Rainbow Reflections

This small exhibit offers a glimpse into the rich and complex history of LGBTQ+ life, activism, and culture. The stories reflected in these pieces and images hold deep meaning, highlighting struggle, resistance, visibility, and joy that have shaped—and continue to shape—LGBTQ+ communities.

The Pride Movement began as a protest, a response to injustice and marginalization. It has since grown into a celebration of identity, love, and solidarity. The objects and stories on display represent just a few moments in this ongoing journey.

While no single exhibit can capture the full scope of queer history, this space invites reflection, recognition, and connection. It seeks to honor those who have fought for change, those who live their truth every day, and the generations continuing to imagine and build a more inclusive future.

The exhibit and its programming are generously supported by the Carden-Temple LGBTQ+ Impact Fund. We also thank the Greater Community AIDS Project of East Central Illinois for their continued support.

Learn About

The Objects

Spilling the Tea

Across the globe, scholars have noted evidence that tea parties have historically been places where queer people could gather without too much notice. Often it was women who wished to be in the presence of other women, and sometimes lovers would set up dates under the guise of teatime.

The significance of these events never left the minds of the queer community. In the US during the 1950s, when LGBTQ+ people faced discrimination and limited social acceptance, tea parties—often called tea dances—served as a way for lesbians and gay men to find safe spaces and connect with others. As it was illegal to serve alcohol to known homosexuals, venues without alcohol licenses promoted these afternoon tea dances to avoid attention and provide a space for LGBTQ+ individuals to socialize.

Fan-tastic

Fans were first invented in Japan in the 7th century and were spreading into Europe by the 15th only continuing in widespread use after that. But how did it come to be associated with queer culture? That answer is harder to pin down, but a few theories exist.

First, gay men were often not accepted in Western society until very recently. As a result, some moved to places like Morocco, Thailand, Vietnam, and China, where they could live more freely. Fans became an important tool for flirtation, especially in Spain, Japan, and China, where their use was considered an art form. Because some gay men expressed themselves in more feminine or playful ways, fans became a part of their flirting style.

Second, it is theorized they became a staple at circuit parties where queer people would dance all night, and needing to cool down they would use fans since they were small, fun, and easy to coordinate with any outfit. From there drag queens then adopted them for similar purposes.

Third, it is assumed that their popularity in the United States is attributed to the feminine qualities ascribed to the fan. Playing on this, straight women and gay men alike used fans to flirt with men. It is as simple as that.

Regardless of which origin story is correct, fans are stylish, expressive, and eye-catching. They add flair and drama, making them a perfect accessory. Plus, they're practical—great for cooling off while dancing or in crowded spaces. All these reasons help explain why they're so beloved in the queer community today.

Divine Desires

Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty, and desire, is a central figure in Greek mythology.

The Greek poet Sappho, often considered the oldest known lesbian poet, wrote extensively about love, including love between women. Sappho's poetry helped to shape the image of Aphrodite as a figure associated with lesbian love and identity, leading to the term “Sapphic” being used to describe lesbian love and culture. While Aphrodite is not explicitly depicted as having female lovers in classical myths, the association with Sappho and her poetry has cemented her as a figure of importance for lesbians.

Other Greek deities are sometimes considered patrons of gay love between men, such as Eros, Himeros, and Pothos, three brothers associated with desire.

Sips of Seduction

Shunga is a genre of Japanese erotic art that flourished during the Edo period (1603–1868). This artform depicted explicit sexual scenes from everyday life with a mix of humor, tenderness, and exaggerated proportions. It was enjoyed by all classes of society and was believed to bring good fortune and ward off evil. While these twentieth-century sake cups are not authentic shunga themselves, they nod to the style and give us an interesting look into same-sex love.

In early twentieth-century Japan, the emergence of the term *dōseiai* signified a shift in how same-sex love between women was perceived. Before the 1910s, danshoku was the dominant term for homosexuality, exclusively referring to male relationships. Love between women had existed but without linguistic recognition, making it easier to dismiss or overlook. By the 1910s and 1920s, female same-sex love became a site of cultural anxiety. Dōseiai was not merely a new word. It marked a new public consciousness that framed lesbianism as both modern and dangerous. Thus, dōseiai was not just a term but a tool—one that pathologized love between women while reinforcing the rigid expectations of femininity in a rapidly changing Japan.

