

## The Seduction of a “High” Society

By Amita Murray

The words “opium den” conjure visions of backpacking across Thailand, or, for the more literary-minded, the first scene of Charles Dickens’ unfinished novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, where choirmaster John Jasper buries his savagely repressed feelings in a London opium den. Opium has not only inspired literary texts (think Georgette Heyer’s delicate damsels who are in constant need of revival through a laudanum tincture), but it has also started wars and destroyed empires. As the Wellcome Collection reminds us in its recent and sumptuous exhibition on the pleasures and dangers of intoxication, it was the East India Company’s export of opium to China in the nineteenth century, in exchange for silk, tea and porcelain, that led to the Opium Wars.

High Society, housed at The Wellcome Trust’s headquarters in North London, is a collection of paintings, original manuscripts, objects, machines and videos that are simultaneously delicious, poignant and amusing. The collection touches on the archetypal Dionysus in all of us, the part of the personality that craves ecstasy, trance, even ritualized madness. Whether you are of the ilk that believes in the power of drugs to unleash the “real” and quintessential you, or you lie on the other side of the camp and are only too aware of the lasting dangers, the idea of letting go of control, if only for a minute, is a seductive one. Sufi practitioners achieved this trance-like state through whirling repeatedly. Meditation practitioners realize it by sitting still and focusing on the breath. While many others escape simply by shutting off the frenetic side of the brain that is always yelling what next, what next, what next, and reading the latest Steig Larsson, eating a steady supply of Belgian chocolate, or pinning their hopes on a sparkly season of *Strictly Come Dancing*.

High Society, then, feeds our need to simultaneously find ourselves, and to escape the persecution of our own minds. Through a complex chart, the collection spells out the dangers of drug abuse, and tells us that the United States has spent \$2500billion on its War on Drugs in the last forty years. Other artefacts, though, show the fine line between the allure of intoxicants, and the dangers of entrapment. A series of haunting black-and-white photographs by Tracy Moffat shows us the relationship between a sinister maid, and her mistress who is hooked on laudanum. The mistress, in the grip of an overwhelming hunger, lolls naked on her bed, as her maid feeds her habit. While not as decadent or lascivious as Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Bottles* that depicts his favourite muse Lizzie Siddal as a mere charcoal sketch in the

background of the opium addiction that led to her death, Moffat's stark pictures capture the tragic eroticism of being in the grip of a beast that is in the end all-consuming and much bigger than you.

Then there is "Drawing produced under the influence of hashish," an eccentric ink-on-paper rendition by Jean-Martin Charcot from 1853, where strange figures that could be Jesus or the Pied Piper, walk across the page, while dancers with extensive plumage and tight skirts cavort with strangers. Deeper into the collection, LSD blotters give us an exotic scene of a Japanese woman sitting next to a lantern, absorbed in her reading, and another of a Kama Sutra-like couple sharing a coy moment. These blotters are printed over a sheet of small perforated squares, and look like whimsical pictures on an Asian fan, but are, in fact, vehicles for the illicit production of LSD.

There are also artefacts of anti-drug movements from around the world. While a nineteenth-century Chinese pamphlet warns of the dangers of opium, fifty years later in Chicago, the Women's Christian Temperance Union parades down the street with placards that read "Drinkers not dries make the gangster." A nineteenth-century English flyer entices men to join High Shot House in Twickenham. "Established (in 1886) for the treatment of gentlemen suffering from Inebriety, the Morphis Habit and the Abuse of Drugs," the Priory-like premises boast of "roomy and comfortable" accommodation, a recreation room with a billiard table, walks to Kew Gardens and Richmond Park, and all the "usual appointments." The entrance fee is £1 1s, with additional weekly charges for a minimum of a thirteen-week stay.

Check out the Wellcome Collection's new exhibition – Dirt: The Filthy Reality of Everyday Life, starting on March 24.

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