

Romance Through the Ages

Customs of Love, Marriage & Dating

Where would we be without romance? What was courtship and marriage like for our distant ancestors? Beginning with the ancient Greeks' recognition of the need to describe more than one kind of love, inventing the word "eros" to describe carnal love, and "agape" to mean a spiritual love, take a stroll back through romantic heritage with this timeline of romantic customs, dating rituals, and tokens of love.

Ancient Courtship

In ancient times, many of the first marriages were by capture, not choice - when there was a scarcity of nubile women, men raided other villages for wives. Frequently the tribe from which a warrior stole a bride would come looking for her, and it was necessary for the warrior and his new wife to go into hiding to avoid being discovered. According to an old French custom, as the moon went through all its phases the couple drank a brew called metheglin, which was made from honey. Hence, we get the word, honeymoon. Arranged marriages were the norm, primarily business relationships born out of the desire and/or need for property, monetary or political alliances.

Medieval Chivalry

From buying a woman dinner to opening a door for her, many of today's courting rituals are rooted in medieval chivalry. During medieval times, the importance of love in a relationship emerged as a reaction to arranged marriages, but was still not considered a prerequisite in matrimonial decisions. Suitors wooed their intended with serenades and flowery poetry, following the lead of lovelorn characters on stage and in verse. Chastity and honor were highly regarded virtues. In 1228, women first gained the right to propose marriage in Scotland, a legal right that then slowly spread through Europe.

Victorian Formality

During the Victorian Era (1837-1901), romantic love became viewed as the primary requirement for marriage and courting became even more formal - almost an art form among the upper classes. An interested gentleman could not simply walk up to a young lady and begin a conversation. Even after being introduced, it was still some time before it was considered appropriate for a man to speak to a lady or for a couple to be seen together. Once they had been formally introduced, if the gentleman wished to escort the lady home he would present his card to her. At the end of the evening the lady would look over her options and chose who would be her escort. She would notify the lucky gentleman by giving him her own card requesting that he escort her home. Almost all courting took place in the girl's home, always under the eye of watchful parents. If the courting progressed, the couple might advance to the front porch. Smitten couples rarely saw each other without the presence of a chaperone, and marriage proposals were frequently written.

Courtship Customs & Tokens of Love

- All the Nordic countries have courtship customs involving knives. For example, in Norway when a girl came of age, her father let it be known that she was available for marriage. The girl would wear an empty sheath on her belt. If a suitor liked the girl, he would put a knife in the sheath, which the girl now wore as a sign that she was betrothed.
- The custom of bundling, found in many parts of 16th and 17th century Europe and America, allowed courting couples to share a bed, fully clothed, and often with a "bundling board" between them or bolster cover tied over the girls legs. The idea was to allow the couple to talk and get to know each other but in the safe (and warm) confines of the girl's house.
- Dating back to 17th century Wales, ornately carved spoons, known as lovespoons, were traditionally made from a single piece of wood by a suitor to show his affection to his loved one. The decorative carvings have various meanings - from an anchor meaning "I desire to settle down" to an intricate vine meaning "love grows."
- Chivalrous gentlemen in England often sent a pair of gloves to their true loves. If the woman wore the gloves to church on Sunday it signalled her acceptance of the proposal.
- In some parts of 18th century Europe a biscuit or small loaf of bread was broken over the head of the bride as she emerged from the church. Unmarried guests scrambled for the pieces, which they then placed under their pillows to bring dreams of the one they would someday marry. This custom is believed to be the precursor of the wedding cake.
- Many cultures throughout the world recognize the idea of matrimony as the "ties that bind". In some African cultures, long grasses are braided together and used to tie the hands of the groom and bride together to symbolize their union. Delicate twine is used in the Hindu Vedic wedding ceremony to bind one of the bride's hand to one of the hands of the groom. In Mexico the practice of having a ceremonial rope loosely place around both of the necks of the bride and groom to "bind" them together is common.

By Kimberly Powell, an article for Valentine's Day

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