

# Fetish

SUSAN M. BLOCK

The Dr. Susan Block Institute for the Erotic Arts & Sciences, Los Angeles, California, United States

The word fetish derives from the French *fétiche*, which comes from the Portuguese *feitico* (“spell”), which in turn stems from the Latin *facticius* (“artificial”) and *facere* (“to make”). In traditional, spiritual terms, a fetish is an object, such as a bone, a piece of fur, a statue carved in the likeness of a deity, or a Christian cross, believed to possess mystical energy.

## Sexual fetish

The terms “erotic fetish” and “sexual fetish” were first introduced by nineteenth-century French psychologist and inventor of the first usable intelligence test, Alfred Binet (1887), who proposed that fetishes be classified as either “spiritual” or “plastic.” So-called “spiritual love” refers to fetishes for situations and activities, as well as attitudes, social class, or occupational roles, such as the flirtatious French maid or the haughty Dominatrix in “Her” dungeon. “Plastic love” focuses on material objects such as shoes, lace panties, latex, or long fingernails.

Sigmund Freud also used the term “sexual fetish” to describe the feeling an individual has when the object of his affection is inanimate. Freud felt male sexual fetishism derived from the castration anxiety coupled with unconscious fear of the mother’s genitals, essentially replacing it with the “safer” fetish object. He wrote about a foot fetishist who, as a little boy, was shocked to learn that his mother had no penis. In fact, he was disturbed to the point of wondering if he might lose his own. Then he discovered his mother’s foot. To overcome his fear of losing his manhood, Freud says he obsessed about his mother’s foot (a penis

surrogate), and became a foot fetishist. Freud did not discuss sexual fetishism in women.

In a sense, the sexual fetishist “worships” the sexual fetish object much like the traditional fetishist venerates a totem pole of deities or a superstitious person invests magical powers in a rabbit’s foot or other lucky charm. The main difference is that the erotic fetishist combines sexual activity and fantasy with the mystical adoration of the fetish object or activity (Love 1994:109–111).

## Childhood and adolescence origins

In the classic sense, the sexual fetishist *requires* the fetish object—or at least, some kind of fantasy of the fetish object—in order to have sex. Some psychologists call this strong, deep-seated, sometimes compulsive need a “paraphilia.” The male fetishist requires the fetish object to get an erection; he cannot get excited without it, and he may become obsessed with it. For the human female, sexual arousal and fetishism are a little more mysterious and difficult to pinpoint. One could say that the female fetishist needs the fetish object to desire or enjoy sex. More often, it seems that females attempt to excite male fetishistic desire.

Male or female, the fetishist objectifies, glorifies, and deifies the object, body part, activity, concept, or situation of his or her fetish above and beyond any mere human being. For example, the foot fetishist sees a beautiful foot as the foot of a goddess. In fact, the foot itself—or the shoe on the foot—is regarded as the goddess. For the leather fetishist, the smell, look, and feel of leather are intoxicating and powerful. The pain fetishists, “the martyrs, the bad boys and naughty girls,” desire to be punished, restrained, bound, spanked, and sometimes even tortured. Often, they fetishize childhood. Submissive fetishists frequently want to be “disciplined” by a mother, father, big sister, teacher, drill instructor, priest, or other authority figure who brings them back to that earlier time when they first discovered feelings of sexual arousal.

Object fetishists may become collectors of their favorite fetish objects. They can get into trouble with the criminal justice system if part of their fetish involves the thrill of stealing other people's personal items, such as panties or shoes. Otherwise, object fetishists are usually harmless. Sometimes the fetish object, activity, or situation puts the fetishist into a trance state that he can only be released from with orgasm. This type of fetishist can be as happy playing with fetish objects as a child playing with toys.

Sexologist Havelock Ellis, who himself admitted to a fetish for "golden showers" (playing with urine), theorized that most fetishes stem from early childhood or adolescence, apparently emerging from intense, often traumatic personal experiences at a time when the fetishist is highly impressionable. Behavioral psychologists call this "imprinting."