Objects in this exhibit:

Blue Teacup
Germany, 20th c.
Gift of Harley J. McKee.
1968.05.0024A.

Pink or Violet Teacup
Liverpool, United Kingdom, ca. 1850–1890.
Gift of Mrs. F. L. Stevens in Memory of Mr. Stevens.
1934.01.0015.

Green Teacup
Russia, 19th c.
Gift of William A. Shirk.
1957.01.0001A.

Yellow Teacup
United Kingtom, 20th c.
Gift of Harley J. McKee.
1968.05.0033A.

Orange and Black Fan
Qing Dynasty China, ca. 1880.
Courtesy of Mrs. W. A. Noyes.
1900.24.0030.

Red Fan
Late 19th c.
Gift of Mrs. Thomas E. Berger.
1972.01.0005.

Gown by Morgan Wells
2022.06.0001.

Wig by Tena Marie
Texas.
2022.06.0003.

Jewels by Mona Monclair
Urbana.
2022.06.0002.

Aphrodite Figurine
Turkey, Hellenistic era (3rd–1st c. BCE).
University of Marburg Archaeological Seminar Collection. 1922.01.00098.

Sake Cups
Japan, 20th c.
Dengate Family Collection.
2024.02.0001.

Ron Steinhoff-Thorton Quilt Panel
Courtesy of the Greater Community AIDS Project of East Central Illinois

David French Quilt Panel
Courtesy of the Greater Community AIDS Project of East Central Illinois

Learn More

About Pride

Sounding Off: LGBTQIA+ Activism

The Stonewall rebellions of 1969 were a series of protests against police raids that targeted queer communities being served alcohol. This is the only known photograph taken during the first night of the riots.

Public Domain photo by Joseph Ambrosini of the *New York Daily News*.

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras festival in Australia concludes with the Sydney Mardi Gras Parade, a vibrant protest for LGBTQIA+ rights and a celebration of diverse sexualities. Over 12,500 participants take part, wearing colorful costumes and riding dazzling floats that reflect community groups, current themes, or political statements.

South Africa Pride 2012 participants in Soweto protest violence against lesbians with a “Dying for Justice” banner and T-shirts that read “Solidarity with women who speak out.”

By Charles Haynes CC BY SA 2.0.

This photo depicts a protest held in November 2008 in New York City, which brought attention to a bill that outlawed same-sex marriage supporting "civil unions" instead.

Photo by David Shankbone.

Two members of the anti-capitalist Homosexual Liberation Front (Spanish: Frente de Liberación Homosexual, FLH) from Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1971.

By WikiCommons

Gay rights demonstration at the 1976 Democratic National Convention in New York City.

Leffler, Warren K, photographer. Gay rights demonstration at the Democratic National Convention, New York City. New York, 1976. Photograph. https://www.loc.gov/item/2005696365/.

Protest Film

Gay and Proud

The Second Largest Minority

Pride Around the World

On June 28, 1970, the first official Pride marches were held in New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion. Over time, Pride events grew fro small protest marches into large celebratio of identity and visibility, blending activism with joy and community.

Pride soon spread beyond the U.S., with London hosting its first march in 1972, followed by cities in Canada, Europe, and eventually every continent.

Chicago's 16th Annual Gay & Lesbian Pride Parade, June 1985.
Credit: Alan Light.

Berlin, Germany Pride 1997. By WikiCommons

The 2012 national Gay Pride march in Bologna, Italy gathered 15,000 marchers. By Stefano Bolognini.

Brazil's 18th annual São Paulo LGBT Pride Parade 2014. By Ben Tavener.

