

## GRANDPA 'S FANS

This title will perhaps puzzle some readers, who would expect “Grandma’s Fans”. There would follow a narrative full of elegant balls and parties, alive with the rustle of satin and the delicacy of lace. Yet this story will not lead us to the stuffy atmosphere of a ball room, but out to the vast expanses of the oceans. For this is as much a sailor’s story as a fan story.

## SOUVENIRS FROM A SAILOR 'S JOURNEYS

My grandfather, Adolphe Moulinier, was born in 1887. At the age of 15, he joined the French company Messageries Maritimes to help support his mother and younger brother after their father’s death.

### The Messageries Maritimes Company and the Far-East Line

The Messageries Maritimes started as the Messageries Nationales in 1851; it was known as the Messageries Impériales from 1853 to 1871 during the reign of Emperor Napoleon III. It was a ship from this company, the *Péluse*, that made the inaugural crossing of the Suez Canal in 1869, thus opening sea routes to the Indian Ocean and the Far-East on a large scale.

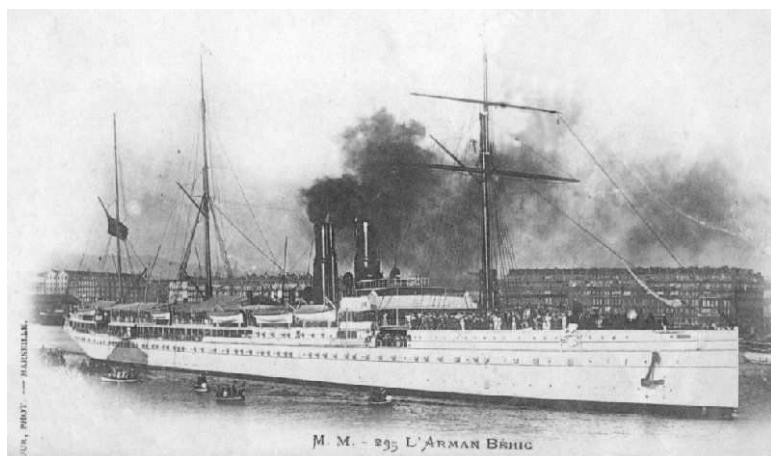
The ships would leave Marseilles, cross the Mediterranean and enter the Suez Canal at Port-Said. Then across the Red Sea and the next port of call Aden, before entering the Indian Ocean. They would stop at Colombo in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and pass through the Straits of Malacca, call at Singapore, Saigon and head towards Japan via Hong Kong to reach their final destination, **Yokohama**.



*Yokohama about 1910 (from Grandma’s Japanese photo album )*



My grandfather sailed along this route in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the 1920s, on various Messageries Maritimes ships: s/s Angkor, Tonkin, Nera, Armand Béhic. [note 1]



*The Armand Béhic in Marseilles Harbour*

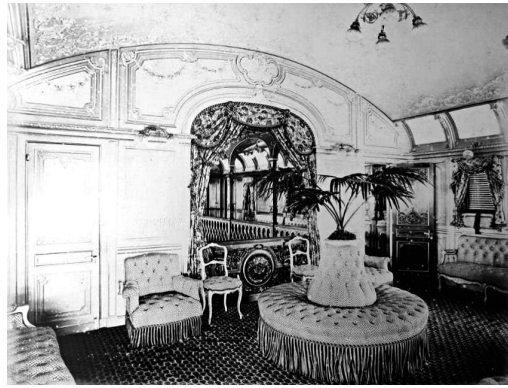


*On the deck, Yokohama 1922*



*The interior of the ship*





Each voyage would bring home a new batch of exotic souvenirs: small trinkets, lacquer work, silk or china vases.

In the years before and after World War I, Europeans had a crush on Japanese art, but not the minimalist sort of design that we appreciate nowadays. Edwardian taste favoured highly elaborate ornamentation, ripe with flamboyant designs and rich colours.

Some items even include fan-shaped patterns.



And of course some fans were among the souvenirs brought back home.

## THE FANS

### 1/ Fans of the fixed type

There are two large fixed fans made of woven straw.



This type of fan is still made nowadays in the Near and Far-East.

In a letter dated September, 19<sup>th</sup>, 1901, a passenger on the Armand Béhic writes that in Port-Saïd, there is a crowd of “tobacco-, match-, and fan-pedlars who swarm around you and offer their wares. (...) the hardest bargaining is required, for they overcharge shamefully, they will ask 5 Francs for a hideous woven straw fan, then let you have it for 5 cents.” [note 2]

Hideous, maybe, but surely useful between Port-Saïd and Suez, knowing that the temperature on deck can reach 45° C, not a single puff of wind cooling the ships, which can only move at reduced speed to avoid damaging the sandy banks of the Canal.

