



Symbols

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The symbols of glbtq pride are diverse in origin and meaning, but they serve the crucial purpose of rendering visible communities that have been erased or marginalized. Moreover, they assert a defiant and sometimes hard-won self-esteem in the face of discrimination and oppression.

Pink and black triangles come from the horrors of the Holocaust but have been reclaimed as signs of solidarity and determination. The labrys is an ancient icon whose importance still resonates. The rainbow flag was created as a sign of affirmation and celebration of the glbtq community. Still other symbols are used to represent bisexuals, the transgendered, leather people, and Bears, among other elements of the diverse glbtq community.

Pink Triangle

The pink triangle (*Rosawinkel*) is a badge of oppression that has been reclaimed as a symbol of pride.

During the Nazi regime some 100,000 people were arrested for homosexual offenses under Paragraph 175 of the German criminal code. Most of those convicted for these offenses were sentenced to prison, and between 5,000 and 15,000 of them were incarcerated in concentration camps.

Once there they were obliged to wear badges indicating the reason for their detention. In the early days of the camps gay men were assigned armbands with a black dot or "175" inscribed on it.

Later, a system of colored triangular patches was instituted. Gay men were identified by an inverted pink triangle sewn on the left shoulder and right trouser leg of their uniforms.

Historian Eugen Kogon has concluded that "the fate of the homosexuals in the camps can only be described as ghastly." Gay men were subject to sterilization, often by castration, and other medical experimentation. In the camps they were assigned the most arduous tasks and were in danger of attacks not just from guards but also from other prisoners.

In the end, wrote Kogon, "virtually all of them perished." Those who survived the war were kept in jail because Paragraph 175 remained in force.

In the early 1970s, gay rights organizations in both Germany and the United States reclaimed the pink triangle.

In 1973 the German gay liberation group Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin (HAW) called upon gays to wear the pink triangle but warned that it would make them targets of discrimination in a homophobic society. Two years later the gay magazine *H.A.W.-Info* again promoted the wearing of the triangle as both a memorial to past victims and a protest against continuing oppression. The 1976 film *Rosa Winkel? Das ist*



The labrys, or double-bladed ax, is one of many symbols adopted by glbtq communities. Image created by Wikimedia Commons contributor EvaK. Image appears under the GNU Free Documentation License.

doch schon lange vorbei... ("Pink Triangle? That was such a long time ago..."), directed by Peter Recht, Detlef Stoffel, and Christiane Schmerl, echoed this theme and documented the persistence of the persecution of gay men.

With Paragraph 175 still on the books, although modified, the gay journal *Rosa Flieder* warned in 1980 that "the pink triangle . . . is not only a remembrance of the past extermination of gays. There is oppression of and discrimination against gays even in this day and age." In a subsequent issue the journal pointed out that police in some regions of the country were still compiling lists of gay citizens.

American gay activists of the 1970s also used the pink triangle as a symbol of both remembrance and the need for progress.

Both the San Francisco journal *Gay Sunshine* (in 1973) and the Toronto gay journal *The Body Politic* (in 1974) ran articles about the concentration camp prisoners who had worn the pink triangle, and urged the use of the symbol as a memorial to them.

The pink triangle took on added political significance when activist groups supporting a New York gay rights bill adopted the symbol in 1974. Orthodox Jewish groups opposed the ordinance, and so gay rights activists organized a protest at which "picketers wore pink triangle armbands in an effort to demonstrate that homosexual men had been fellow victims with Jews (and others) in the Nazi concentration camps."

The following year in a *New York Times* editorial Ira Glasser, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, called upon all readers to wear the pink triangle to show support for the pending bill, which was designed to end discrimination against homosexuals in employment, housing, and public accommodation. Commenting on the persecution of gays in Nazi Germany, Glasser wrote, "Many know about the yellow star, but the pink triangle still lies buried as a virtual historical secret."

In the mid-1980s ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) adopted the triangle but with the point facing upward to symbolize the need for "an active fight back rather than a passive resignation to fate." The symbol often appeared above the motto "Silence = Death."

