different certificate.

Of course, peacock feathers,  
handkerchiefs, carnations,  
are but a few of the many, many  
queer symbols throughout history.

All sorts of different shapes,  
colours and hidden meanings.

There have always been coded  
messages in clothing, in  
badges and so on and so forth.

There's the nautical star tattoo  
commonplace in lesbian  
communities.

The lambda symbol designed  
by the Gay Activists Alliance in the  
early 1970s, in science  
represents energy.

There's one inspired by an animal.  
My favourite one is the lavender  
rhinoceros, which has a red heart  
that emerged in the US, I believe  
in Boston in the mid-1970s.

It symbolises  
strength and resilience against  
adversity because it's a much  
maligned animal.

But some queer symbols emerge  
from less celebratory, more  
defiant beginnings.

One of the most powerful and iconic  
subversions of imagery was the pink  
triangle, which is reappropriated  
from its use in Nazi concentration camps.

It was sowed on people's  
uniforms when they were in prison to  
identify them as  
gay men in  
the concentration camps.

There were other triangles as well.

There was a black triangle, for  
example, that identified  
antisocial behaviour and  
that included lesbians  
amongst them.

In a way, it's been  
reclaimed by the  
communities in the same way  
that the word 'queer' has been reclaimed.

In the mid-80s  
there was a campaign called 'silence = Death,'  
where they took that pink triangle  
and flipped it.

That campaign was addressing the  
silence around the AIDS epidemic  
in both media and government at the time.

There were thousands, tens  
of thousands, hundreds of thousands

of people that weren't being  
represented.

Historical artists have also  
frequently used the guise of  
classical or mythological identity  
to smuggle in references  
to LGBTQ+ sentiments and feelings.

Comparatively to the Middle Ages,  
antiquity was a time of acceptance.

Queer people might not have had the  
labels that we do today, but  
it's freer, more open attitudes  
towards sexualities made  
ancient Greece and Rome a  
touchstone that artists throughout  
history returned to.

Those people had found the kind  
of, the vehicle in which to put  
their desire, kind of smuggle into  
the thing that's existing and  
already allowed.

Was it sanctioned by history,  
and by great literature.

It's allowed the artist  
to perhaps dwell  
on the beauty of  
the male figure.

You can say, 'well, you know, that's  
Haidrian and Antinoüs  
or that's Achilles and Patroclus.

Or from the Bible,

David and Jonathan.

So artists use these figures,  
like Simeon Solomon's depiction  
of Sappho, a Greek poet from Lesbos,  
from which the word lesbian is derived.

A sensual depiction of two women in an embrace,  
dress slipping off a shoulder, two  
birds mimicking their form from behind.

But it isn't just visual artworks  
in which queer code was used.

From the 30s to the 60s, a  
vernacular slang called 'Polari'  
was used by gay men.

Polari is a form of a slang  
language, which took words from  
lots of different places.

There was around 500 to 600  
words documented  
from Yiddish, from slang terms used by  
circus performers,  
wrestlers, apparently  
merchant sailors too  
and it was adopted by gay circles.

Particularly gay men communicating  
with each other without risk.

There are some words still used  
today that actually originated  
from Polari.

Cottaging and cruising,  
which have particular connotations to them. There are words like naff,  
which is a word from Polari.

Which just goes to show the legacy  
of these kinds of codes.  
So a variety of visual  
and linguistic codes can be seen  
throughout history,  
hinting at queer experiences and inner lives.  
But is there also a broader visual  
language that runs through history?  
Is there such a thing as a queer aesthetic?  
It's hard to sort of say what a queer aesthetic is  
without stereotyping someone, I think.  
There isn't any one experience.  
Queerness is something that's  
difficult to describe.  
It's multitudinous  
there are lots of voices  
with different lived experiences and  
different opinions trying to be expressed.  
Aesthetics change with time.  
We are every colour in the spectrum,  
aren't we?  
Nonetheless, through arts history,  
LGBTQ+ artists  
have been inspired by their  
predecessors.  
So there are themes and motifs  
that emerge.  
Because we don't see many images  
which represent us,  
we have to find ourselves,  
we have to re-appropriate the

imagery that exists.

There is a way in which like,  
material and imagery is  
recycled.

And so they are there in our DNA  
without us necessarily directly  
referring to them.

Whether it's the use of a certain colour or certain types of fashion,  
images of camp or drag.

I associate it with otherness  
in a way.

Anything that is  
not societal norm or the  
heteronormative.

Maybe there's a gaydar in painting...

Of course, there are specific  
aesthetics and subcultures within  
the broader LGBTQ+  
umbrella like flowers,  
which recur from Gluck's coded  
still lives to the floral  
compositions of Karl van Vechten's  
photography of Harlem residents,  
in the 30s and 40s,  
to Mapplethorpe's black and  
white flower photography.

Since legal changes have in  
recent decades made the lives  
of queer people more open and free,  
so too has the art produced by  
LGBTQ+ artists.



The world of queer art opened up,  
becoming bolder, louder  
and more mainstream.

There's less requirement for  
people to use those symbols,  
those codes, which in essence,  
were there to protect people.

And yet, if you look closely,  
those secret codes and aesthetics  
are still there.

It is interesting even being in times when you  
potentially can be more overt, and are more overt,  
again, it does seem to be something of fascination  
and something which comes quite naturally  
to slide in a reference.

People will read it when they know what it is,  
but for others, for other it might pass them by.

For today's artists  
really, it's about exploring,  
analysing and challenging the  
visuals that have defined queer  
culture of the past.

When we come to try to find our own language,  
how do we do that?

How can we identify an authentic voice  
when everything we are is  
developed as a consequence of  
everything that we see and  
everything that we know and all the  
expectations which are placed on us, etc.

We are all formed by the

cultures that make us.

And maybe it's these figures from  
the past, maybe it's these like  
myths, maybe it's other people  
who've made something before and  
the way that I like to work with  
that when I get it is to kind of pick it  
apart and like to talk about  
both like the histories, that  
inform us and the kind of  
shortcomings of those histories.

I thought I wanted to try to make some images,  
Which try to deal with that,  
try to deal with the difficulty of that.

And so secret languages are  
always with us, constantly  
evolving, resurfacing  
and speaking to us.