

Peace in Our Time: The Peace Sign as a Fashion Icon

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Abstract

It is the Summer of Love, or so says Macy's Department Store in their current advertising campaign and window displays. Young people may not be flocking to Haight-Ashbury, but they are converging on retailers in search of a different sort of peace. Peace sign apparel has inundated the fashion industry, appearing as everything from diamond necklaces to baby socks. But do modern consumers understand the symbol's message? By tracking the evolution of the peace sign from its origins as a symbol of protest to its current position as a mass-marketed fashion icon, this paper aims to answer that question.

Introduction

Walking down Market Street in central Philadelphia, it is difficult not to notice the presence of the peace sign. The figure looms from massive wooden symbols in Macy's department store windows to diminutive denim versions on the pockets of a teenager's jeans. Recently, the icon has become a fashion darling, appearing on apparel, in advertisements, and throughout visual displays. It is perhaps ironic that in a country involved in a foreign war, deploying additional troops in Afghanistan, and continually manufacturing nuclear weapons, it has become nearly impossible to avoid the universal sign for peace. This begs the question, has the peace sign lost its meaning and become a mere fashion symbol? By tracking the evolution of the sign from its origins as a symbol of protest to its current position as a mass-marketed fashion icon, this paper aims to provide an answer.

Peace as Logo

The symbol, which has become universally recognized as the peace sign, was originally created in 1958 by British textile designer and artist Gerald Holtom (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament). The previous year, activists working for the publication *Peace News*—*The International Pacifist Weekly* formed the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War, and began planning the first major anti-nuclear march. Holtom, who was responsible for making the placards and banners to be carried on the march, wanted to develop a symbol that would visually communicate the message of nuclear disarmament

(Rigby 476-77). In his 1973 letter to Hugh Brock, former editor of *Peace News*, Holtom described his thought process in designing the symbol: “I was in despair. Deep despair. I drew myself: the representative of an individual in despair, with hands palm out stretched outwards and downwards in the manner of Goya’s peasant before the firing squad. I formalized the drawing into a line and put a circle around it.” (Rigby 477). The resulting image was also a combination of the semaphore letters N and D, for nuclear disarmament (Rigby 477).

The design made its debut at the Direct Action Committee’s three-day march over Easter weekend, April 4th to 7th, 1958. Five hundred cardboard signs were carried from London to the British Atomic Weapons Research Establishment in Aldermaston, where Britain’s nuclear weapons were and continue to be produced (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament). The sign was an immediate success and several months later the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament adopted it as the organization’s logo (Rigby 478). Along with the new symbol, the CND took over the second Aldermaston march in 1959. For this march, ceramic artist Eric Austin created small black-on-white peace badges, which were distributed along with the message “In the event of a nuclear war, these fired pottery badges would be among the few human artifacts to survive the nuclear inferno.” (Kolsbun and Sweeney 44). These badges signaled the beginning of an abundant and diverse line of merchandise bearing the peace sign.

Peace as Symbol

Two years after its original debut, the symbol made its first American appearance on a Committee for Nonviolent Action flier distributed in 1960 (Kolsbun and Sweeney 58). As the country entered a decade of political turmoil and cultural unrest, the symbol assumed prevalence, becoming associated with the many different groups striving for social change. Nuclear disarmament organizations, civil rights advocates, women’s liberation activists and protestors of the Vietnam War all utilized the sign in support of their cause. It was at this time, the CND logo stopped signifying only nuclear disarmament and became a universal symbol for peace.

In the mid to late sixties, peace was exactly what the nation wanted. In regards to the Vietnam War, Kolsbun and Sweeney note that, “As combat escalated, so did U.S. antiwar protests and the presence of the peace symbol” (75). The design appeared on signs and banners, protest pins, in anti-war publications, even on armbands worn by soldiers on the ground in Vietnam. As the desire for amity spread, the sign became “an icon for the counterculture and the anti-war movements” (Kolsbun and Sweeney17). This was the golden age of the peace sign, when it represented youthful idealism and symbolized non-violence, life and love.

