

JULIUS BRENCHLEY COLLECTION

Authentic Art or Tourist Souvenirs?

Haida Argillite Pipes in the Brenchley Collection

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The Julius Brenchley Collection contains a number of significant artefacts from Native North America collected during the height of European exploration. In particular there are a number of fascinating objects made from Argillite, a type of black rock native to the Queen Charlotte Islands in Haida Gwaii. The often small and fragile objects made by the Haida tribe were a popular item of curios collected by explorers and now belong to museum ethnographic collections all over the world. There have been a number of significant studies that focus on argillite pipes which attempt to decipher their representation. This has led to two conflicting views; some believe pipes are untraditional souvenirs that are more representative of Euro-American exploration, whilst others believe the pipes are a natural progression of Haida art. Julius Brenchley was no exception to the trend and his collection provides us with two examples that both agree and disagree with these views. It is important to understand why both pipes were produced and to apply historical context when analysing the amount of impact European exploration had on Northwest Coast design.

The *Native Figure Argillite Pipe* [Fig. 1] is characteristic of the Haida artistic style that developed during the mid 19th Century. The two-dimensional figures are rooted from authentic Haida emblems and follow the same rules applied to surface design on items of importance such as ceremonial bowls, cedar wood boxes and blankets. However, the imagery is more stylised. This pipe is considered to be a panel pipe because it has a flat base and the overall shape is trapezoidal (Sheehan, 1981: 71). This panel pipe style emerged over the course of the mid 19th Century and adapted from earlier argillite pipes carved around 1820; this example in the Brenchley Collection is typical of 1850s pipes which appeared flatter and began to feature more elaborate surface decoration. The design is no longer limited to the conventional shape of a pipe.



Figure One: **Native Figure Argillite Pipe.** Artist Unknown. Haida; ca.1850.

The design depicts animals and supernatural beings interconnected in a methodical sequence. The compositions of the animals, likely to be ravens, are symmetrical and create the straight base of the pipe. Each figure represented on the design is likely to be significant in Haida culture, however, the exact meaning of the image and what is being represented can only be speculated (Holm, Sheehan). Identification is difficult to determine because there is no evidence from the artist themselves as to what is being represented. The most prominent figures in Haida mythology include the thunderbird, sea otter, raven, whale, salmon and wolf and bear. These are all animals that reflect the environment of the Northwest Coast (Mundkur, 1976: 434). In an attempt to speculate it is possible to interpret a number of figures seemingly relating to Haida mythology.ⁱ Each figure is connected to form a flowing sequence and three of the animals are connected through long extended tongues. The long extended tongue motif has been interpreted as symbol of an exchange of spiritual power (Wright, 2001: 226) and this may relate the pipe to a theme of transformation. In contrast, Sheehan (136) believes the symbol of exchanging tongues “cannot be interpreted in terms of traditional iconography”. This would imply that Haida artists adjusted imagery in order to make it a non-secular item for sale.

In order to apply my own interpretation based on various theories, I have separated each figure in the design and discussed each image in an anti-clockwise sequence beginning with the raven [Fig. 2A]. The Raven [Fig. 2A & 2F] is shown in profile as having a straight beak with a blunt tip and wings and is a prevalent character in Haida mythology whose society was divided into two clans represented by the raven and the eagle. The raven is believed to be the creator and a trickster that could assume any form. The imagery on the pipe could be

interpreted as depicting a cycle where the raven changes into various different forms and then transforms back into itself. The start of the transformation appears to begin with the raven on the right-hand side [2A] whose tongue protrudes towards the next figure. The last raven [2F] appears to have its mouth open in preparation to devour the other creatures.