Not everyone has supported the use of the pink triangle as a pride symbol. Senior editor Sara Hart of the magazine *10 Percent* wrote against the symbol in 1993, saying that it trivialized the suffering of gay and lesbian victims of the Holocaust. Readers generally disagreed. In letters to the editor, they cited the ongoing struggle against homophobia, anti-gay legislation, and the lack of government response during the Reagan administration to the AIDS epidemic.

The pink triangle has become a symbol of pride and determination as well as of remembrance. As Erik N. Jensen wrote, "The pink triangle has served multiple functions: it has united a diverse population of gay men and women, mobilized political action, and provided an interpretive framework for contemporary experiences."

Black Triangle

Although Paragraph 175 applied only to gay men, and most of the homosexual victims of Nazism were men, nevertheless some lesbians were also incarcerated in Nazi Germany's concentration camps. Lesbians in the camps wore the black triangle of the "asocial" category of prisoner, so designated because they failed to adhere to the Aryan ideal of womanhood, a wife dedicated to "*Kinder, Küche, und Kirche*" ("children, kitchen, and church").

While non-lesbians were also included in the asocial category, lesbians in Germany and the United States began reclaiming the black triangle as a pride symbol in the 1980s. Many advocates of its use felt the need for a woman-specific symbol. Some argued that the exclusive use of the pink triangle not only hid the

lesbian victims of the Holocaust from the view of history but also marginalized women in the contemporary gay rights movement.

The black triangle is not a symbol as ubiquitous as the pink triangle, but it also stands as a memorial to victims of oppression and a sign of commitment to the struggle for dignity and human rights.

Other Triangles

The triangle has also been adopted as a pride symbol by bisexual and transgender people.

The bisexual symbol consists of two triangles, a pink one in front and slightly to the left of a blue.

The transgender pride symbol is a pink triangle with a blue figure that incorporates the signs for Mars and Venus. In the center is a blue circle. An arrow pointing to the upper right corner completes the sign of Mars. A cross extending toward the point at the bottom of the triangle makes the sign of Venus. A crossed arrow pointing toward the upper right corner of the triangle combines the two.

Perhaps the most absurd moment in the history of the triangle symbol came in 1999 when conservative Christian televangelist Jerry Falwell in his *National Liberty Journal* issued a "Parents Alert: Tinky Winky Comes out of the Closet." The object of Falwell's scorn was a character on the *Teletubbies* television show, a British program shown on PBS in the United States whose target audience is two-year-olds.

The teletubbies are colorful, fuzzy little creatures with antennas on their heads. Falwell, noting that Tinky Winky's antenna is triangular and further observing that Tinky Winky is purple and sometimes carries a purse, concluded that Tinky Winky was gay. "These subtle depictions are no doubt intentional," said Falwell, who added that "as a Christian I felt that role-modeling the gay lifestyle is damaging to the moral lives of children."

Falwell's condemnation of Tinky Winky met with general derision. Typical of public comment was Elaine Lafferty's lead in an article in *The Irish Times*: "Now that the question of whether the U. S. presidency will survive seems to be subsiding, a new question is threatening to surface in America: Is Tinky Winky gay?"

Lambda

First used as a sign of gay pride in 1970, the lambda has become a widely recognized symbol.

New York City's Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) chose the lower-case lambda at the suggestion of Tom Doerr, a graphic artist. The GAA explained that since the lambda stood for "a complete exchange of energy" in chemistry and physics, it was an apt symbol of potential for change. They proclaimed it a sign of "a commitment among men and women to achieve and defend their human rights as homosexual citizens."

Other meanings have become attached to the lambda. Some have noted that it is used in science to represent wavelength and thus may stand for a specifically gay and lesbian perspective or "wavelength." Others have referred to the use of the letter on the shields or battle flags of ancient Greek regiments whose warriors were accompanied into battle by younger men, possibly their lovers. Still others associate the lambda with the first letter of the word *liberation*.

The lambda was adopted as the official symbol of the gay rights movement at the first International Gay Rights Congress in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1974. It has since been used on clothing, jewelry, and other consumer goods. One version of the rainbow flag features a white lambda near the upper left corner.

The lambda figures in the names of several prominent organizations, including the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund and the Lambda Literary Foundation.

