

**Symbols commonly encountered  
in the gay community**

# Rainbows

## Rainbow Flag



The Rainbow Flag has become one of the most widely used and recognized symbols of the gay pride movement. The concept of the rainbow is hardly a new one. Rainbows have been used since ancient times in all kinds of cultures- Greek, African, Native American and Celtic, to name only a few. Even Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition has made use of the rainbow as a freedom symbol.

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## Original Rainbow Flag



The Rainbow Flag as we know it today was developed by San Francisco artist Gilbert Baker in 1978. At the time, there was a need for a gay symbol which could be used year after year for the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Pride Parade. Baker took inspiration from many sources, from the hippies movement to the black civil rights movement, and came up with a flag with eight stripes. Colour has always played an important part in the gay rights movement- Victorian England symbolized homosexuality with the colour green, lavender became popular in the 1960s, and pink from the pink triangle has caught on as well- and the colours of the gay flag were no different.

Baker explained that his colours each stood for a different aspect of gay and lesbian life:

- Hot pink for sexuality,
- Red for life,
- Orange for healing,
- Yellow for sunlight,
- Green for nature,
- Turquoise for magic
- Blue for serenity,
- Purple for spirit.

Baker himself and thirty other volunteers hand-stitched and hand-dyed to large prototype flags for the 1978 parade. It was an immediate hit. However, when Baker took his design to the San Francisco Flag Co. to have it mass-produced for the 1979 parade, he had to remove the hot pink stripe. Baker had hand-dyed the colour, and unfortunately pink was not a commercially available colour.

Later that year, when the city's first openly gay supervisor, Harvey Milk, was assassinated, the 1979 Pride Parade Committee found in Baker's flag the perfect symbol for the entire gay community to unite under in protest of this tragedy. The committee got rid of the indigo stripe to make the colours evenly divisible along the parade route: red, orange, and yellow on one side of the street; green, blue, and purple on the other. (This version also conforms to traditional colour theory- the three primary colours and three secondary colours in art- rather than the spectrum of light colours of R O Y G B I V. Thus, today's six-colour flag was born and displayed during the 1979 Pride Parade.

The flag quickly caught on like wildfire in cities across the country. It was even officially recognized by the International Congress of Flag Makers. In 1989 the flag was given international recognition when West Hollywood resident John Stout successfully sued his landlords after they tried to prohibit him from hanging the flag from his apartment balcony. At New York's Stonewall 25 Parade in 1994, a gigantic 30-foot wide, one mile long rainbow flag was carried through the parade route by over 10,000 volunteers.



**American Gay Flag**



**Freedom Rings**

As with any symbol, the varieties that the rainbow flag currently comes in are limitless. Shown here as the American flag version featuring the stars-and-stripes motif, the flag with triangle, and the flag with the lambda symbol incorporated. It also went on to inspire freedom rings- six metal

rings in each of the flag's six colours on a chain, usually worn as a necklace, bracelet or key chain. Incidentally, the flag has also been an amazing fun-raising tool for the Gay Rights Movement. When large rainbow flags were first carried along parade routes with the carriers at the corners and along the sides, they found that people along the parade route with throw change into convenient valley created in the flag's centre. At first, some people in the gay community took offence to this- they didn't want people to feel that they were pitiable and in need of charity. But movements cannot exist on spirit alone, so many organizations took to this occurrence with enthusiasm and the practice continues to this day.



**Triangle**



**Lambda Rainbow**

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## Triangles



**Pink Triangle**

As most everyone knows, the pink triangle is a symbol taken directly from the Nazi concentration camps. Usually when concentration camps and Nazis are mentioned, most people tend to think of Jews and the Jewish Holocaust (for good reason). But the fact that a large number of homosexual prisoners were in those same camps is an often ignored or overlooked fact of history.

The real story behind the pink triangle begins prior to World War II. Paragraph 175, a clause in German law, prohibited homosexual relations (much like many states in the U.S. today have laws against "crimes of nature"). In 1935, during Hitler's rise to power, he extended this law to include homosexual kissing, embracing, and even having homosexual fantasies. An estimated 25,000 people were convicted under this law between 1937 and 1939 alone. They were sent to prisons and later concentration camps. Their sentence also included sterilization, most commonly in the form of castration. In 1942, Hitler extended the punishment for homosexuality to death.

