

# Frill seekers

Graceful and practical in equal measure, the parasol has a long and colourful history when it comes to creating shade. Deborah Nicholls-Lee takes cover

ONCE held aloft for rulers and royalty, the parasol is thought to have protected the privileged from the sun for 4,000 years before the English adopted it. 'From its first appearance, the parasol was associated with rank, as it was carried over, rather than by, the person it shaded,' writes Jeremy Farrell in *Umbrellas & Parasols* (1986). Originally made of broad leaves, paper or feathers, they were popular with Egyptian nobles, Assyrian monarchs and Chinese emperors, with status conferred by the size or the number of tiers. In pre-colonial Burma, it was the quantity and colour of the parasols carried that conveyed your social standing.

‘The parasol signalled a delicate complexion worth protecting’

According to Mr Farrell, the earliest evidence of the parasol on British soil is an inventory penned for Mary, Queen of Scots in 1561, where a fringed canopy of crimson satin ‘serving to mak Schaddow afoir the Quene’ is listed among her possessions. The portable parasol then makes sporadic appearances—in the trousseau of Catherine of Braganza, for example, when she married Charles II in 1662; and, in fiction, we have the hero of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) fashioning one from skins on his desert island. The French took to the parasol with some enthusiasm in the 18th century, taking their cue from fashion arbiter Madame de Pompadour, who would inspire the *marquise* model. In Paris, parasols were even rented out so people could peacock along the Pont Neuf.



Above: With a flirtatious flourish, Marilyn Monroe revives parasol semaphore in the 1950s.

Right: Summer son: Monet’s *Woman with a Parasol—Madame Monet and Her Son*, 1875

The British Isles, however, would not reach peak parasol until the 1800s, when this marriage of fashion and function became irresistible to an aspirational and expanding middle class. The accessory signalled a delicate complexion worth protecting and the means to stroll at leisure or travel in an open-top carriage. By 1851, the Great Exhibition was already showcasing nifty models retracted with the touch of a button, alongside an extravagant pink moiré and satin parasol presented to Queen Victoria that featured a stick set with diamonds, rubies and emeralds.

The most coveted parasols were made of exotic materials that sent out strong signals about the owner’s status and the trade routes that were opening up across the world. Covers could be made of linen, cotton, satin or silk—or even paper from the Far East. They were structured with ribs of whalebone, bamboo,

copper alloy and, later, steel. Trimmings included tassels, feathers, jewels or lace. The most grandiose were mounted onto handles of intricately carved ivory and the most artistic were painted with colourful flowers, insects and birds. For all their style and splendour, parasols could also prove somewhat cumbersome, especially in the confined space of a carriage. In the 1830s, foldable models were released that featured a hinge in the stick and diminutive ‘telegram’ parasols, barely wider than a dinner plate, appeared on the scene in the late 1850s, although their fashionably dainty appearance was clearly a triumph of form over function.

When selecting a parasol, the choice of colour mattered enormously, with care taken to avoid inadvertently dulling the complexion. ‘A parasol lined with rose de chine, or carnation coloured silk, sheds a youthful →







and animated colour over the face,' advised the art critic Charles Blanc in his acclaimed *Art in Ornament and Dress* (1877). Should this fabric clash with the bearer's outfit, there was no need to worry. 'The parasol can be made to harmonise with the dress by means of a light flounce, or by a small fringe of the same colour as the dress or its trimmings.'

The parasol not only protected a lady's fashionably pale complexion, but—as the esteemed French bibliophile Octave Uzanne observed in *The Sunshade, The Glove, The Muff* (1883)—it 'adds new graces to a woman' and 'surrounds as with a halo the charms of her face'. French Impressionist painters, such as Monet and Renoir, favoured it as a focal point on canvas, as did their American counterparts, Frederick Carl Friezeke and Colin Campbell Cooper, who featured colourful Oriental parasols that bloomed like exotic flowers. Emblems of privilege and High Society, parasols also became the darlings of print media and were seized upon by lifestyle editors, who splashed them on the front covers of *Vogue*, *Britannia*, *Eve* and the expatriate publication *The Sphere*.