Labrys

The labrys, a double-bladed ax, is an ancient weapon used in the Mediterranean region. It is associated with various deities including Zeus Labrandeus, an androgynous representation in which the god is depicted with both a beard and multiple breasts. It is also considered an image of the scepter of Demeter, whose worship may have involved lesbian sex.

The labrys is perhaps best known as the weapon of the Amazons.

In recent years the labrys has been adopted by lesbian feminists as a symbol of strength and solidarity.

Gender Symbols

The astrological symbols for Mars--a circle with an arrow pointing off to the upper right--and Venus--a circle with a descending cross--have long been used as signs for men and women.

Most commonly seen as gay pride symbols are double figures of each of the signs, betokening same-sex love. These symbols have been employed since the 1970s as emblems of the modern gay rights movement.

In the 1970s, the feminist movement also adopted the Venus symbol and occasionally used double or multiple images of it as a sign of solidarity and sisterhood that was not lesbian-specific.

The symbol for bisexual pride combines the signs of Mars and Venus, with both the arrow and the cross radiating from the central circle. This symbol is incorporated in the triangle used to denote transgender pride.

Various other combinations of the signs have been invented, including joined double-Mars and double-Venus symbols to signify solidarity between gay men and lesbians.

AIDS Ribbon

The AIDS ribbon, a looped red ribbon often worn as a lapel pin, came to widespread public attention when many members of Broadway Cares, an AIDS-research fundraising group of Actors' Equity, wore them to the Tony Awards ceremony in June 1991.

The emblem quickly became well known. On December 1, 1993--World AIDS Day--the United States Postal Service issued an AIDS Awareness stamp featuring the red ribbon. Some members of the Citizens' Stamp Advisory Committee considered the stamp too controversial, but Postmaster General Marvin T. Runyon, a strong supporter of the fight against AIDS, approved the stamp and ordered that 350 million be printed--a rate nearly triple that of some other commemorative issues at the time.

Runyon chose a simple and elegant design by Tom Mann of Warrenton, Virginia. The red ribbon stands out against a white background and slightly overlaps a thin black border. The Postal Service waived licensing fees so that AIDS charities could use the image of the stamp for fundraising.

In 1996, at the conclusion of the United States Figure Skating Championships, Rudy Galindo, America's first openly gay champion, wore a large AIDS ribbon over a stark black costume to honor his late brother and two coaches when he skated his exhibition routine. Four years later Galindo was diagnosed as HIV-positive.

Lavender Rhinoceros

A symbol that did not gain widespread currency, the lavender rhinoceros first appeared in Boston in the mid

1970s. The rhinoceros was chosen as an emblem because the animal is usually docile but puts up a strong defense if threatened. The color links it to the gay rights movement.

Color Symbolism

Exactly as to why certain colors acquire symbolic values is not always clear, but several colors have been linked to glbtq people. Lavender and pink may be the most widespread colors associated with homosexuality in the modern era.

The linkage of these colors with homosexuality may be due to ancient literary and mythological references. The homosexual associations might also arise from the fact that the colors mediate or challenge the gender-specific colors of blue and pink that are usually assigned to male and female infants and children. As a combination of blue and pink, lavender is "in-between" male and female colors, partaking of both; when pink (instead of the anticipated blue) is assigned to males, it challenges (or at least fails to fulfill) gender expectations.

At various times, however, other colors have also been seen as symbolic of homosexuality. In the 1890s, for example, yellow was seen as symbolic of homosexual decadence, perhaps because of the decadents' favorite publication, *The Yellow Book*.

Green Carnation, Red Tie, Colored Handkerchiefs

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a green carnation and a red tie or neck scarf signaled the same-sex interests of the wearers. The green carnation was particularly associated with the Wilde circle and provided Robert Hichens with the title of his 1894 satire, *The Green Carnation*, published just a year before Wilde's catastrophic fall. The red tie, as a symbol of homosexuality, is seen in the paintings of Paul Cadmus.

In the early 1970s, an elaborate back-pocket handkerchief code was developed, with various colors signaling specific sexual preferences.