The supernatural element of this design appears to be in the form of the Sea-Wolf creature known as the Wasgo [Fig. 2B]. Associated with fantasy and superstition it can be speculatively identified as part whale because of the short fin on its head with the hole in the centre and part wolf because of the long curved claws (Stewart, 1979: 42 & 46). The next animal which is connected by a tongue appears to be a bird, most likely an eagle [Fig. 2C]. The animal is identified as an eagle because of the prominent wing and the eagle's importance in Haida culture; however the generic stylisation makes it difficult to identify. The detailing of the wing is carved in the traditional Haida design style of ovoid shapes (Stewart: 30) and the inclusion of small details which are adapted from conventional Haida imagery marks the transition of objects from utilitarian to souvenirs.

Continuing to the next image, the bird's wing also reaches out towards and holds what appears to be a humanoid, a human with animalistic features [Fig. 2D]. The figure appears to have a large ears and a hand. Its head is bent at a complete 180 degree angle unlike any of the other creatures, a common feature applied to the image of humans, however the significance is unknown (Wright, 1983: 141). The last animal to be depicted appears to be a wolf [Fig. 2E] who is believed to have a special power a man had to acquire in order to become a successful hunter (Stewart: 46), perhaps emphasised by the humanoid character next to it. The carving shows the wolf to have long ears, an elongated snout and its stance is crouched on all four legs. Its claw holds the beak of the final raven [Fig. 2F] in an attempt to avoid transforming back.



A: Raven



B: Wasgo



C: Eagle



D: Humanoid



E: Wolf



F: Raven

Figure Two: A breakdown of each figure on the **Native Figure Argillite Pipe**.

Many interpretations can be applied to the imagery as there is no evidence relating the pipe to a Haida myth. Myths were sacred and kept between tribal and clan members, therefore, the theme of transformation can only be speculated. The pipe appears aesthetically authentic, animals and supernatural beings could be compared with imagery on crests and ceremonial objects. However, the design remains ambiguous and it is likely that only the carver would have fully understood the story being portrayed. Maurer (in Wade, 1986: 148) suggests that “non-Indians will never fully comprehend the complex cultural, religious, and metaphysical associations of a traditional Indian art object” and this also can be applied to objects that derived from tradition in order to sell. It is possible that native artists and sellers never intended the foreign buyer to understand the true meaning of a motif. To buyers, if the visual representation looked quintessentially “Indian”, it is likely that further meanings were inessential. Brenchley’s object labels that lack detail emphasize this point, no specific tribes are attributed to any of the pipes.

Imagery developed and transitioned during the mid 19th Century and artists began focusing on the subject of Euro-American travellers, a theme depicted on the *Curios Argillite Pipe* [Fig.3]. Three male Europeans shown in profile are travelling on a boat featuring European objects including a chair and a cabin structure with windows. These items would have been unfamiliar to the Haida tribe and often characterise the imagery on panel pipes (Sheehan: 81). The artist's interpretations of European people on this pipe are typical of representations during this time period: facial features are exaggerated, noses are elongated and men have long hair. The female figure is accentuated by standing and staring at the viewer in contrast to the other figures. The two men either ends of the boat appear to be steering and the central male figure is sat down holding the female. Is she being taken away, or steered perhaps? This perception is emphasised by the woman's arms being submissively behind her back.

The composition of the pipe can be analysed in terms of the importance of symmetry in Haida art (Holm: 84). The piece is not exactly symmetrical but by drawing a vertical line down the central male a reflection can be distinguished, the female can be interpreted as reflecting the cabin. As the woman is reflecting a possession of the Europeans, it can be inferred that she too has become a possession of the European male. The male is in control and the scene reflects Grayson Perry's (Wall Text: 2011) comment that Haida artists often depicted European's violent attitude towards women. The woman could be his European wife, but her ethnicity is debateable, she could even be Native American. Many European men began relationships with Native American women when travelling; therefore, the image could be a comment of this occurrence. It is also suggested that on traditional designs symmetry was horizontal as opposed to vertical (Holm: 85), as seen on this piece, and this could be another attempt by the Haida to subvert tradition on souvenirs. The meaning of the piece is unknown; however it leads to many questions relating to the actions of Euro-Americans during the height of exploration.



Figure Three: **Curios Argillite Pipe**. Artist Unknown. Haida; ca.1850.