For the imaginative writer, the parasol made wonderful copy. René-Marie Cazal, a parasol manufacturer in the mid 1800s, was clearly in full sales mode when he proclaimed that: 'The Sunshade, like a rosy vapour, attenuates and



*Above:* A charming halo: Audrey Hepburn seeks graceful shelter. *Below:* The parasol as a mark of class in Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, 1884–86





## Here comes the sun

There was a time when going out into the midday sun was considered quite mad, not only due to the oppressive heat, but because of the risk of tanning. Arsenic, lead and mercury were among the poisons applied to the Victorian complexion to whiten it, according to upper-class beauty conventions that saw darker skin tones deemed undesirable due to their association with outdoor work and manual labour.

This began to change in the early 1900s, when the use of ultraviolet rays to treat tuberculosis and rickets planted a seed that sunlight was good for you. When, in 1923, Coco Chanel inadvertently tanned during a cruise of the French Riviera, a trend for sun-kissed skin gathered pace. A tanned glow—acquired by the pool, or, like Chanel, on a yacht—denoted a lifestyle born of affluence and became a mark of pride.

Parasols and gauntlets were abandoned and, by the 1940s, when tan stockings were in short supply, light-skinned women even painted their legs with tea and Bovril for that bronzed look. As the link between sun exposure and skin cancer was confirmed, sunscreen hit British shelves, created from curious ingredients such as chestnut extract and petroleum. Armed with these products, we resumed our place on the sun-lounger. Mad dogs and Englishmen...

softens the contour of the features, revives the vanished tints, [and] surrounds the physiognomy with its diaphanous reflections.' In fairness, the parasol did compare favourably with the rather clumsy-looking 'umbrella bonnets' (wide-brimmed hats) that were also popular at the time. In contrast, notes T. S. Crawford in *A History of the Umbrella* (1970), the parasol 'was light and elegant' and its possibilities manifold. 'Serving both as a dress accessory and a shade from the sun, it could also be used to hide the modest bearer from unwelcome glances, or gracefully handled, could prove a most effective aid to coquetry.'

## 'How many dramas, has it hidden with its cloud of silk!'

Indeed, for those in the know, parasol semaphore played a flirtatious role in courting: a strike on the hand expressed displeasure, for example, whereas pressing the handle to your lips invited a kiss. Twirl it around and you were warning your suitor that your



Cover story: *Vogue* is among the magazines to draw on the parasol's High Society links

exchange was being watched. Deliberately dropping a parasol was code for a declaration of love. 'How many sweet smiles have played under its corolla!' gushed Monsieur Cazal. 'How many charming signs of the head, how many intoxicating and magic looks, has the Sunshade protected from jealousy and indiscretion! How many emotions, how many dramas, has it hidden with its cloud of silk!'

Should a man's attention be unwanted, the parasol again came to the rescue. Deceptively sturdy when folded, it doubled as a handy weapon of self-defence, making women not only prettier, but more powerful. In Edwardian London, a Miss Sanderson even taught classes on how to use a parasol to fend off assailants. She was 'as capable with the stick as the sword,' wrote one journalist, who was impressed

by her display of 'down slashes, upper cuts, side swings, jabs and thrusts'. If necessary, the parasol could even serve as armour: a model owned by Queen Victoria was designed to protect her from any attempt on her life, concealing between two pieces of green silk a layer of impenetrable chainmail.

Yet, above all, the parasol was 'a weapon of coquetry,' wrote critic Charles Blanc. It concealed women's faces, suggesting a measure of modesty, and drew attention to them as a signifier of good taste and ample means. 'Do you imagine that women have invented it to preserve their complexion from the heats of the sun?' he inquires. 'Certainly, without doubt; but... what a grudge they would have against the sun, if it gave them no pretext for defending themselves against his rays!' 🐉