Prisoners in Nazi concentration camps were labelled according to their crimes by inverted collared triangles. "Regular" criminals were denoted by a green triangle, political prisoners by red triangles and Jews by two overlapping yellow triangles (to form the Star of David, the most common Jewish symbol). Homosexual prisoners were labels with pink triangles. Gay Jews- the lowest form of prisoner- had overlapping yellow and pink triangles. This system also created a social hierarchy among the prisoners, and it has been reported that the pink triangle prisoners often received the worst workloads and were continually harassed and beaten by both guards and other prisoners.

Although homosexual prisoners were not shipped en mass to the Auschwitz death camps like so many of the Jewish prisoners, there were still large numbers of gay men executed there along with other non-Jewish prisoners. The real tragedy though occurred after the war. When the Allies defeated the Germany and the Nazi Regime, the political and remaining Jewish prisoners were released from the camps (the regular criminals- murderers, rapists, etc.- were not released for obvious reasons). The homosexual prisoners were never released though because Paragraph 175 remained West German law until 1969. So these innocent men watched as their fellow prisoners were set free, but remained prisoners for 24 more years.

In the 1970s, the pink triangle started to be used in conjunction with the gay liberation movement. When people, especially public figures such as law makers, were confronted with such a symbol, they risked being associated with the Nazis if he or she were to attempt to openly limit or prosecute gays. In the 1980s, when the triangle's popularity truly began to take off, ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) adopted the it as their symbol, but turned it upright to suggest an active fight rather than passive resignation. I've also been told that some people wear their triangles pointing up if they personally know somebody who has died of AIDS. In any case, the pink triangle is definitely a symbol very closely connected to oppression and the fight against it, and stands as a vow never to let another Holocaust happen again. Like the word "queer," it is a symbol of hate which has been reclaimed and now stands for pride.



**Black Triangle**

The Pink Triangle was used exclusively with male prisoners- lesbians were not included under Paragraph 175. However, women were arrested and imprisoned for "antisocial behaviour," which included anything from feminism, lesbianism, and prostitution to any woman who didn't conform to the ideal Nazi image of a woman: cooking, cleaning, kitchen work, child raising, passive, etc. These women were labelled with a black triangle. Just as the pink triangle has been reclaimed, lesbians and feminists have begun using the black triangle as a symbol of pride and sisterhood.



**Burgundy Triangle**

It is rumoured that there was a burgundy triangle which designated transgendered prisoners, but so far this is only a rumour and has not been substantiated with facts.

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## **Bisexual Pride**



**Bisexual Triangles**

Somewhere in all this excitement with gay and lesbian symbols, bisexuals appear to have slipped through the cracks. It has only been within the last decade or so that bisexuals have begun actively organizing and fighting for equal voices. One of the many good things to come out of this movement is a symbol that bisexuals can call all their own: the interlocking pink and blue triangles sometimes referred to as the "biangles." Unfortunately, in contrast to most other pride symbols, the exact origin of this symbol is quite mysterious. The pink triangle is obviously taken from the gay symbol. The blue triangle was never used by the Nazis. It may have been added as a foil for pink- pink for girls and blue for boys (because bisexuals have attractions to both), with the overlapping purple triangle (purple has

always been a very prominent colour in the gay pride movement) representing the middle ground that bisexuals fall into.



**Bisexual Moon**

It has also been explained that the pink triangle represents homosexuality while blue represents heterosexuality. Thus the overlap between the pink and blue triangles is the purple triangle of bisexuality. The bisexual moon symbol was created to avoid the use of the Nazi-originated pink triangle.



First unveiled on 5 December 1998, the bisexual pride flag was designed by Michael Page to represent the Bisexual community. This rectangular flag consists of a broad magenta stripe at the top, representing same-gender attraction; a broad stripe in blue at the bottom, representing opposite-gender attraction; and a narrower deep lavender band occupying the central fifth, which represents attraction towards both genders.

