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NEUROSCIENCE

Opiates for the people

W. F. Bynum applauds an open-minded exhibition on the history of recreational drugs.

The exhibition *High Society* may not alter your mind, but it will broaden your thinking. The ubiquity of recreational drug use in all times and all cultures is the focus of this show at London's Wellcome Collection. On offer is a varied combination of artefacts, artworks, books and videos tackling pharmacology, the drug trade, self-experimentation, collective intoxication and the ethics of abusing these substances.

Opium and its products pop up again and again: the largest object in the exhibition is a gigantic opium pipe from the late nineteenth century. The dominance of opium is unsurprising, as the poppy was cultivated for its sap at least as early as 3000 BC. Both opium and alcohol have been

High Society: Mind-Altering Drugs in History and Culture
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intimately connected with humanity for millennia. However, cocaine, mescaline, LSD, tobacco and even betel nuts also get their due. Coffee is here, too — the only drug available for testing *in situ*, at the Wellcome Collection's café.

One man's stimulant is another man's poison. This exhibition takes a non-judgemental stance, making no distinction between legal thrills — such as those delivered by coffee, alcohol and tobacco — and illegal ones. In any case, as the historical and anthropological arcs of the displays show, the legal issues are time- and culture-

dependent. Opium was demonized in the West only from the mid-nineteenth century; marijuana is always contentious; and many moral or health crusaders would today ban tobacco, alcohol or both.

Running throughout the exhibition is the striking documentation of the fine line separating pleasure and pain, ecstasy and vacant dependency. This is most explicit on a wall of 19 photographs by Tracy Moffat from 1999, entitled *Laudanum*. The images — depicting a woman and her maid experiencing hallucinations in various guises and poses, some erotic, some melancholic and some downright disturbing — convey a sense of what it would be like to witness such an event.

Context is important in experiencing mind-altering drugs. Social cohesion and rites of passage are linked to some hallucinogens, as the exhibition's images and films reveal. Ayahuasca, a psychoactive brew made from *Banisteriopsis* vines, is shown being drunk by the Tucano people of the Colombian Amazon. Peyote, a cactus containing mescaline among a range of alkyls, is dried and chewed by the Huichol and other indigenous peoples of Mexico. The resin from the bark of the virola tree is snorted like snuff during a ceremony in a Venezuela palm festival. These colourful rituals stand in contrast to less convivial Western gatherings, including a counterculture photograph of '4:20 Day', when 10,000 people gathered on 20 April 2008 for a mass 'smoke-in' of cannabis at the University of Colorado, Boulder, to protest against the drug's illegal status.

Medical science also gets a look in. Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann's description of LSD is on display, as well as classic texts about clinical uses of opium and its derivatives. In a recorded interview, British neuroscientist Barry Everitt describes the latest research on neural networks that is helping us to understand addiction and prevent relapse. He explains how addiction may be a learned behaviour that is intimately tied to memory retrieval.

A display on the economics of drugs shows some striking figures. The annual expenditure by the US government on its 'War on Drugs' equals the annual worldwide income of the Roman Catholic Church, or the amount Americans spend each year on complementary medicine. And each of these exceeds the yearly international market for antidepressants.

The centre of gravity of this rewarding exhibition seems to lie in the 'swinging sixties'. If you didn't experience that era first hand, as I did, this is your chance to find out what all the hype was about. ■

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