

RAINBOWS

The rainbow objects gathered in this case are made by American artists of both native and colonial heritage. Over the centuries, a range of mythological and spiritual meanings has been attributed to the rainbow. In its impermanence and immaterial beauty this natural phenomenon can challenge our notions of what is real and possible.

In 1978, a San Francisco-based artist designed a flag with rainbow-colored stripes as a symbol of the diversity and unity of the LGBT community. Today this banner is internationally recognized. It is flown at gay and lesbian pride marches and other gatherings and displayed to mark community centers and queer-friendly businesses around the world.

—Ulrike Müller



TRIANGLES

The objects within this category feature triangular forms and zigzag lines, and they were all made by or for women. Displayed as a group, they propose an open and speculative response to questions regarding the absence or presence of queer bodies in the Museum. Can cultural invisibility be challenged by experimental, imaginative ways of looking?

As a symbol of gay liberation the triangle signifies pride and solidarity, but it also memorializes a history of homophobic violence. During the German Nazi regime (1933–45) homosexual men and “antisocial” women (a category that included feminists and lesbians) were persecuted and often killed. In concentration camps their prisoners’ uniforms were marked with pink or black triangular badges.

—Ulrike Müller



HANDS

Hands are powerful symbols in many cultures, as in the ancient Egyptian amulets and Buddhist ritual gesture seen here. Hands guide, protect, and signal. A cast of the hand of a beloved person may be a souvenir, but it may also contain a possessive claim—the one displayed here is prominently adorned with a ring that signifies marriage.

In drawings nearby, hands form fists and assume more immediately passionate meanings. Fists represent struggle and resistance to oppression, as in the radical feminist symbol that features a clenched fist in the center of the symbol for woman. Hands touch, stroke, pet, hit, poke, and penetrate; they are sensual, sexual, and political. Hands refer to agency, the ability to do things that affect others and the world.

—Ulrike Müller



FLOWERS

The objects in this category present various ways of looking at flowers, in particular the white lily. This case displays the highly stylized form of an art deco vase together with an elegant black-and-white calyx on a dinner plate and a blocky lily printed on paper, whereas the watercolor installed on the wall nearby is based on careful botanical observation. The subject matter is handled very differently in each of these pieces, yet they all respond to the lily's suggestive form.

Historically, flower painting was considered a “minor” art form accessible to women and others excluded from life drawing classes and arts academies. Flowers, especially irises, appear in lesbian and feminist imagery owing to their seductive beauty and sexualized formal connotations.

—Ulrike Müller



AXES (LABRYSES)

Axes, swords, and knives can be tools or weapons. Whether their purpose is quotidian or ceremonial, the care applied to their form and adornment speaks to this power.

Since the 1970s the labrys, or double-bladed battle-axe employed by the mythological Amazonian women warriors, has been a symbol for lesbian feminist strength and self-sufficiency. It evokes a tradition of fierce lesbians working together to establish nonpatriarchal social structures.

Monique Wittig writes, “Our symbols deny the traditional symbols and are fictional for traditional male culture, and we possess an entire fiction into which we project ourselves and which is already a possible reality. It is our fiction that validates us.”

—Ulrike Müller