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## AIDS Awareness

### Victory Over AIDS



The gay community has been one of the hardest hit by the AIDS epidemic. A San Francisco group suggested a modification to the traditional rainbow flag by adding a black stripe to the bottom of it to commemorate everyone who we've lost to the AIDS virus over the years. Sgt. Leonard Matlovich, a well-decorated Vietnam War Veteran who is dying of AIDS, proposed that when a cure for AIDS was found, all of the black stripes should be removed from these flags and ceremoniously burned in Washington D.C.

### AIDS Awareness Ribbon



The Red Ribbon Project was created by singer/songwriter Paul Jabara and the New York-based Visual AIDS group in 1991. Visual AIDS is a charity group of art professionals aimed at recognizing and honouring friends and colleagues who are dying or have died of AIDS. Visual AIDS not only encourages art organizations, galleries, museums, and other AIDS organizations to commemorate those who have died of AIDS, but also to educate the public about the transmission of AIDS and HIV and the needs of those living with AIDS.

It's raises funds for research and treatment of AIDS. The red ribbon was originally inspired by the yellow ribbons prominently displayed during the Gulf War in support of U.S. soldiers. The colour red was chosen because it is the colour of blood- AIDS and HIV being blood-related diseases- and its symbolic connection to passion and love. The red ribbon made its public debut when host Jeremy Irons wore it during the 1991 Tony Awards. Since then, wearing the red ribbon has become a fashion statement and extremely politically correct. Some feel that the red ribbon has lost it's importance, and is now simply lip service to AIDS causes. However, the Red Ribbon Project is still going strong and remains a driving force behind AIDS awareness. It is the Project's sincerest hope that one day it will no longer be needed.

## Bear Pride



Bears marching in San Francisco Pride 2004.



*Bear* is an affectionate gay slang term for those in the bear communities, a subculture in the gay community and an emerging subset of LGBT communities with events, codes and culture specific identity. Bears tend to have hairy bodies and facial hair; some are heavy-set; some project an image of working-class masculinity in their grooming and appearance, though none of these are requirements or unique indicators. The bear concept can function as an identity, an affiliation, and an ideal to live up to, and there is ongoing debate in bear communities about what constitutes a bear. Some state that self-identifying as a bear is the only requirement, while others argue that bears must have certain physical characteristics—such as a hairy chest and face or having a large body—and a certain mode of dress and behaviour.

"Bears" are almost always gay or bisexual men although increasingly transgender men and those who shun labels for gender and sexuality are also included within bear communities. The Bear community has spread all over the world, with Bear clubs in many countries. Bear clubs often serve as social and sexual networks for older, hairier, sometimes heavier gay and bisexual men, and members often contribute to their local gay communities through fundraising and other functions. Bear events are common in heavily-gay communities.

The first bear flag was designed in 1992. It was carried by marchers in the 1992 Gay Pride Parades in Denver, Russian River and San Francisco. It was also carried at the March on Washington in 1993. Additionally, it was presented at Bear Expo 1993 and 1994 and also at International Bear Rendezvous 1995. The flag has been trademarked by the Front Range Bears of Denver, Colorado.



The first bear flag



The Bear Pride Flag



The International Bear Brotherhood Flag

The Bear Pride Flag was presented on June 18, 1995 at the bar "Spags" in Seattle, Washington. The blue stripe represents the sky and the green stripe represents the earth. In between these two are all the bears of the world- white for polar bears, black for black bears, and brown for brown bears. The yellow paw print is the sun, representing the spirit. While this is the most widely seen bear symbol, it is not really official. Bear groups tend to develop their own individual flags and symbols to represent them.

Also In 1995, Craig Byrnes (member of the Chesapeake Bay Bears, Washington, DC and known to many bears of this area as Mr. Baltimore Bear Cub '93 und Mr. TBLC of Virginia '94), thought it might be fitting to design a flag that would best represent the bear community, since there was no "official" flag yet. After

drawing and sewing four variations, Craig presented those prototype flags at the "Bears of Summer" events of the Chesapeake Bay Bears in July of 1995.

Bears were asked to put a quarter in the appropriate box to vote for the flag that they liked best. The money was donated to the Chesapeake Bay Bears to add to their AIDS fundraising collections.

