

Reading Historical Habits: Clay Pipes in the History of the Western World

Beverly Lemire¹

¹ Department of History, Classics, and Religion, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

E-mail: lemire@ualberta.ca

Objects can be puzzling. Unpacking the meanings embedded in an object gives life to past places and people and unleashes the curiosity and imagination of learners. I recognize that each member of the class brings their personal knowledge to a problem, an invaluable resource. But, as a group, we begin by acknowledging what we don't know. Chris Gosden reminds us that: "people are socialized into particular material worlds which existed prior to their birth. The nature of social being for people will be structured by the education of their senses by the objects surrounding them in childhood... [with] their senses and emotions educated by the object world."²⁵

Some speak about learning to 'read' objects and material culture. We are very adept at this in contemporary contexts – think of fashion and sports paraphernalia. But we face challenges once we confront an object from outside our time and place.

My challenge to the class was to 'read' clay pipes, used for centuries in the western world to smoke tobacco. Of course, tobacco originated in Indigenous American cultures and Indigenous Peoples taught incomers about tobacco's use in diplomatic, festive and social contexts – merchants, mariners and missionaries. Pipe smoking was next translated from Indigenous cultures to European, African and world cultures in the 1500s, through colonial encounters. Europeans chose to make clay pipes based on Indigenous models, pipes that swept across the Atlantic World from the 1590s onwards, made in the millions. Museums are filled with such smoking tools, often of white clay, usually with broken pipe stems. American, European, Caribbean, African and Australian heritage centres hold dozens and sometimes hundreds of these implements (see Internet hyperlinks below). The pipes I own came from the English agricultural region of East Anglia; but I could have picked them up in many venues, including (with a mudlark licence) on the River Thames in London after high tide. When three broken pipes are taken out of their little box the game begins. What are they? What are they made from? How were they used?

These pipes pose a material puzzle. Students are urged to practice close looking, handle the pipes carefully and work collaboratively. In the mid 1900s most men smoked pipes or cigarettes. The pipe form remained largely the same; so, clay pipes would not have teased students from that era. But, as Gosden reminds us, generational change means that the shape of a tool can bewilder.

Analysis demands patience and respect to achieve results. Looking slowly is key and then looking again. All the senses can be engaged: look, touch, smell and heft in the hand. Students touched and turned these little things, to try to unlock the puzzle. (No one tried their sense of smell – too bad. It may have been revelatory.) Giving space to all the voices in the room is the way to get the richest discovery process.

"They look like bone, carved bone," one student observed. "Or maybe stone," someone suggested. The idea of stone was soon discarded; while the 'things' were smooth to the touch they were also lightweight. "What did they do with this," someone asked. The box of pipes passed from hand-to-hand.

²⁵ Chris Gosden, "What Do Objects Want?" *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* Vol. 12, no. 3 (2005): 197, accessed 11 November 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20177516>.



Figures 1 and 2.

One student came to class armed with a course in industrial design. This trained her to see things differently. She studied the pipes for evidence of their construction: “These pipes were industrially made,” she concluded. “It’s clear in the moulded pipe bowl, the seams that join the parts and the embossed motif on one pipe bowl” (see Figure 2). Once this student offered her analysis classmates could ‘see’ more clearly. Everyone crowded in to observe for themselves; they recognized the signs their classmate deciphered and gave her credit. In fact, she had never seen a clay pipe before, but was trained to ‘read’ objects. In this way she captured some key facets of these things. This opened the opportunity to talk about how hard, or easy, these would be to make; and how much these might cost. When they asked where I got these things, they were intrigued when I explained that they came from the side of an English field after spring ploughing, turned up by the frost. Questions followed, including the circulation of these commonplace things, so far from tobacco’s Indigenous origins and continued use. Elements of global, colonial and imperial history were suddenly right before their eyes. Discovery horizons opened widely.

Clay tobacco pipes mark a winding history that entangled Indigenous tobacco technologies with colonial and global histories, through the seizure of Indigenous lands, and commercialization of tobacco in the colonial Americas (employing millions of enslaved Africans). A flood of western-made clay pipes paralleled these developments, putting untold millions of pipes in the hands of men and women over the centuries.

Additional Resources

- “Broseley Pipeworks - Clay Tobacco Pipe Museum.” *Museums of the World*. Accessed November 11, 2019. <https://museu.ms/museum/details/14460/broseley-pipeworks-clay-tobacco-pipe-museum>.
- “Clay Tobacco Pipes, Repaired.” *Sydney Living Museums*. Access 11 November 11, 2019. <https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/taxonomy/term/18636#object-107656>.
- “Colonial Williamsburg.” <https://www.history.org/history/teaching/enewsletter/volume13/dec14/primsources.cfm>.
- Fay, Amelia. “Tobacco Pipes.” *Canada’s History*. Accessed November 11, 2019. <https://www.canadashistory.ca/explore/fur-trade/tobacco-pipes>.
- Lemire, Beverly. *Global Trade and the Transformation of Consumer Cultures. The Material World Remade*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- “Material Technologies of Empire: The Tobacco Pipe in Early Modern Landscapes of Exchange in the Atlantic World” *MAVCOR Journal* (mavcor.yale.edu) 14 April 2021. <https://mavcor.yale.edu/mavcor-journal/essays/material-technologies-empire-tobacco-pipe-early-modern-landscapes-exchange>
- “Pamplin Clay Tobacco Pipes,” Museum of Anthropology, University of Missouri <https://anthromuseum.missouri.edu/e-exhibits/pamplin-clay-tobacco-pipes>, Accessed 11 November 2019.
- “Tobacco Pipe.” *Science Museum Group*. Accessed November 11, 2019. https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/search/object_type/tobacco-pipe.