### 2/ The folded fans

They are typical early 20<sup>th</sup> century fans of Asian origin, of the type produced for export, popular in Europe due to their cheap price. The jury of the International Exhibition in Paris already remarked in 1878: “France, with such high salaries, cannot compete with China and Japan as far as prices are concerned. (...) The low cost of labour in those two countries explains why they can produce fans of such good quality that are sold in Paris for 15 or 20 cents each.” [note 3]



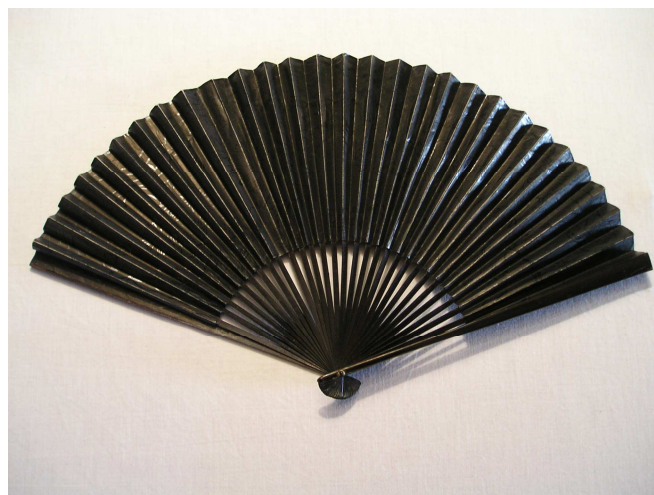
I remember that there were six of them in Grandpa's house, but somehow one was lost in the 1960s. The remaining five are in pristine condition, having been kept in a drawer for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **“Les chrysanthèmes”**



Bamboo sticks, the guards with a light silver design and double paper leaf painted with big blousy chrysanthemums in shades of red and mauve. This flower is a favourite in Asia; it represents moral strength in the face of hardship. It is the emblem of the Japanese Empire and its cultivation was formerly restricted to the Court.

### **“Black is Black”**



The elegant simplicity of this fan is a far cry from the flamboyant style of ornamentation described earlier. Like a Soulages painting, it explores various shades of black, contrasting highly polished lacquered sticks with a matt-finish paper leaf, on which glossy stylized floral designs stand out.



### “Les Roses grises”



The smallest of the three paper fans is by no means the least interesting. Granted, the sticks are the usual lacquered bamboo, but the leaf shows some originality: a floral design, yet no chrysanthemums or cherry blossoms, those staples of Japanese art, but roses, the favourite flowers of English gardens. And the landscape with the little cottage in the centre of the leaf has more to do with Europe than with Japan. For centuries, Western-style motifs have been used quite frequently on items designed for export. But in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Western influence also begins to pervade the traditional Japanese way of life, as shown in the following object.



It is a lacquer pagoda-shaped cigar-box. The four pivoting panels each contain the photo of a young beauty. Three of them are dressed the traditional way in flowing kimonos, whereas the fourth one sports western-style clothes: a long coat, plumed hat and parasol.

## “Transparence brune”



This fan is quite different from the preceding ones. It has thin bamboo inner sticks and two outer sticks made of bone, which end without a guard, the leaf simply covering their upper part. The leaf itself has transparency due to the technique used: finely cut-out paper motifs set between two layers of loosely woven, stiff gauze. The design shows up at its best when held up to the light: an ideogram among the stylized blossoming branches.

I have recently purchased another fan similar to this one, with slight differences in decoration.



Professor Anna Checcoli has kindly forwarded to me the photo of a fan made with the same technique, but green instead of brown. [note 4]

It is described as “Indo-Chinese work”. In that case, it could have been bought by my grandfather during the stop-over in Saigon.



### “Les Cerisiers en fleurs”



The fifth fan is more classical. It has ivory sticks; the guards are carved with wisteria and foliage. The silk leaf is painted with cherry blossoms and two little blue birds. Some of the flowers are embroidered in silk thread.

A fan with the same features is illustrated in the catalogue of the exhibition “Fanning the Senses” at the Fan Museum, Greenwich. Mrs Hélène Alexander suggests that it “could well emanate from the workshops of the Omyia Palace, Kyoto”.<sup>[note 5]</sup>

Anyway, it is a type of fan commonly found on the market. I bought one in 2009, the sticks identical down to the smallest detail, the leaf featuring irises.



Obviously, there is nothing rare or exceptional about Grandpa’s fans. Though they have little market value, they are precious to me: small souvenirs that remind me of my grand-father, of his and his family’s courage living through months, years of separation while he was away at sea. They also remind me of my childhood:



Who knows if I would be collecting fans today if, a long time ago, I had not played with

## GRANDPA'S FANS



## NOTES

1/ The ship in Marseilles harbour and the views of the salons, courtesy of Mr Philippe Ramona on [www.es-conseil.fr/pramona](http://www.es-conseil.fr/pramona)

2/ Letter by Joseph Tremblé, on the same site as preceding.

3/ Rapport du jury de l'Exposition Universelle Internationale , Paris, 1878, Groupe IV, Classe 37.

4/ "Eventails, objets de désir" by Pascal Payen-Appenzeller, Editions Parangon, 2000.

5/ "Fanning the Senses", catalogue of the Fan Museum, Greenwich, 2007.

