

OPIUM LAMPS



Variations on the Opium Smoking Theme (Published Period: January-February 1997)

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From its introduction into China in late Ming times the use of opium was wide-spread amongst the wealthier class of society, and the taste of this class is reflected in various objects connected with its indulgence. Opium beds and divans, specially shaped pillows of Guangdong stoneware with a canted surface to allow the recumbent smoker comfortably to hold his pipe at the flame of the lamp, a wealth of pipes, pipe-bowls, bowl-racks and tools plus a tray to hold them, minister to the tastes of the refined voluptuary. Amongst opium paraphernalia the lamp occupies a position second in importance only to the pipe; indeed, the lamp lends itself better to artistic treatment than does the pipe, and silver opium lamps of Qing dynasty vintage rank as minor works of art. Though referred to as lamps, since the purpose is not illumination but combustion the other term, "burner", is perhaps more apt. Here we adhere to the conventional nomenclature to avoid confusion because "burner" is often confusing applied to pipe-bowl, which in French is invariably *fourneau*.

Burners, or lamps, date from the inception of the habit in the seventeenth century, but the vast bulk of opium lampware was produced only after the spectacular

expansion of the opium trade from 1830 onward, with quality as well as quantity diminishing as the twentieth century approaches and progresses. The most part therefore of what the collector will want to collect dates from the nineteenth century. Lamps, pipes, indeed opium equipment of any kind dating from the eighteenth, are very rare. Material vary; metal, jade, horn and ivory are all used, with metal predominating. Quality lamps are made of silver, with white copper, which resembles silver when new as the poor man's substitute. Gilt lamps also exist, matching other gilt fittings on the tray. Basic components are a reservoir to the oil, a wick holder with tube to keep the wick immersed, and a glass to protect the flame from draughts and prevent it smoking. The glass varies in shape according to the kind of lamp--four basic types can be distinguished-- but a hole at the top to allow the flame or heat to emerge is *de rigueur*. Descriptions of opium dens refer to the little flames winking in the semi-darkness of the den. Opium lamps emit but a feeble light, serving to make darkness visible rather. The smoker reclines on his side, holding the mouthpiece of the pipe to his lips with one hand whilst with the other he guides the pipe toward the lamp, with the bowl inverted over the flame so that the heat converts the drug into smoke. This method of smoking, which is accounted the least wasteful, was devised in South China, and the purpose of the bowl, with its ovoid or orbicular shape, is not only to collect the dross but to retain the smoke, which is drawn into the lungs in a number of short suspirations.

Before this stage, which occupies less than two minutes, more than ten may have been spent preparing the drug for consumption. The usual way of doing this is to dip a long needle (*yen hauk*) into a box of prepared opium (*chandu*) and then build up a bolus on its tip by rotating the needle over the flame of the lamp. With the evaporation of its moisture content the opium swells to six or seven times its original size. Alternatively, opium can be cooked in a diminutive copper pan over the flame of the lamp and then transferred to a shaping device made of horn, which imparts a conical form to previous viscous substance. The cone, which is waxy, can also be worked up on a paktong or porcelain palette, using a spatula. Transfixing the cone with his needle, the smoker inserts it into the orifice of the bowl, then disengages the needle with a twirl, thereby leaving a vent for the passage of air, so the precious vapour is drawn into the bowl and stem of the pipe. As it sizzles, the cone collapses, the smoker pushing it toward the hole with his needle. Any dross adhering is scraped off with the spatula and the bowl cooled with a sponge. The spatula often forms on end of a double-ended needle, but sometimes a small piece of bamboo is used instead of a metal spatula to mould the cone. The lamp thus performs a dual role: to "cook" the opium and to produce combustion of the drug when cooked. It is also

used to warm the bowl prior to the insertion of the drug. Cooking is a tricky operation requiring no little skill and experience on the part of the operator. Tyros invariably mismanage the operation over/or undercooking the opium.