The same idealistic objectives formed the basis of the budding hippie movement, with whom the symbol would forever be inextricably linked. Kolsbun and Sweeney note that as the movement flourished in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, the sign became synonymous with the anti-establishment values of the counterculture (94). As a 1967 *Time* magazine cover story documented, “The key ethical element of the hippie

movement is love—indiscriminate and all-embracing, fluid and changeable, directed at friend and foe alike” (Kolsbun and Sweeney 94).

Peace as Icon

By the end of the decade the peace sign had gone global. In 1971, Peggy Duff, General Secretary of the CND, wrote, “I have found it all over the world, on Glasgow bus shelters, on tiny villages in East Anglia and the Isle of Wight, far afield in the United States, in Greece, in Japan” (Kolsbun and Sweeney 113). The previous year, a decision by The United States Patent and Trademark Office to place the symbol in the public domain would only increase the prominence of the sign, making it free for reproduction by the growing advertising industry (Kolsbun and Sweeney 170). That very year the American Tobacco Company placed the peace sign on the packaging of their Lucky Strike cigarettes. According to the company chairman this was not a political statement, but a marketing ploy to create interest and increase sales (Kolsbun and Sweeney 173). It would not be the last time the icon’s meaning was overlooked in favor of its profitability.

Since then, many companies have capitalized on the money making potential of a symbol that was never intended to be used to support capitalism. Throughout the following decades the peace sign appeared on a variety of products, with its presence becoming more profound in recent years. At Christmastime 2008, in celebration of the icon’s fiftieth birthday, Barney’s New York invited shoppers to “Have a Hippie Holiday”. The luxury department store along with the Earth Pledge FutureFashion Initiative asked a host of well-known designers to create sustainable garments incorporating the peace sign. Pieces by Diane Von Furstenberg, Ralph Lauren, Michael Kors, Stella McCartney, Phillip Lim and Alexander Wang were showcased in an elaborate holiday display that included windows dedicated to the Afro, denim, tie-dye, and the “Ladies of the Counter Culture” (Scott, Bryan.) The store also commissioned a peace sign embellished carbon neutral Volkswagen Beetle, which was raffled off, with proceeds benefiting Volkswagen’s Carbon Neutral Project. Along with the custom automobile, the store offered a plethora of peace sign products including Barney’s limited addition peace sign cufflinks, \$400.00, and men’s velvet slippers with gold peace signs, \$440.00 (Patton).

Macy’s Department Store followed with its own peace sign window displays in the summer of 2009. Their “Summer of Love” advertising campaign derived its name from the summer of 1967, when thousands of young hippies flocked to Haight-Ashbury to participate in a new type of society. The window displays at the Macy’s in downtown Philadelphia placed enormous wooden peace signs around mannequins dressed in hippie inspired clothing (see figure 1). Multi-colored peace sign decals decorated the glass while a similar pattern covered wooden backdrops behind the mannequins.



Figure 1: Window Displays at Macy's, Philadelphia.
Photo courtesy of Rachel Raudenbush. All rights reserved.

Tiffany and Co. ran a Fall 2008 advertising campaign declaring that “Some Style Is Legendary” and depicting model Lily Cole wearing their peace sign charm necklace. The mini diamond and platinum charm retails for \$1,200.00, and is also available in 18 karat gold for \$450.00 or sterling silver for \$100.00. Other jewelers offer more expensive renderings, with David Yurman’s cable peace sign pave necklace running \$950.00 and Roberto Coin’s large peace sign necklace for \$1,600.00. One of the most lavish manifestations of the symbol is on Jimmy Choo’s patent leather peace tote, which sells for \$1,750.00. Additional high-end retailers utilize the icon including Moschino, who has placed it in the background of their website as well as on men’s dress shirts, polos, pants and tees. Michael Kors has placed the design on shoes while designer Tory Burch created an interlocking peace sign pattern on a long-sleeved jersey tee, \$195.00.

