

A tangled history of America's relationship with illegal drugs. (Drug Enforcement Administration Museum, Arlington, Virginia, USA)

by Wanda J Reif

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Illegal Drugs in America: A Modern History
A permanent exhibition at the Drug Enforcement Administration
Museum, Arlington, Virginia, USA. Admission by appointment only.
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On the long roster of museums in the vicinity of Washington, DC, there's a new one--the Drug Enforcement Administration Museum--run by the government agency in charge of the war on recreational drugs. It provides an instructive journey through the tangled history of America's acceptance and rejection of drugs, from 1850s' opium dens to today's punitive policing of mood-altering substances. The exhibition comes with a tolerable dose of boosterism for current federal drug policies.

The section America's First Drug Epidemic 1850-1914 attributes the introduction of drugs in America to Chinese immigrants who brought opium to California during the gold rush. Photographs of opium dens, commonplace in American life by the 1890s, and a display of elaborately carved opium pipes, convey the Asian connection.

Tracking the evolution of drugs in American society, the exhibition shows that opiates such as morphine, laudanum (alcohol suffused with opium), and paregoric (alcohol, opium, and camphor) were used to treat Civil War wounded and became a staple of medical practice towards the end of the 19th century. By 1900, an estimated one in 200 Americans was addicted, the typical addict being a white middle-class woman hooked through medical treatment. An Illinois pharmacist's poison register from 1908 lists among its prescriptions for respectable married ladies opium and laudanum for "headache", "rheumatism", and "rupture", along with strychnine for "mice" and carbolic for "anticeptic" (sic).

Easy access prevailed, as shown in a display of over-the-counter products attractively packaged and touting "secret" ingredients, usually large amounts of alcohol, opiates, or both. Greene's syrup of tar (petroleum oil and opium) was prescribed for respiratory afflictions. Bayer Heroin was widely advertised. Mrs Winslow's Soothing Syrup, opiate-based, for children with teething problems and sleeplessness, was listed as the cause of death on death certificates of several youngsters in the early 1900s.

Cocaine, introduced in 1885 as the first effective local anaesthetic, was prescribed for ailments ranging from depression to hay fever, and was incorporated into wine, colas, and catarrh powders.

Increasing concern about the debilitating effects of addiction led to laws restricting public access to drugs and imposing stringent controls on prescribing by physicians. As with America's ill-fated experiment with alcohol prohibition, drug control led to criminal drug trafficking. Enforcing the New Drug Laws 1919-1950 portrays America as the international leader in controlling drugs in the first half of the 20th century. Pictures of notorious figures and major drug busts by federal agents are displayed, along with various seized "tools of the trade", including submachine guns and common items for concealing drugs.

The cachet of drug use by entertainment celebrities is highlighted by photographs of performers killed by drugs, such as Charlie Parker and Billie Holliday, and movie stills of Hollywood's melodramatic depiction of drug use.

Law enforcement and a shift in societal attitudes towards drug use, combined with growing drug scandals in the entertainment industry, largely eliminated heroin and cocaine from American life from about the end of World War I until the 1960s, according to the exhibition. Newspaper articles and magazine covers shown in the exhibition trace the changing viewpoint; a picture of a 1940s neighbourhood drugstore suggests benign wholesomeness.

By the 1960s, America had largely forgotten its first drug epidemic. Then came the baby boomers, riding on postwar prosperity, and viewing drugs as a harmless adjunct of social rebellion. The market responded with bountiful supplies of marijuana, amphetamines, psychedelics, and more. When middle-class users turned to dealing and trafficking, the drug

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culture exploded. Photographs of Jack Kerouac, Timothy Leary, and Janis Joplin are juxtaposed with drug busts, bad trips, and homemade drug paraphernalia.

In the 1970s, cocaine, touted as the "champagne of drugs", reappeared. It was accompanied by expensive accessories, which are exhibited, together with pictures and cartoons showing the rapidly evolving public attitude towards cocaine use--from harmless luxury to middle-class recreation to hardcore addiction and street crack dealers. According to the DEA exhibition, drug use in America reached its peak in 1979, when one in ten used drugs on a regular basis.

The Vietnam War brought drugs to soldiers through supply routes in Southeast Asia, which ushered in the current era of international drug suppliers. Return of Cocaine & the Rise of Cartels spotlights the Colombian drug traffickers who developed smuggling operations into the USA, hiding their contraband in Paddington bears, surfboards, and fresh fish. The violence associated with the cartels is reflected in displays of seized weapons, including a diamond-encrusted revolver. Not surprisingly for a museum run by a law enforcement agency, there is no effort to cover decriminalisation as a strategy for defeating the plague of gangsterism and corruption that invariably accompanies illegal drug traffic.

The DEA museum provides an enlightening and comprehensive look at the vacillating attitudes and usage patterns of America's complex relationship with drugs. There is scant attention, however, to the underlying causes of the enduring fascination in this richest of nations for substances that provide escape from reality.

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