After examining a number of lamps one comes to recognize the different types; something like a morphology of opium lamp design begins to emerge. Early lamps are delightfully simple, consisting of a perforated base, usually of lead for stability with a tripod support to ensure the circulation of air and a flange in the middle into which a glass reservoir, or font, to hold the oil, is inserted, firmly wedged in with paper. Capping the reservoir is a brass wick-holder, while a bell-shaped glass fits over all. Variety was achieved by having reservoir and cover of different hues of glass is really a funnel, for a hole at the top is necessary to ensure a draught. Lamps of this kind made entirely of glass exist, even down to the base. Glass lamps were common in America, where their cheapness recommended them to indentured labourers working on mining sites or on the railway, and fragments have been excavated on the rubbish tips of abandoned "Chinatowns" in such places. The existence of much more utilitarian lamps, with base of brass and not a trace of Chinese influence visible in their design, raises a question as to provenance. H.H. (Harry Hubel) Kan In *Opium Smoking in American and China*, published by G.P. Putnam's Sons in New York in 1882, reports that opium lamps were manufactured in Birmingham, England, and whilst anything is possible in the city of 1001 trades certainly none is visible there today, as the author can testify from personal experience, so that they must have been for export only, if ever they existed. It seems to have been this type of lamp that predominated when the opium trade was at its height, its popularity can be gauged from the frequency with which it recurs in old photographs. Today it tends to be rare on account of its vulnerability, whenever the glass components got broken the remainder would be promptly discarded. Few lamps today remain their original shades. Shades can be improvised by filling a bottle with oil into which a red-hot poker is plunged, whereupon the glass cracks neatly along the line of the oil. Many old photographs of the interiors of dens show this unprepossessing feature. More aesthetic are the etched or coloured glasses some lamps boast; one in the writer's collection is enameled with a design of figures and prunus blossom.

Most commonly met with now is the less fragile metal lamp. By far the most complex of all opium lamps, this comprised: a base; a font approximately conical in shape, which can be integral with the base but frequently forms a separated component; a screw-in-wick assembly; a gallery intricately pierced and equipped with a rim for the glass to rest on; and, optionally, a flanged disk which goes over the neck of the

reservoir, leaving the wick protruding. In this case the disk, resting on the flange, forms the support for the glass. Sometimes a cap fits over the wick assembly to prevent the oil evaporating. The principle is no different from the previous type. To ensure that the flame does not die of oxygen exhaustion plentiful supply of air is needed. Air circulates through the pierced work of the gallery and the perforated disk into the flame chamber to create a draught. Beautiful, faceted glasses of domical shape are a feature of this kind of lamp. These thick glasses are cast, hand-blown. Occasionally silver, such lamps more usually white copper, or red and white copper combined; brass and nickel also popular. Normally round, conformably can also be hexagonal, with glass to match.

A third type has no base but a square, hexagonal or octagonal body which serves as reservoir. Occasionally the oil is held in a tubular insert soldered to the base, in which case the body is a mere decorative shell. Cloisonné lamps belong to this category because the four sides offered space for the display of artistic fancy. Here both openwork gallery and matching top have disappeared, and circulation is effected by a pierced collar which admits the air directly in quality examples this collar will be of filigree work. It is on the rim of this gallery that the glass rests. The glass can be either domical, as in the previous kind, or a tall conical shape, hand-blown, and ground away at the apex to provide the necessary aperture. Books on cloisonné lamps we have are of white copper. Unlike the preceding kind, which is seldom other than round, this type can be polygonal or even more complicated in shape so long as the gallery remains round to support the glass. Square glasses intended to sit on square bases exist but are rare.

Yet another category of lamp (Type 4) utilizes the same arrangement but with a body of porcelain or jade. Since these materials are unsuitable for oil, the reservoir is a white copper cylinder suspended from the lid that closes the aperture of the cup or vase. Jade lamps, however, are solid, and the cylinder sits in a hole shaped to receive it. A metal foot is added for stability. White porcelain lamps look very pretty with silver mounts. Cantonese cups are often converted into opium lamps, and even small vases are liable to suffer the same fate. The lamps in Allom's famous depiction of an opium den may belong this category, although the absence of any glass somewhat impugns their verisimilitude. Jade lamps are cylindrical and usually on the small side; in fact, many approximate to the portable variety used by travelers. A thread is often found at the foot of round metal lamps of the second type. This indicates that there was once a screw-on cover to protect the glass, so even large lamps were portable. Addicts cannot go for long without a "fix", and some pieces of equipment, like pipes

which can be dismantled, are intended for travelers' use. The standard travelers' lamp is metallic and unscrews to reveal a base that serves as reservoir and a diminutive glass, miniature version of Type 3 in fact; outwardly, it mimics the form of ascertain kind of opium box, complete down to the tiny handle by which such boxes are carried between finger and thumb.

Opium lamps lack any rotary device for the adjustment of the wick; the wick is adjusted manually with tweezers and trimmed with scissors. About eighteen years ago a pair of silver tweezers with a poppy-head knob went for 100 British Pounds in London. Chinese scissors are the most beautiful in the world and highly collectable, adding yet another item to the list of smoker's requisites. A little metal tray or box normally holds both, atop the larger tray containing all the other paraphernalia. This little tray, one inside the other. If the inner tray be of wood, a perch is necessary to protect the surface from being scorched by the hot tools. For precisely this reason the inner tray tends to be metallic. Chinese wicks are made from the fibrous tubers of the lotus plant, but loosely wound cotton wick is also used. Colza, i.e. rapeseed, oil was used, which entails a tube attached to the wick-holder to immerse the wick, the reason being that colza oil is viscous and the metal tube conducts heat from the flame. Kane in the monograph referred to states that addicts use sweet or peanut oil, but the refined voluptuary will never be content with anything less than camellia oil, the perfume of which betrays the true aesthete.

