

From Clay Tokens to QR Codes

4 MIN READ

FROM CLAY TOKENS TO QR CODES

A LOOK AT THE EVOLUTION OF THE LIVE EVENT TICKET

Ah, the ticket. That little item that grants us entry to the world's most memorable events—whether it's a concert, sports game, or the theater. But before tickets were digital codes ready to be scanned from your phone, they had a long, sometimes surprising history. So, how did we go from clay tokens to blockchain-backed tickets? If you've ever been curious about the evolution of this industry essential, you're in for a fun ride.

ANCIENT TIMES

CLAY TOKENS AND ROMAN EFFICIENCY

Our journey begins around 80 AD in ancient Rome. Back then, if you wanted to catch the hottest live event—the gladiator games at the Colosseum—you didn't get an email confirmation. Instead, you were given a small, usually clay or wooden token that served as your entry pass. This was called a tessera. These tokens often had your seat number engraved on them, making Rome the pioneer of reserved seating. With 50,000 fans crowding the Colosseum for a show, organization was key.

These games, often hosted for free by emperors like Titus during the inaugural games of the Colosseum, still needed some way to keep the crowds in line. So, while the games were an extravagant gift to the people, these tokens ensured the best seats went to—you guessed it—the elite.

Over in Greece, similar early ticketing systems were used for public performances at iconic venues like the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens. With audiences of up to 17,000, the Greeks relied on these tokens to help manage seating. Public events in these ancient times weren't just about entertainment; they were a way to reinforce social order.

At the inaugural games of the Colosseum in 80 AD, hosted by Emperor Titus, a tessera ensured that senators, nobles, and the emperor's special guests sat in the front rows, while the masses watched from farther back. VIP culture is nothing new!

MEDIEVAL & RENAISSANCE EUROPE

FROM ROYAL INVITES TO OPERA TICKETS

By the time the Middle Ages rolled around, public events were fewer and farther between, and ticketing was more about who you knew than what you could afford. Royal courts across Europe held exclusive banquets and jousting tournaments, where getting in required a royal invitation. No clay tokens or stubs here—just a scroll with a wax seal. For events like the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520, an extravagant summit between Henry VIII of England and Francis I of France, attendees were handpicked. Only the elites made the cut.

But the Renaissance flipped the script. Suddenly, public entertainment was back in vogue, and in 1637, Venice opened the world's first public opera house, the Teatro San Cassiano. This was a watershed moment in ticketing history because, for the first time, you had to pay for entry. With tickets in hand, the masses were now able to enjoy performances that had once been reserved for the elite. And if you had the funds to pay more, you got the best seats in the house, close to the stage. This tiered pricing model still thrives in theaters today.

Across the English Channel, London's Globe Theatre was shaking things up too. By the early 1600s, Shakespeare's plays were pulling in crowds of thousands. Whether you stood shoulder to shoulder in the pit or grabbed a seat in the upper galleries, you needed a ticket to get in. The idea of paying to watch a public performance was quickly becoming the new normal.

In 1637, Teatro San Cassiano became the first public opera house where tickets were sold to the general public. Tiered pricing—where you paid more for the better seats—was born, and opera became accessible to everyone (as long as they could afford it, of course).

18TH AND 19TH CENTURY

THE TICKETING BOOM

By the 18th century, ticketing was no longer a privilege for the elite. It became big business as public entertainment exploded. Theaters in London, like the Drury Lane Theatre, which opened in 1663, sold tickets through their box office. These tickets became more elaborate, often printed with intricate designs to discourage counterfeiters—something that would be a familiar challenge to anyone managing ticket fraud today.

The rise of technology also played a major role in ticketing's evolution. In 1841, Thomas Edmondson, a British station master, created a ticket-printing machine for railroads. The invention was initially for train passengers, but live-event venues quickly realized how it could streamline their own operations. Theaters and sports venues adopted the machine, allowing them to print standardized, mass-produced tickets that included seat numbers and pricing information.

In the United States, ticketing really took off with the explosion of professional sports. By 1869, the Cincinnati Red Stockings became the first professional baseball team, drawing huge crowds. Paper tickets became essential for managing the throngs of fans. As baseball grew in popularity, stadiums across the country began using standardized tickets to manage seating, monitor gate entries, and, of course, collect

revenue.

When the Cincinnati Red Stockings became the first professional baseball team in 1869, they sparked a nationwide trend. Crowds of over 5,000 came to their games, and for the first time, American sports saw widespread use of pre-printed tickets.

20TH AND 21ST CENTURY

THE DIGITAL AGE

The 20th century kicked off with printed tickets dominating the scene for concerts, sports, and theater alike. But in 1976, everything changed with the launch of Ticketmaster, which introduced the first computerized ticketing system. No more standing in long lines at the box office—fans could now purchase tickets remotely, and event organizers finally had a tool to better manage inventory and sales.

By the late 1990s, the internet transformed ticketing yet again. Paper tickets gave way to e-tickets, which could be printed at home or stored on your phone. This made things much more convenient for both eventgoers and box offices alike. Gone were the days of losing your ticket in a pile of paperwork—now you could flash a barcode at the gate and waltz right in. Venues also began using these systems to fight ticket fraud, introducing barcode scanning and other verification tools to keep counterfeiters at bay.

The 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta became the first major event to offer electronic ticketing options. This marked a major shift toward the digital future of ticketing, paving the way for e-tickets and mobile apps to become the norm.

And then came blockchain. In the 2020s, blockchain-based ticketing systems emerged, offering secure, tamper-proof digital tickets that could be traced and authenticated. Some events even started exploring NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens) as collectible tickets that doubled as memorabilia. The ticket, once just a piece of paper, was now becoming an asset in itself.

TICKETS – PAST, PRESENT, AND WHAT’S NEXT?

From clay tokens in ancient Rome to blockchain-backed NFTs, the journey of the live-event ticket is filled with fascinating twists and turns. For those of you working in the ticketing industry today, managing the balance between technology, fan experience, and security is nothing short of an art form. As tickets evolve further into the digital realm, it’s worth remembering how far they’ve come—and just how crucial they are in creating unforgettable experiences.

The next step? Well, maybe it’s retina scans, or perhaps something we haven’t even dreamed of yet. One thing is certain: tickets, in all their forms, will always be our pass to the moments that matter most.