## Fetish fashions

But fashion is also a rich source of fetishes, and fetishes can be very fashionable. In fact, the word "fetish" is currently quite faddish. Whereas once it implied inadequacy, psychosis, or at least neurosis, the "fetish" concept has been normalized and even acquired a certain erotic trendiness in the twenty-first century, as exemplified by the extreme popularity of fetish-oriented pop stars Madonna and Lady Gaga. Contemporary culture features fetish fashions, fetish games, and fetish balls. Most of the participants in these fetish balls and games and wearers of fetish styles, such as leather thigh-highs, eight-inch heels, pointed-toed boots, corsets, pencil skirts, and collars, do not *require* the fetish object or activity in order to become sexually aroused. They just enjoy it as spice in their sex life. Fetishism can therefore span the psychologically compulsive realm of paraphilias and the much wider world of sexual orientation, experimentation, and preference. Nevertheless, one can certainly meet a dangerous paraphiliac at a fetish ball, just as one can meet a sociopath in one's friendly neighborhood bar.

Not all fetishes are in vogue all the time, and the people who struggle most with "fetish guilt" are the ones with the unfashionable fetishes. Many an otherwise healthy fetishist's sense of anxiety and compulsivity stem from little more

than being acutely out of fashion and hence non-normative. A typical example is men who like to wear stockings and heels, but happen to live in the twenty-first century, as opposed to the eighteenth century when many manly gentlemen, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, wore stockings and heels, even while fighting in the American Revolution.

## Normalizing fetishes

Of course, it is more acceptable for a man to openly express a fetish for wearing women's clothing or anything else that is consensual in the early 2000s than it was in the late nineteenth century. At that time, psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing declared that fetishes were caused by "pathological sexual degeneration and hypersensitivity." On the other hand, in his *Psychopathia Sexualis* of 1885, Krafft-Ebing was the first doctor to recognize the difficulty of drawing the line between fetish and "normal" sex when he said most lovers engage in "horseplay ... just for fun" and that doesn't make them sadomasochists.

Far more than Krafft-Ebing, or his contemporary, Sigmund Freud, sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld showed unusual acceptance of the normalcy of erotic fetishism when he proposed his theory of "partial attractiveness" in 1920, which normalized body-part fetishes. According to Hirschfeld, sexual attractiveness does not originate in a person as a whole but is the product of the interaction of parts of the person. He felt that nearly everyone is particularly drawn to certain parts (e.g., the typical "breast man" or "leg man") and is thus inclined to a normal kind of fetishism. Only detaching and obsessively overvaluing a single feature results in pathological fetishism or paraphilia (Gordon 2000:152-170).

Contemporary psychiatrists, psychologists, and sex experts tend to define most consensual fetishes as normal variations of human sexuality. Many modern doctors do not consider the fetishist to be ill because of the fetish itself. There is only a need for treatment if the fetish becomes a problem in terms of the individual's ability to enjoy consensual sex, stay within the law, develop or maintain a relationship, or accomplish other goals in life. There is a variety of

treatments for difficult fetishes, including cognitive therapy, psychoanalysis, aversion therapy, and medication, all of which have varied degrees of success.

One of the keys to healthy fetishism is consensuality. Or, to use less clinical terms: care and respect for one's partner as a human being. Paradoxically, part of the play of fetishism is to dehumanize one's partner, making him or her a sex object, a role in one's fantasies, a deity, slave or captive, student or teacher. Thus, most experts feel that a healthy, fetish-filled life balances this intensive fantasy play with a strong recognition of the humanity of one's partner.

**SEE ALSO:** BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, Sadomasochism); Consensual Sex; Desire, Sexual; Domination and Submission (D&S); Fantasy, Sexual; Pornography, Addiction to ("Con"); Pornography, Addiction to ("Pro"); Pornography Use as a Clinical Issue; Sexual Stigma; Spanking

## REFERENCES

---

- Binet, A. 1887. "Du fétichisme dans l'amour" [Fetishism in Love]. *Revue Philosophique*, 24: 143–167.
- Gordon, Mel. 2000. *Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin*. Los Angeles, CA: Feral House.
- Love, Brenda. 1994. *The Encyclopedia of Unusual Sex Practices*. Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books.

## FURTHER READINGS

---

- Baker, Nicholson. 2011. *House of Holes: A Book of Raunch*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Block, Susan. 1996. *The 10 Commandments of Pleasure: Erotic Keys to a Healthy Sexual Life*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Blue, Violet. 2011. *Fetish Sex: A Complete Guide to Sexual Fetishes*, San Francisco, CA: Digma Publications.