Cape Town, South Africa Pride 2014. By Samantha Marx CC by 2.0

Örebro, Sweeden Pride 2015. CC by 2.0

Vietnam Pride 2016 in Hanoi. Public Domain By USAID

Mexico City, Mexico Pride 2016. By IssacVP

Bangalore, India celebrates its second annual gay pride parade hosting a crowd of nearly 1,000. CC by Nick Johnson.

Toronto, Canada Pride Parade 2018. CC by 2.0

Greater Community AIDS Project of East Central Illinois

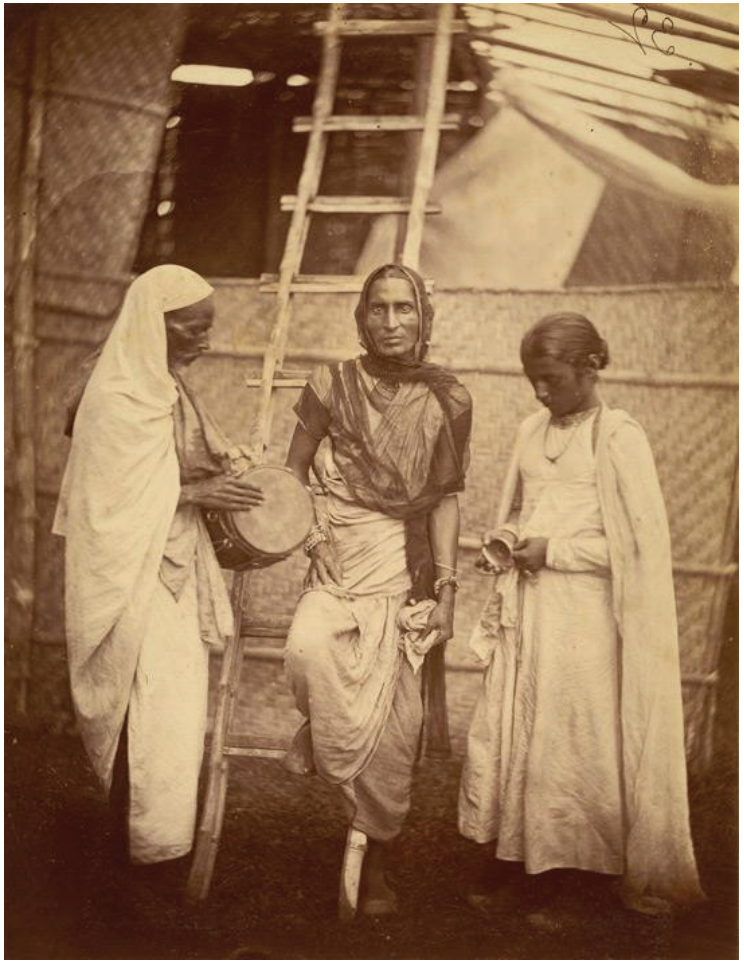
Founded in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, GCAP provides life-saving support and advocacy for people living with HIV/AIDS in East Central Illinois. Offering housing, case management, and financial aid, GCAP helps individuals maintain health and stability. Through education and outreach, the organization works to prevent new infections and build a more informed, compassionate, and inclusive community.

Learn more at this link.

Outside the Binary

Across time and place, many cultures have recognized genders beyond the male-female binary. In Indigenous North American communities, Two-Spirit people embody both masculine and feminine qualities and often hold important spiritual or social roles. In South Asia, hijras have been recognized for centuries and form distinct communities with cultural and religious significance. Pacific Island cultures such as those in Samoa recognize fa'afafine, who are individuals that live outside Western gender norms.

Identities like these are found in cultures all over the world. These identities reflect the diversity and complexity of gender as a social and cultural construct, not solely a biological category. While European colonialism and modern legal systems have often tried to erase or suppress these identities, many communities have resisted, continuing to live as their true selves.



Hijras are recognized in South Asia as a third gender—neither male nor female. Often born male or intersex, many present femininely and may undergo a ritual castration. Hijra communities exist throughout modern states of Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bangladesh, although they continue to face marginalization and police abuse. This photo depicts a Bengali hijra and their companions in 1860.