Equality Symbol

The equality symbol developed by the Human Rights Campaign, a cube in which an equal sign can be discerned in blue and yellow, is a familiar symbol on bumper stickers, magnets, caps, and other pieces of clothing, as well as on decals in the windows of places of business. It signifies commitment to equal rights for glbtq people.

Flags

Flags make a very public statement of membership in a group. As such, pride flags are a frequent feature of gay pride parades and are also flown at businesses that wish to identify themselves as gay-owned or gay-friendly and at the homes of people who wish to proclaim their pride.

Rainbow Flag

The best known of the flags representing the glbtq community, the rainbow flag was designed in 1978 by Gilbert Baker for the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Freedom Day Parade.

The two flags flown in the 1978 parade were produced by Baker and volunteers at the San Francisco Gay Center who dyed the fabrics for the eight stripes, each of which represented a concept.

The colors of the original flags were hot pink for sexuality, red for life, orange for healing, yellow for the

sun, green for nature, turquoise for art, indigo for harmony, and violet for spirit.

After the appearance of the rainbow flags in the parade, there was a public demand for them, and they went into commercial production but in a modified form. Since hot pink, turquoise, and indigo material was costly and difficult to obtain, the first two colors were eliminated and the third changed to blue.

Baker plans to restore the two deleted colors in a monumental flag that will be a centerpiece of the June 2003 PrideFest in Key West, Florida. The 1.25-mile-long flag will stretch across the island from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico.

Another huge rainbow flag was part of the 1994 New York pride parade, which marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of Stonewall. The marchers who carried the flag had contributed money for AIDS charities. At the end of the parade each flag-bearer received a piece of the giant banner.

AIDS activist Leonard Matlovich suggested that a black stripe be added to the bottom of the flag to commemorate the suffering of people with AIDS. Once a cure was found, the stripes would be removed and burned. This version of the flag has not been widely used.

Two of the more common variations of the rainbow flag add either a white lambda or a pink triangle near the upper left corner. Another rendition called "New Glory" is based on the flag of the United States. It retains the fifty stars on a blue field but replaces the thirteen red and white stripes with the six stripes of the rainbow flag.

The rainbow motif of the flag has become a symbol in its own right. The six colored stripes are the basis of the design for a variety of products, including clothing, jewelry, bumper stickers, key chains, and stuffed toys.

The logo of the Rainbow Sash Movement, an organization of gay and lesbian Catholics, incorporates the cross, the pink triangle, and the stripes of the rainbow flag.

Bisexual Pride Flag

The bisexual pride flag was designed by Michael Page, who felt the need for a colorful and easily recognizable emblem specifically for bisexual people. He chose a simple pattern of a pink stripe and a blue one overlapping to form purple. According to Page, the uppermost pink stripe, which covers two-fifths of the flag, represent same-sex attraction; the blue, which covers an equal portion at the base of the flag, symbolizes heterosexual attraction; and the purple stripe making up the central one fifth stands for bisexuality.

Page made the decision not to trademark or patent the flag in order to encourage people to use it freely.

The flag was first presented on December 5, 1998 and has subsequently been displayed at glbtq events around the world.

Leather Pride Flag

The leather pride flag has nine horizontal stripes. The first, third, seventh, and ninth are black; the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth are blue; and the central stripe is white. In the upper left is a red heart tilted slightly to the left.

First seen at a Mr. Leather contest in Chicago on May 28, 1989, the flag rapidly gained popularity and has become a fixture at pride parades and leather events.

Bear Pride Flag

The gay male subculture of Bears, masculine, often hirsute and large men, whose ideal of male beauty is often counter to that espoused by mainstream gay men, has its own pride flag.

Several versions of the bear pride flag have appeared since the early 1990s. All feature at least one black or brown pawprint. Some early varieties had two. The background consists of stripes--usually horizontal but sometimes diagonal--in shades of brown, tan, and yellow representing hair colors. Sometimes gray or white stripes are included.

The flag has been displayed at Bear Rendezvous gatherings and in pride parades.

Conclusion

All of these signs and emblems serve important functions. They render the glbtq community visible and express our vibrancy and spirit. They also promote a sense of belonging which is very valuable to individuals who may feel marginalized by the larger society.

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