The winning flag shows a simple design: a field of horizontal stripes with a paw print in the upper left corner. The colours represent the fur colours and nationalities of bears throughout the world (here the animals are meant).

Craig Byrnes always was very serious about getting the flag out and visible. He had been very generous about donating flags to bear clubs, but you also could buy the flags from him. His company "Bear Manufacturing" became the nameplate for a whole line of bear-focused products.



Early in 2002 Craig Byrnes announced that he does not intend to follow up on the trademark so that the International Bear Brotherhood Flag can be used free by the bear community. Craig Byrnes also closed his company "Bear Manufacturing".

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## Leather Pride



The Leather Pride Flag was created by artist Tony DeBlase and was first displayed on May 28, 1989 at the Chicago Mr. Leather contest. It stands as a symbol for the leather community-people who are into leather, sado-masochism, bondage, domination, uniforms, rubber and other kind of sexual fetishes. This flag is most often found in the gay community, but it encompasses all orientations.



Another Leather Pride Flag which hasn't gained quite as much popularity is a modified rainbow flag in which the purple stripe is replaced by a black stripe. This variety though is easily confused with the Victory Over AIDS Flag

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## Lambda



One symbol which continues to remain popular is the lower case Greek letter lambda. The symbol was originally chosen by the Gay Activists Alliance of New York in 1970. The GAA was a group which broke away from the larger Gay Liberation Front at the end of 1969, only six months after its foundation in response to the Stonewall Riots. While the GLF wanted to work side by side with the black and women's liberation movements to gain unity and acceptance, the GAA wanted to focus their efforts more concisely on only Gay and Lesbian issues.

Because of its official adoption by the GAA, which sponsored public events for the gay community, the lambda soon became a quick way for the members of the gay community to identify each other. The reasoning was that the lambda would easily be mistaken for a college fraternity symbol and ignored by the majority of the population. Eventually though, the GAA headquarters was torched by an arsonist, destroying not only the building but all of the organization's records, and the movement never recovered from the loss. The symbol, however, lived on.

Now what the symbol means or meant when it was introduced are a prime topic for speculation and a morass of public rumouring. Some of the more popular rumours are:

- Simply, the Greek letter "L" standing for "liberation."
- The Greek Spartans believed that the lambda represented unity.
- The Romans took it as meaning "the light of knowledge shining into the darkness of ignorance."
- The charged energy of the gay movement. This stems from the lambda's use in chemistry and physics to denote energy in equations.
- The synergy which results when gays and lesbians work together towards a common goal (a gestalt theory which also stems from the physics-energy theory)
- The notion that straights and gays, or gays and lesbians, or any pairing of these three, are on different wavelengths when it comes to sex, sexuality, or even brain patterns. This again comes from the lambda's presence in chemistry and physics, where it is sometimes used to represent the wavelength of certain types of energy.
- An iconic rendering of the scales of justice and the constant force that keeps opposing sides from overcoming each other. The hook at the bottom of the right leg would then signify the action and initiative needed to reach and maintain balance.
- The lambda is also thought by some to have appeared on the shields of Spartan and/or Theban warriors. The Thebes version is more popular because, as legend has it, the city-state organized the Theban Band from groups of idealized lovers, which made them extremely fierce and dedicated warriors. Eventually however, the army was completely decimated by King Philip II, but was later honoured by his son Alexander the Great.

There is no actual evidence though that the lambda was ever associated with this group. However, there was a Hollywood movie in the 1960s called *The 300 Spartans* starring Diane Baker, Richard Egan, and Ralph Richardson that showed Spartan warriors who appeared to have lambdas on their shields.

Whatever the lambda meant or means today, it's everywhere. Even though at one time it acquired a strictly male connotation, it is used by both gays and lesbians today. Back in December of 1974, the lambda was officially declared the international symbol for gay and lesbian rights by the International Gay Rights Congress in Edinburgh, Scotland.