In Zapotec culture in Oaxaca, Mexico, muxes are people assigned male at birth who embrace feminine roles and identities. Recognized as a third gender, muxes reflect a blend of tradition, individuality, and cultural pride, playing an important role in preserving Zapotec customs and challenging binary gender norms. Learn more about muxe identity in the case called “Adorned in Tradition” in the Americas gallery. This is a photo of Lukas Avendaño, a Zapotec muxe performance artist from Mexico.

In Samoa and American Samoa, fa‘afafine refers to a recognized third gender. Individuals are raised as ar identify as women, while still being biologically mal This is a cultural and societal norm in these regions distinct from transgender or lesbian/gay identities. Identities like fa’afafine are also found in other Oceanic cultures.

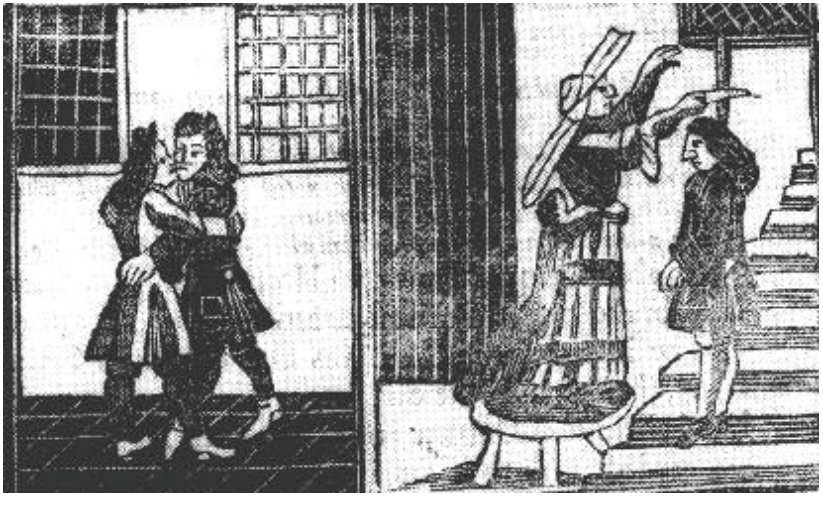
Facebook -Samoan Fa'afafine Association

Mahu

Two-Spirit

The Bay Area American Indian Two-Spirits march at San Francisco Pride in 2013.

Who's Molly?



English Molly House. CC BY 4.0

In 18th-century England, "molly-houses" were spaces where queer and gender-nonconforming men could gather, celebrate, and avoid the rigid norms of gender and sexuality in London and elsewhere in Europe. The term "molly," once used for lower-class women and sex workers, came to describe these men who found freedom in singing, dancing, cross-dressing, and even mock weddings and births. Molly-houses, in legal proceedings, were often compared to male brothels, like the ones depicted here by Léon Choubrac and the accompanied unauthored piece.

Gay Rodeo

Gay rodeo emerged in the United States in the 1970s as a space where LGBTQ+ people could celebrate Western culture while challenging stereotypes about both cowboys and queer identity. With events like bull riding and barrel racing, gay rodeos blend traditional rodeo skills with inclusive community values. They offer visibility, camaraderie, and pride in spaces where LGBTQ+ people are often excluded.

Photo from the Grand Entry at the Rocky Mountain Regional Rodeo in 2005. Photo by the Colorado Gay Rodeo Association.

The Gay Rodeo

Link to video by Localish on Youtube.

Work it, queen!

Actor, theatre owner, broadway star, and female impersonator Julian Eltinge in 1925. By WikiCommons

show at the Stonewall Discotheque in Miami Beach, Florida, in 1972. CC by 2.0

Drag queens from Buenos Aires advertising a nightclub in 1995.
Courtesy of Archivo de la Memoria Trans.

Shea Couleé, The Vivienne, RuPaul, Trinity the Tuck, Jinkx Monsoon, Monét X Change, and Raja at LA DragCon 2022.
By WikiCommons

Work it, king!

New York drag king, comedian, and entertainer Murray Hill in 2023. By WikiCommons.