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 as 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.