

History of Queer Symbology

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Symbols of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people over time have ranged from the very visible six-striped rainbow flag to the more obscure and seldom recognized purple hand. The symbols have a varied history. Some symbols were given by outside influences; others were originated from within gay liberation movements. The symbols are as diverse as the individuals that they represent.

One of the earliest symbols used by homosexuals was the pink triangle, which was assigned to them during the Holocaust by the Nazi government of Germany. The symbol was assigned to men who violated section 175 of German law. Just as Jews were designated with a Star of David, homosexual men were forced to wear the pink triangle to indicate their offense. While in concentration camps, the men wearing the symbol were sterilized, often by castration (Rapp, 2003). Gay men were often attacked by the guards, as well as other prisoners in the camps. Lesbians were not originally identified in the same manner, but before the end of the Holocaust, they were identified using a black triangle (Haeberle, 1981). In 1973, gay rights organizations in both Germany and the United States made an effort to “reclaim” the symbol of the pink triangle, by using it as a symbol for their movements. This effort to reclaim was an attempt to commemorate the lives lost during the Holocaust as well to bring awareness to the continued persecution of homosexuals. Over time the pink triangle has been utilized by itself, or on the backdrop of a rainbow flag (Rapp, 2003).

The rainbow flag representing the LGBT community was originally designed by Gilbert Baker in 1978 for the Gay and Lesbian Freedom Day Parade. The original flag was constructed

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of eight horizontal stripes: pink (fuchsia), red, orange, yellow, green, turquoise (blue), indigo, and violet (Rapp, 2002). The flag was constructed after Baker, then a drag costume designer, was contacted by Harvey Milk to design a flag to represent the gay pride movement in San Francisco during the parade. Milk's desire to promote an open, "out", identity is the reason for the creation of the flag. Many people shared Milk's view, and as such the rainbow flag became a widely used symbol of not only the lesbian and gay rights movement, but also of lesbian and gay individuals. Milk and Baker together decided that the gay community needed a symbol that came from "inside", instead of using the pink triangle reclaimed from the holocaust. The original rainbow flag contained a pink stripe as its top bar as a connection to the original pink triangle symbol. Unfortunately due to manufacturing difficulties incurred due to the complication of fabric dying in the 1970s, the pink stripe was removed in 1979 (djpaulypauld, 2011). Turquoise and indigo were eventually replaced by a single blue stripe because of concerns regarding visually discerning an odd number of stripes when the flag was mounted vertically. Specifically for the 1979 Gay and Lesbian Freedom Day parade it was the intention to mount the flags vertically on lamp posts throughout San Francisco, and as such, the flag was reduced to six stripes (Rapp, 2002). Baker intends for both the pink and indigo stripes to eventually return to the flag (Hayes, 2010). The colors of the rainbow flag are assigned meanings by Baker and others involved in the gay pride movement, although Baker himself admits that the meanings were assigned arbitrarily, with only the flag as a whole carrying meaning for the movement for which it was created (djpaulypauld, 2011). The traditional meanings assigned are: pink for sexuality, red for life, orange for healing, yellow for sunlight, green for nature, turquoise for art or magic, indigo for harmony or serenity, and violet for spirit (Hayes, 2010). Over time the flag

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has been adopted in numerous variants, including bear pride, bisexual pride and leather pride, which includes the bondage/discipline and sadomasochism community (Rapp, 2003).

The lowercase letter lambda (λ), from the Greek alphabet, is another symbol that has over time evolved to be representative of the queer community. It was originally promoted as a symbol of gay activism by the Gay Activists Alliance in 1970. It was selected as a symbol of high energy, due to its relationship with optics and kinetic energy. The association of the lowercase lambda with Spartan soldiers was also an appealing aspect due to the symbolism of an army joined against a common oppressor (Gay Activists Alliance, 1970). The adoption of the symbol was upheld by the International Gay Rights Congress in 1974, which made lambda an international symbol of gay rights (International Gay Rights Congress, 1974). Today numerous organizations, including Lambda Legal, various community organizations and gay fraternities (Yeung & Stompler, 2000) use the letter in their names to designate their association with the gay community and to indicate they are a safe place for LGBT individuals.

Functioning as a symbol, a letter and a word, lambda is one of the most versatile symbols of the lesbian and gay movements, without the potentially negative connotations that may be raised from internally created symbols such as the rainbow flag, or from previously homophobic symbols such as the pink triangle.

The green carnation was popularized as a symbol of the queer community by Oscar Wilde. Wilde used green carnations as an indication of his identity as a homosexual within his social circle. Wilde publicly denied the association of sexuality with the green carnation (Beckson, 2000). Whether Wilde intended for the meaning to be associated with the carnation or not remains debated, although the satirical account in “The Green Carnation” by Robert Hichens,

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has been used in support of the assumption that it was his intention for the green carnation to be an indicator of sexual identity. Regardless of Wilde's intentions, the green carnation took on the role of being a symbol of homosexuality when worn by men. Wilde also inspired an association between colorful accessories and hidden sexual meanings. It is generally believed that Wilde inspired the handkerchief code that is in use by the LGBT community to indicate sexual interests (Rapp, 2003).

A more recent symbol that has been recognized is the white knot. The white knot is representative of marriage equality. The creation of the white not as an LGBT symbol directly corresponds to the passing of Proposition 8 in California (White Knot for Equality, 2011), an amendment to the state constitution designed to restrict legal marriage to a single man and a single woman, eliminating same-sex marriage (Secretary of State of California, 2008). The white knot is a symbol of marriage, utilizing the Western cultural reference to marriage as "tying the knot". White is a traditional color associated with marriage, and as such it was selected to be the color of the knots for the movement for marriage equality (White Knot for Equality, 2011).

Each symbol of the queer community has its own distinct history and purpose. The symbols covered here are only a sampling of the symbols that exist. Gilbert Baker describes the gay community as being "tribal", and intentionally less unified than heteronormative society (djpaulypauld, 2011). If that is the case and the gay community is fragmented, then the symbols for common goals are even more important as a sign of LGBT solidarity to society as a whole.

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