Although the symbol is widely available in the luxury market, it is most often found at a contemporary price point and marketed to young women by brands including Betsey Johnson, Juicy Couture, Guess, Pink and Steve Madden. Betsey Johnson took a creative approach to the sign, using chain to trace it within a heart of her “Prisoner of Love” handbags. A tote retails for \$275.00 while a hobo runs \$245.00. The designer also formed the icon from an airplane on a line of Air Betseyville bags, and included it on her “Bohemian Betsey” necklace. Similarly, Juicy Couture has used the symbol as a clasp on a \$68.00 silvertone bracelet from which hang Juicy’s signature heart banner, pearl and crown. The company also offers peace sign stud earrings in silver pave or peace heart

studs in pink pave. A shiny version of the symbol comes upon a multicolor “Juicy Couture Flower Child” print tee for \$98.00 or on pink slippers for \$55.00. Victoria’s Secret’s contemporary collection, Pink, uses the icon as well, placing it on an array of sweatpants and matching hoodies in pink, white and gray. The bling boyfriend hoodie, \$59.50, and pant, \$49.50, include studded metallic graphic signs. The line also produces a variety of intimates, swimwear and accessories, all bearing the symbol.

The company best known for using the peace sign in their merchandise, advertising and store displays is Lucky Brand. The denim company was founded in 1990 by Gene Montesano and Berry Perlman, two former hippies with a love for rock and roll. It now stocks an array of peace related merchandise for men, women and children (Lucky Brand). Most notable is the brand’s vast selection of peace sign jewelry and graphic tees, including the Peace Sign Mosaic Mood Ring, \$39.00, and Peace Cuff Bracelet, \$38.00. The icon has also been incorporated into the company’s marketing, appearing on packaging as well as in store windows (see figure 2). Footwear retailer, Steve Madden, has also utilized the symbol in their advertising. The company’s 2008 Peace, Love, Shoes campaign used the peace sign along with a heart and the silhouette of a sandal to capture customer attention. The brand’s Peace, Love, Shoes tote sold for \$48.00, while the icon graced a variety of footwear and accessories, including boots, sandals, and belt buckles (see figure 3).



Figure 2: Peace Sign Graphic Tee in Lucky Brand Window, New York City.
Photo courtesy of Rachel Raudenbush. All rights reserved.

For smaller budgets, fast fashion retailer Forever 21 carries an assortment of peace sign merchandise. Their “I Love Peace” t-shirts are printed in either Hebrew or Chinese, and retail for \$10.90. A Sesame Street Peace Tee portrays the children’s show characters surrounded by the phrase “Peace on the Street” and runs \$18.90. Off-price retailers like T.J. Maxx, Marshalls and Ross also stock large selections of designer peace products at reduced prices. Many discount retailers also offer the fashion; most notably Target, which sells a wide variety of items including a large selection of peace jewelry, and encompassing everything from a giant lighted peace sign, \$99.99, to peace embellished baby socks, \$3.99.



Figure 3: Steven by Steve Madden Peace Sign Belt Buckle.
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The symbol is available at nearly every retailer, in every department, and at every price point. Few fashions have crossed age, gender and economic boundaries. Less have transcended from head shops to Tiffany’s, but the universal sign for peace has proven its relevance to consumers in every demographic. Though these customers may not be purchasing the fashion based on its original context as the logo for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, something about the symbol resonates within them. Kolsbun and Sweeney conclude that “They may not know its original meaning, but they know it stands for good things—be nice to friends, be kind to animals, no fighting.” (173). They are

declaring that the positive message of the symbol has not been lost in its commercialization.

Conclusion

From its humble beginnings printed on five hundred cardboard signs to its high-profile appearance in the windows of Barney's New York, the peace sign has been conspicuous since its creation. As each successive generation discovers the symbol, it evolves to suit their lifestyle. Because contemporary youth express themselves through clothing, its manifestation has been through the fashion industry. Though some may not fully comprehend its significance, the design continues to connote the positive aspects of the human condition. The peace sign attests to the ability of a symbol to become a profitable fashion icon while retaining an inherent and universal truth. Whether used as a symbol of protest or simply as a fashion icon, one thing is certain; the peace sign is prominent in our culture, even if peace is not.

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