There is an obvious difference between the compositions of both pipes. The *Native Figure Argillite Pipe* is almost abstract; the figures fit together and form a flowing and compact design. However, on European focused imagery as seen on the *Curios Argillite Pipe*, the Haida style changed and the figures are separated. A deeper understanding can be made of Haida opinion towards European society by looking at the carving style. The separation in the imagery could symbolise the Haida belief that Europeans lacked community (Wyatt, 1993: 187). Looking at the imagery demonstrates Haida feelings towards European visitors too. Haida carvers can be seen as satirists (Perry, 2011: 71 & Sheehan: 130) because explorers believed pipes symbolised the places they visited, however, Haida artists played on their stupidity because pipes had no relevance to Haida culture at all. This thought could apply to both pipes in the collection. The *Native Figure Argillite Pipe* appears to offer a traditional scene, and was perhaps bought with an understanding that the imagery was spiritually significant, when in fact it is a secular souvenir. And with the *Curios Argillite Pipe*, Mr Brenchley may have bought it because it depicts a familiar scene, unbeknown to him that it may well be ridiculing European society.

It can be said that pipes developed from European contact because none were made before 1820. The concept of the argillite pipe was designed to appeal to European buyers who introduced the concept of tobacco smoking and would therefore be attracted to these types of products (Furst & Furst, 1982: 103). The production of pipes, and other souvenirs, developed as the fur trade declined allowing the continuation of trade with visitors and provided income during a period of time when society had to adapt to encroaching Euro-

American ways of living (Feest, 1992: 28). Pipes were not utilised during the everyday lives of the Haida and according to Wright (1982) pipes were not sacred and did not hold any religious significance for the tribe. What argillite pipes represent today is a transition in Haida mentality; the tribe for the first time began carving for aesthetic purposes rather than utilitarian purposes. It is clear both pipes were made for sale rather than to be used practically because the designs are carved onto thin pieces of fragile argillite which would not be able to be smoked.

However, the act of making argillite pipes can be seen as a natural progression of Haida art. Pipes can be interpreted as objects of utility which is important in Haida ideology, as Holm (1983: 106) explains, "...probably Haida pipe carvers, reluctant to make a decorated object without function, chose to drill the hole even if it was too small for any practical use". Haida carvers continued to include ritualistic beliefs onto an item that was made as a souvenir. Furthermore, it can be said that objects were made specifically for curios in order to preserve Haida culture and protect it from becoming commercially available. Haida artists made argillite pipes to sell rather than giving away items that carried importance. Feest (19) has stated that tribes were reluctant to part with useful artefacts and destroyed many objects after ceremonial use. By creating argillite pipes, the Haida tribe continued to prosper and trade with Euro-Americans without having to sacrifice important spiritual and religious beliefs. The act of selling and trading was also not a new concept as the Haida had conducted trade with other tribes before European arrival. The idea of accumulating wealth was not new either, the Haida practised the Potlatch ceremony where the Chief collected many items and then distributed them as gifts to other members of the tribe in order to display his wealth.

Argillite pipes convey how Haida artisans were able to develop their culture and adapt designs onto new objects introduced by Europeans. Europeans had a profound effect on the tribal life during the mid 19th Century, and as Wright (2001: 87) comments, "[European interaction] altered and expanded rather than influenced". The pipes that illustrate authentic native designs portray this development; designs reference symbolism and mythology important in Haida culture. Souvenir art pipes merged indigenous designs and European objects to appeal to the buyer. As demonstrated, native designs were altered in

order to sell, and Bill Holm (1965: 19) reiterates this point when he stated that “[The Northwest Coast artist] retained the essential character of the art style and successfully transferred his principles of design from the old media to the new”. This statement can be applied to the *Native Figure Argillite Pipe* because the Haida artist has applied traditional styling onto a new medium and object.