Camellia oil is not only expensive but hard to come by; though expressed from camellia seeds in China and Japan, the Japanese oil commercially available is used for hair dressing and has been treated so as to be rendered inflammable. Coconut oil is also employed. Spirit lamps with blue spirituous flames leaping from them are a figment of overheated fiction writers' imagination. Sax Rohmer (author of *Dope. A Story of Chinatown and the Drug Traffic*, Cassel, London, 1919) is the least and Julian Croskey (the pseudonym used by Charles Welsh Mason, the Elder, the author of *Max*, published by John Lane, London, 1897 and macabre tales like *The Shen's Pigtail and Other Cues of Anglo-China Life*, published by T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1894), the most reliable of novelists who have treated the theme of opium. Croskey had the advantage of being in the opium trade. Rohmer's *Dope* was inspired by a cause célèbre of the time, the Billie Carleton case, when an actress died of an overdose during the Armistice celebrations, leading to the uncovering of scandal involving high society figures and the closure of the den she and her confreres frequented in Limehouse, London's Chinatown.

The two most vulnerable parts of an opium lamp are the glass and the wick support, seldom does one find a good lamp with both in place. Fortunately, glasses are interchangeable and sizes were already standardized in the nineteenth century, so parts can be cannibalized. It were unwise for the collector to pass up the chance of a good lamp simply because one component is missing; moreover, replacement glasses are available provided one know where to look. The author knows of a shop in New York's Chinatown where glasses and sundry other items were on sale till recently, although the shopkeeper affected not to know what they were for! It is odd that the wick holder should be almost as vulnerable as the glass but a good restorer can make one, though not to fit a bastard thread on the reservoir when the wick-holder was a screw fitting. Not all screwed in; most were simply a snug fit.

As a collector grows familiar with his subject he begin to recognize features which keep on repeating. The solid moulding at the base that is such a satisfactory feature on lamps of Type 2 is sometimes filigree and in this form can move up to provide the gallery in Type 3. whilst the grooved corner familiar to us from porcelain shapes seem to be almost mandatory on all lamps with square bases. Much can be gleaned from the study of old photographs, more certainly than from engraving depicting opium dens, which are subject to artistic license; even when the photos are turn of the century or *entre les guerres* the equipment the predates the photo and may be older by decades.

A photo taken by Brassai circa 1920, during the belle epoque of opium, when Jean Cocteau and other sophisticates made opium-smoking fashionable in literary and bohemian circles, probably depicts equipment imported from Indo-China and already antique by the time it arrived. (Brassai is the pseudonym of Gyula Halasz and the title of the book is *Paris de Nuit*, Edition "Arts et Metiers", Paris, 1933. His photos are very atmospheric and convey the ambience of decadence in the intellectual circles of that time.) There is more than one way of perparing opium or charging the pipe, and travellers' accounts are often misleading because based on one man's personal observation; they need to be collated not only with one another but with the visual evidence from graphic and photographic sources before a clear picture emerges.

The habitue is frequently an aesthete who exchanges pieces of equipment with fellow addicts whose tastes approximate his own. The complexity of the ritual accounts for the diversity of the paraphenalia associated with its use., so that this brief study, which supplements earlier features in ARTS on ASIA on opium boxes (May-June, 1991) and opium pipes (March-April, 1995), is far from exhaustive, there remains to

be considered a veritable wealth of unexplored topics ranging from the tools (needles, spoons, pans, pipe-scrapers and bowl-scrapers, tweezers, scissors, spatulas, platters and brushes) to dross-boxes, caps, shaping devices, sponge-dishes, perches for the tools, pillows of a variety of types, filigree boxes and trays both wooden and metallic, almost any one of which merits a study by itself. Lamps, like the pipes, rank as curios collectable in their own right, but the more functional items seldom travelled find, likewise pipe-howls because they frequently got broken.

One particular item than which nothing perhaps could be more whimsical forms an appropriate note on which to end. Because of the morbid excitation of the senses under the influence of opium the flame of the lamp hurts the eye. To obviate this, a zoomorphic object in metal, a frog or, more appropriately, a moth, of intricate workmanship, is attached to the rim of the glass precisely where the flame of the lamp would impinge on the addict's vision. These charming addenda are the hardest to locate of all.

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