

Mission of the AIP Meerschaum Working Group

Deposits of meerschaum, or sepolite, its Latin name, are found in many countries. It is a fibrous mineral, hydrated, magnesium silicate, that has been used for several centuries for example in the fabrication of small luxurious objects and, since the custom of smoking tobacco spread around the world, employed in the manufacture of tobacco pipes. The best meerschaum for this latter purpose comes from the area around Eskeşehir, Turkey. In the mid-18th century, throughout the 19th century, and into the early 20th century, this medium was used by skilled craftsmen in many European countries and in the United States to produce exquisitely carved as well as ordinary functional pipes.

While the study of clay pipes has long since been considered to be the domain of science and archaeology, very little research has been conducted on meerschaum as a material for pipes, cigar (cheroot) and cigarette holders. In order to fulfil this research endeavour, the Academy established a standing Meerschaum Working Group (MWG) to study these topics.

The number and names of the active participants in the MWG has varied since its activation. In its earliest years, the group's work was restricted to informal discussions at the annual AIP congress. In 2008, however four eminent carved pipes and their history were displayed on the then-AIP Web site. In 2009, its members developed a global database of meerschaum pipe makers and vendors and an initial bibliography of source documents on meerschaum history and use. Both products, presented at the AIP congress in Budapest, Hungary, are working drafts and continue to be expanded and revised as additional, relevant information is encountered. It was also decided at this meeting that a collaborative writing assignment, tentatively titled 'Iconography and the Meerschaum Pipe', should be worked out and presented to the 2010 AIP congress in Grasse, France.

It is a fact that almost no meerschaum pipe carvers signed their works, but some did display them at various expositions, exhibitions, and fairs in Europe and the U.S. from 1851 until around 1925. Therefore, in Grasse at the MWG meeting, it will be proposed a research project on pipes displayed in these exhibitions, by whom, and if possible, with descriptions and illustrations of them. If the Group decides that this task is too daunting, alternative research proposals on some other aspects of meerschaum will be entertained.

All pipe researchers, collectors and smokers interested in any historical aspect of meerschaum and meerschaum pipes may request the Bibliography and/or Global Database of Carvers. Moreover, they are encouraged to seek membership of the Academy.

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