Lastly, it is important to contextualise Julius Brenchley’s exploration in order to understand how and why Haida argillite pipes form part of his North American collection. Julius Brenchley travelled around the world between 1849 and 1867 and began in America. He reached Fort Vancouver, the fur trade post owned by the Hudson’s Bay Company in Washington State at the end of 1850. Due to the relative proximity to Haida Gwaii, the island home to the Haida tribe off the Northwest Coast of British Columbia, it is likely that most Haida objects were acquired by Mr Brenchley at Fort Vancouver.ⁱⁱ Objects would have been acquired through trade or gift when Haida tribesmen and women travelled down the West Coast in cedar wood canoes to trade and sell goods (Kaufmann, 1976: 56). The objects in the collection lack documentation and are vague in origin and this could be as a result of acquiring objects from the Fort’s store rather than directly from the artist. An approximate origin date of 1850 can be applied to many of the objects, but if some objects were collected from Fort Vancouver’s store their origin could pre-date 1850.

This passage from the preface of *Jottings during the Cruise of H.M.S. Curaçoa among the South Sea Islands in 1865* (Anon., 1873: xvi) describes why Julius Brenchley collected items from around the world:

“Thus, though travelling for his own instruction and amusement, he spared neither cost nor trouble in procuring what he thought would contribute to the instruction and gratification of others.” Furthermore, “Though [Brenchley] left a large amount of notes made during his journeys, he was more interested in collecting material objects, illustrative and commemorative of his varied travels, than devoting himself to literary descriptions of them.”

It is evident Julius Brenchley was the archetypal explorer who collected objects to illustrate his travels. As the passage states Brenchley collected “for his own instruction and amusement” rather than for historical or cultural purposes. The emphasis on “his journeys”

also implies sole importance over the people he visited. Carol Sheehan's (17) statement regarding collectors' reasoning for buying argillite goods can be applied to Brenchley: "...the buyer was more interested in the fact that it was carved by an Indian than in the meaning of its images". As a result, the surface design on many of the objects in the collection, especially the argillite pipes, is presented without meaning and therefore lost to the present day viewer.

To conclude, argillite pipes today are categorised as ethnographic items meaning that objects are illustrative of Haida culture and are demonstrative of the customs and characteristics of the Haida tribe. But to what extent argillite pipes are illustrative and demonstrative of the customs and characteristics of the Haida tribe is debated. Analysis of argillite pipes can conclude that Haida culture was greatly impacted by the increased arrival of Euro-American settlers to native North America. However, the production of pipes continued trade and the accumulation of wealth innate in Haida society. Looking at pipes in the context of today, it can be said that Haida carvers made pipes in order to participate in growing commerce and to retain their own sacred possessions. Argillite pipes demonstrate the Haida tribe as having an astute characteristic because they sold souvenirs that appeared to be authentic to their culture in a form that would appeal to the foreign buyer. It is believed that much of the surface decoration on pipes is meaningless; however a certain level of traditional Haida style and elements of mythology can be interpreted from both pieces analysed. Overall, elements of traditional design and style on ceremonial and utilitarian objects have been adapted to be sold commercially to Euro-Americans. And, by depicting Euro-American scenes, Haida carvers continued to document history in their traditional way, through imagery and oral stories as opposed to the written word.

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Notes

ⁱ In order to speculate the imagery on many of the Argillite Pipes, I have extensively used Hilary Stewart's analysis 'Looking at Indian Art of the Northwest Coast'.

ⁱⁱ I have applied the information on Sir Edward Belcher, accessed on the British Museum Online [2012], to Julius Brenchley. The text states that most traders and explorers who journeyed the Northwest did not visit the Queen Charlotte Islands, but stopped at Fort Vancouver. The Fort, which traded in furs, was likely to have stored Haida souvenirs that travellers then collected. As Julius Brenchley stayed at Fort Vancouver at the end of 1850, see *A Journey to the Great-Salt-Lake* (Volume 2), p.449 and there is no information regarding travel to the Queen Charlotte Islands, it is very likely he acquired Haida souvenirs at the Fort.