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## Labrys



The labrys is less popular now than it once was, even though its connection to lesbianism and women began thousands of years ago. The labrys is basically a double-bladed axe or hatchet which can be used for both harvesting and as a weapon. The first labrys is believed to have been created over 8,000 years ago. It was favoured by tribes of female Amazons that roamed the area around what is now Kazakhstan in central Asia. It has also been linked to the early town of Catal Huyuk in what is now Turkey around 6,000 BCE as a tool for clearing ground. Catal Huyuk was a peaceful town which worshipped the Earth goddess and prospered without conflict for 1,500 years.

An ancient civilization on the island of Crete in the Mediterranean Sea also held the labrys in high standing. Little was known about the Minoan civilization (it lasted from around 3,000 to 1,100 BCE) except myths until archaeologists began excavating relics from Crete's pre-Minoan era around the beginning of the 20th century. The most amazing discovery on the island was the palace of Knossos, believed to be the royal palace, along with a 35,000 square foot maze of rooms and hallways. This maze was prolifically decorated with a double-axe motif, especially the principal reception room. The term labyrinth is derived from labrys. This site is believed to be linked to the myth of the Minotaur.

The Minoan society, although possessing both a king and queen near its end, was predominantly matriarchal. Their religion centred around a bare-breasted Great Goddess who is believed to have been a protector of women. This goddess is often shown holding snakes in her hands, a symbol of fertility and agriculture, and surrounded by female worshippers with double axes which were used for tilling soil. Preserved frescos from the time period also tend to show more girls than boys, usually in such dangerous sports as bull jumping (bulls were also a reoccurring theme in Minoan art).

The double axe quickly spread across Europe, becoming popular with the Etruscans, the Gauls, the Druids, and the Scandinavians. The labrys kept its religious connotation even when it was adopted by other cultures, having been scratched into a good many surfaces during pagan times. When the Roman Empire came along, the plow replaced the labrys as far as farming went, but it remained a formidable weapon. The labrys began to be seen less and less religiously, and soon took on the name "battleaxe" instead. From there it was passed through successive generations of war-torn Europe until it was replaced in popularity by the sword.

The labrys was resurrected as a female symbol in the 1970s by a number of lesbian and feminist organizations. Its popularity grew when articles about its origins were published in feminist literature of the time. Today, the labrys has been superseded by other symbols, but can still be seen adorning jewellery and women's specialty stores.

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## Purple hand



On Halloween night (31 October), 1969, sixty members of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Society for Individual Rights (SIR) staged a protest at San Francisco's *Examiner* in response to another in a series of news articles disparaging LGBT people in San Francisco's gay bars and clubs. The peaceful protest against the "homophobic editorial policies" of the *Examiner* turned tumultuous and were later called "Friday of the Purple Hand" and "Bloody Friday of the Purple Hand". Examiner employees "dumped a bag of printers' ink from the third story window of the newspaper building onto the crowd". Some reports were that it was a barrel of ink poured from the roof of the building. The protestors "used the ink to scrawl "Gay Power" and other slogans on the building walls" and stamp purple hand prints "throughout downtown San Francisco" resulting in "one of the most visible demonstrations of gay power". According to Larry LittleJohn, then president of SIR, "At that point, the tactical squad arrived -- not to get the employees who dumped the ink, but to arrest the demonstrators who were the victims. The police could have surrounded the Examiner building...but, no, they went after the gays...Somebody could have been hurt if that ink had gotten into their eyes, but the police came racing in with their clubs swinging, knocking people to the ground. It was unbelievable." The accounts of police brutality include women being thrown to the ground and protesters' teeth being knocked out.

Inspired by "Black Hand" (*La Mano Nera* in Italian) extortion methods of Camorra gangsters and the Mafia, some activists attempted to institute "purple hand" as a gay and lesbian symbol as a warning to stop anti-gay attacks, with little success. In Turkey, the LGBT rights organization MorEl Eskişehir LBTT Oluşumu (Purple Hand Eskişehir LGBT Formation), also bears the name of this symbol.

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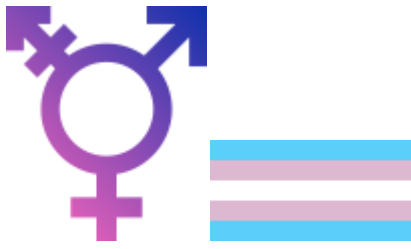
## Gender symbols



Pairs of male and female gender symbols based on the astrological symbols for Venus (representing female) and Mars (representing male) are used to form symbols for gay and lesbian. Two interlocking male symbols form a gay male symbol. Two interlocking female symbols form a lesbian symbol. Variations on this theme can be used to represent bisexuals, transgender persons, as well as heterosexuals.

