



The Rainbow Flag



The Alyson Almanac: A Treasury of Information for the Gay & Lesbian Community describes Rainbow Flag as follows:

In 1978, Gilbert Baker of San Francisco designed and made a flag with six stripes representing the six colors of the rainbow as a symbol of gay and lesbian community pride. Slowly the flag took hold, offering a colorful and optimistic alternative to the more common pink triangle symbol. Today it is recognized by the International Congress of Flag Makers, and is flown in lesbian and gay pride marches worldwide. In 1989, the rainbow flag received nationwide attention after John Stout successfully sued his landlords in West Hollywood, when they prohibited him from displaying the flag from his apartment balcony. Meanwhile, Baker is still in San Francisco, and still making more flags.

*The Rainbow Flag by Steven W. Anderson
appeared in GAZE Magazine (Minneapolis), #191, on 28 May 1993, p. 25:*

Color has long played an important role in our community's expression of pride. In Victorian England, for example, the color green was associated with homosexuality. The color purple (or, more accurately, lavender) became popularized as a symbol for pride in the late 1960s - a frequent post-Stonewall catchword for the gay community was "Purple Power". And, of course, there's the pink triangle. Although it was first used in Nazi Germany to identify gay males in concentration camps, the pink triangle only received widespread use as a gay pop icon in the early 1980s. But the most colorful of our symbols is the Rainbow Flag, and its rainbow of colors - red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple - represents the diversity of our community. The first Rainbow Flag was designed in 1978 by Gilbert Baker, a San Francisco artist, who created the flag in response to a local activist's call for the need of a community symbol. (This was before the pink triangle was popularly used as a symbol of pride.) Using the five-striped "Flag of the Race" as his inspiration, Baker designed a flag with eight stripes: pink, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. According to Baker, those colors represented, respectively: sexuality, life, healing, sun, nature, art, harmony, and spirit. Baker dyed and sewed the material for the first flag himself - in the true spirit of Betsy Ross.

Baker soon approached San Francisco's Paramount Flag Company about mass producing and selling his "gay flag". Unfortunately, Baker had hand-dyed all the colors, and since the color "hot pink" was not commercially available, mass production of his eight-striped version became impossible. The flag was thus reduced to seven stripes.

In November 1978, San Francisco's gay community was stunned when the city's first openly gay supervisor, Harvey Milk, was assassinated. Wishing to demonstrate the gay community's strength and solidarity in the aftermath of this tragedy, the 1979 Pride Parade Committee decided to use Baker's flag. The committee eliminated the indigo stripe so they could divide the colors evenly along the parade route - three colors on one side of the street and three on the other. Soon the six colors were incorporated into a six-striped version that became popularized and that, today, is recognized by the International Congress of Flag Makers.

In San Francisco, the Rainbow Flag is everywhere: it can be seen hanging from apartment windows throughout the city (most notably in the Castro district), local bars frequently display the flag, and Rainbow Flag banners are hung from lampposts on Market Street (San Francisco's main avenue) throughout Pride Month. Visiting the city, one can not help but feel a tremendous sense of pride at seeing this powerful symbol displayed so prominently.

Although the Rainbow Flag was initially used as a symbol of pride only in San Francisco, it has received increased visibility in recent years. Today, it is a frequent sight in a number of other cities as well - New York, West Hollywood, and Amsterdam, among them. Even in the Twin Cities, the flag seems to be gaining in popularity. Indeed, the Rainbow Flag reminds us that ours is a diverse community - composed of people with a variety of individual tastes of which we should all be proud.

Sources used for this article were found at Quatrefoil Library in St. Paul, and include: "Vexed by Rainbows", by Paul Zomcheck, in "Bay Area Reporter" (June 26, 1986); "Rainbow Flag" in "The Alyson Almanac" (1989); and "The Rainbow Flag", in "Parade 90: San Francisco Gay/Lesbian Freedom Day Parade and Celebration" (June 24, 1990)