Gay Dress & Identity in the 20th Century
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When I think of diversity, I tend to forget about the LGBT community and I mostly think of people of different races, religions, and ethnic groups. This presentation opened my eyes to this separate world of fashion and dress for the gay community. I was aware that being gay in the early 20th century was looked down upon, but did not know about their secret communities and codes. These aspects really surprised me and I became interested in the culture.

Because they could not express their sexual preferences openly in the early 1900s, gay men started to adopt a dress code that would communicate their sexual orientation or sexuality to others in their community. Different gay communities formed in cities. Context was key; they recognized each other by their “codes” that no one other than the groups recognized. This was covert, not to show pride. A lot of secret societies started to form in urban centers. These groups consisted of mostly upper class men who dressed with sophistication and elegance, but some of the working class would also find their way in.

There were several different ways to get these messages across. The least masculine was drag or cross dressing; this was also the most common. Others would wear flower boutonnieres on their attire. Oscar Wilde is famous for wearing a green carnation in this way. At the time, most men’s clothes were of dark colors, so wearing any color was often a tell-tale sign. This could be a colored suit or a loudly colored pocket square. It was often said that “green suits were the badge of open pansies.” It was also common to wear a green or red tie.

As the 20th century progressed, the sexual revolution started, with more sexual liberation as a result. Men started to deliberately express themselves. If a man had just one ear pierced, wears his keys on his belt loop, or as a handkerchief in his back pocket, it may be a sign he was gay. There also were more expressive t-shirts, jewelry and flags.

One aspect of gay dress is the hanky code. This is messages communicated through colors of a handkerchief, and which pocket it is in. It communicates sexual availability and is referred to as “flagging”. The color represents a certain sexual fetish, and whether it is placed in the left or right pocket says if they are a top or bottom. Towards the start, there were about 13-15 color codes, and now there are about 50. This started as a secret thing, but now is more about identity and is the only real code still used today. Lesbian groups also started using a version of the hanky code at one point. The hanky code has made appearances in film, art, music and fashion.

Another unknown aspect of gay culture and fashion to me was the gay tribes. There are several groups within the LGBT community. These are dandy/fairy, who are well-dressed and manicured; clone/circuit boy, who are just your average, all American man; leatherman/BDSM, will wear biker jackets and leather; bears, who reject the clone and are often bigger, not fashionable men; and finally drag.

Currently, there has been intersection of identities and people are a lot more accepting of different types of people. The transgender community has been getting a lot of attention and gay marriage has been legalized in all states. Now, there’s a lot about gay pride and freedom to not have to hide who you are. It’s very interesting to see how fashion influenced this culture through the past hundred years and how it’s constantly changing and evolving.