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Enjoying the high life—drugs in history and culture

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In 1934, Cole Porter's Broadway musical *Anything Goes* opened with the song *I Get a Kick Out of You*. In it, audiences were told that "some get a kick from cocaine". To enable the song to be aired on the radio, Porter agreed that singers might change the objectionable reference to cocaine: they could substitute "some like a whiff of Guerlain". The line that "mere alcohol doesn't thrill me at all" excited no opposition.

David Nutt, the former UK Government drugs adviser, was widely cited recently for pointing out in this journal that alcohol is more harmful than any other drug. Today, each person on average drinks more than twice the volume of alcohol than they did in 1945. Consumption of cocaine is also increasing; according to the EU's drug agency, the UK is at the top of the European "league table" for cocaine use. Internationally, the drugs market is estimated to be worth about £200 billion a year. So it would seem a perfect time for the Wellcome Collection's *High Society* exhibition, which seeks to explore the universal human desire to use mood-altering or mind-altering substances. It does so with panache and elegance; informing rather than moralising, and instilling in visitors a sense of reverence for people's powers of self-deception as well as ingenuity and creativity.

There are so many fascinating objects that it's difficult to know where to begin. Even seemingly modest artifacts tell remarkable stories. On entering the exhibition, there is a large wall of intriguing pipes, syringes, capsules, gourds, vaporisers, cups, betel boxes, nut cutters, cannabis bongs, cigarettes, powders, and mushrooms. Drug taking is global. We are catapulted from opium dens in Patna (India) to colourful bazaars in Constantinople. An intricate engraving from 1785 shows the King of Tonga accepting a bowl of Kava, a narcotic drink with powers of intoxication, purification, sedation, and healing (it is particularly effective for fungal infections and rheumatism). In 1982, Queen Elizabeth II drank it on her state visit. We are not told her verdict. There are photographs from the 1930s of the Huichol people of Mexico making an annual pilgrimage to collect peyote, a small cactus rich in mescaline. We are told that it is a rite that has persisted almost unchanged since pre-Columbian times.

European fascination with drugs is similarly mesmerising. A simple glass bottle, labelled "Forced March", was marketed as a useful gift for friends in need of a "boost". The bottle was sold by Burroughs Wellcome in the early 20th century and contained a powerful mixture of cocaine and caffeine. If taken once an hour "when undergoing continued mental strain or physical exertion", it promised to prolong powers of endurance and curb appetites. No wonder both Ernest Shackleton and Robert Scott found "Forced March" a useful

addition to their packs on their calamitous expeditions to the South Pole. Soldiers during World War I also imbibed these convenient pills, perhaps helping them endure the rigours of trench warfare, but not endearing them to folks back home who were less than keen to have “crazy” soldiers cavorting in public squares. In 1916, the government attempted to curb the use of cocaine by soldiers on leave from war service, but cocaine was only banned completely by the Dangerous Drugs Act of 1920.

The message of this exhibition is the curious fluidity in the identification and classification of drugs. Drugs are both glamorous and appalling, and their status can shift with bewildering abruptness. It is difficult for us today to imagine a world in which cocaine was routinely added to elixirs, cigarettes, “nerve tonics”, and drinks. John Pemberton’s original 1886 recipe for Coca Cola insisted on adding cocaine. Medication sold over the counter by influential pharmaceutical company Parke-Davis contained substantial quantities of the drug, which was widely believed to “supply the place of food, make the coward brave, the silent eloquent, and render the sufferer insensitive to pain”. When Ethel Merman appeared on Broadway in 1934 singing *I Get A Kick Out Of You*, many people in the audience would have agreed with her claim that cocaine and alcohol were secondary thrills compared to love. But they might also have agreed on the simpler pleasures of returning home to a cigarette, tumbler of whiskey, and, if feeling under the weather, an opium-packed throat pastille.

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