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## Transgender symbols



Popular transgender symbols, used to identify transvestites, transsexuals, and other transgender people, frequently consist of modified gender symbols combining elements from both the male and female symbols. The most popular version, originating from a drawing by Holly Boswell, depicts a circle with an arrow projecting from the top-right, as per the male symbol, a cross projecting from the bottom, as per the female symbol, and with an additional stroked arrow (combining the female cross and male arrow) projecting from the top-left.

Another transgender symbol is the Transgender Pride flag designed by Monica Helms, and first shown at a pride parade in Phoenix, Arizona, USA in 2000. The flag represents the transgender community and consists of five horizontal stripes, two light blue, two pink, with a white stripe in the center. Helms described the meaning of the flag as follows:

“ The light blue is the traditional color for baby boys, pink is for girls, and the white in the middle is for those who are transitioning, those who feel they have a neutral gender or no gender, and those who are intersex. The pattern is such that no matter which way you fly it, it will always be correct. This symbolizes us trying to find correctness in our own lives. ”

Other transgender symbols include the butterfly (symbolizing transformation or metamorphosis), and a pink/light blue yin and yang symbol.

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## Other symbols

In addition to these major symbols of the LGBT community, other lesser symbols have been used to represent members' unity, pride, shared values, and allegiance to one another.



The polyamory movement has introduced the Purple Mobius symbol for use by polyamorous and non-monogamous people and LGBTQ individuals. It is intended to be an abstract symbol to fill the niche left by the other available symbols, which have criticisms. The triangle shape and purple color was intended to reference the pre-existing LGBT and other social and civil rights movements symbols, while the Mobius was a nodding reference to the pre-existing heart/infinity symbol for polyamory (the infinity being one example of a Mobius Strip). The symbol was designed by Joreth InnKeeper and is intended to be public domain.



The polyamory movement has introduced the "love outside the box" symbol for use by polyamorous and non-monogamous people and LGBTQ individuals.



Gay activists in Boston chose the purple rhinoceros as a symbol of the gay movement after conducting a media campaign for this purpose (1974), selecting this animal because, although it is sometimes misunderstood, it is really both docile and intelligent - but when a rhinoceros is angered, it fights ferociously. Lavender was used because it was a widely recognized gay pride colour and the heart was added to represent love and the "common humanity of all people."



In ancient Rome, as in 19th-century England, green indicated homosexual affiliations. Victorian men would often pin a green carnation to their lapel as a signal. A green carnation has been associated with homosexuality, due to the author Oscar Wilde often sporting one. The term "wearing a green carnation," however, is sometimes used as a derogatory term.



American poet Walt Whitman used the calamus plant to represent homoerotic love.



Nineteenth-century poets used the Lad's Love plant to symbolize homosexuality.



Bisexual women and lesbians would give violets to the woman they were wooing, symbolizing their "Sapphic" desire. Sappho described, in a poem, herself and a lover wearing garlands of violets. The giving of violets was popular in the 1920s, 30's and 40's.



Lesbians in the mid-twentieth century would tattoo a blue star on a part of the body, commonly the arm that could be covered during the day and revealed at night/in clubs.

- In the early years of the 20th century, a red necktie was worn by some men to signal their homosexuality to others.
- The pinky ring was a fashionable jewellery accessory for male homosexuals during the 1950s through the 1970s.
- In the United Kingdom, the *Pink Jack* has been widely used in recent years to demonstrate a unique British Gay and Lesbian identity.
- Conversely, since the first century, the hare, the hyena, and the weasel have been used in literature as negative symbols of male homosexuality, with connotations of sexual perversion.
- In the Society for Creative Anachronism, LGBT members often wear a blue feather to indicate membership in or an affinity for Clan Blue Feather, a group of SCA members promoting the study of homosexuality in the Middle Ages.