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# Depictions of Smokers on Stove Tiles (17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries)\*

Ana-Maria Gruia

**Abstract:** The article presents depictions of tobacco pipe smokers on stove tiles in Central and Eastern Europe. Such depictions are analyzed in the context of the habit's spread and reception in the area, with special interest in who smoked and where. Several analogies and cases of later interventions offer interesting clues on how their viewers might have reacted to and interacted with images of smokers on stove tiles from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

**Keywords:** history of smoking, stove tiles, tobacco pipes, pottery, image reception.

Existing research on the history of tobacco smoking rarely focuses on depictions of smokers and when it does, the context is very precise: either Dutch seventeenth-century art or modern advertising<sup>1</sup>. The only existing brief overview of the habit's iconography<sup>2</sup> labels smoking as a good subject for visual depictions due to formal and symbolic reasons and an interest in the habit due to its exotic character. From a visual perspective, the swirls of smoke and its transparent matter allows for displays of artistry and a means of visually connecting depicted characters. Before the eighteenth century smoking was used mostly symbolically in Dutch painting (especially in *vanitas* themes). Due to religious views, such paintings do not generally render glamorous depictions of smoking but seem to convey the foolishness in indulging in sensual pleasures at the expense of the soul's salvation. Abandoned pipes might be symbols of a departed owner or signs of low virtue – neglecting duties, laziness, leaving children unattended. The first glamorous depictions of tobacco consumption (mainly as snuff) appeared in eighteenth-century France, since when performed in public it reflected anti-religious attitudes and was associated to elegant aristocratic habits. The nineteenth century and industrialization brought better delivery of tobacco iconography and mass media for publicity. Smoking became associated to virility and manly activities such as war, but it was also adopted by the “new women”. The habit was also connected to artists and writers as last bastions of freedom.

Several more detailed studies focus on smoking in the Dutch art of the Golden Age, but they reach diverging interpretations and it is extremely difficult to be sure how people in the seventeenth century would have viewed such scenes. It seems that in the first half of the century smoking had mostly negative connotations<sup>3</sup>, being mainly depicted in feasting scenes (usually in taverns and inns) and especially in association to indecorous behavior, drunkenness and flirting. Pipes were also interpreted as phallic symbols since the beginning of the seventeenth century and gestures such as inserting one's finger in a pipe bowl or blowing smoke at a woman were considered as sexually insulting<sup>4</sup>. Sources indicate that tobacco was offered during various types of celebrations, such as celebrations of office<sup>5</sup> and even funerals (Of an innkeeper)<sup>6</sup>. Smoking and pipes were also visually associated to rethoricians, members of amateur dramatic companies, whose living style and culture met with increasing dissatisfaction throughout the seventeenth century. In paintings depicting such Chambers of Rethoricians, unorthodox members were mostly seen smoking (Jews and Muslims), even if unused pipes were

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<sup>1</sup> For example Mitchell 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Goodman 2005, vol. 2, s.v. “visual arts”, 158–179.

<sup>3</sup> Gaskell 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Shama 1999, 204–205.

<sup>5</sup> Shama 1999, 186.

<sup>6</sup> Shama 1999, 151.

placed on tables or kept in hats<sup>7</sup>. The moralistic intent behind images of children smoking, drinking and being idle were also identified in the context of Dutch Republican obsession for education and an admonition for parents not to offer a bad example to their young<sup>8</sup>.

Nevertheless, not all depictions of smoking bore negative connotations, since it was also assimilated to homely habits, merry making, socializing and bucolic scenes<sup>9</sup>. The moderate use of tobacco was deemed inoffensive by all except militant clergymen and institutional custodians<sup>10</sup> (forbidden in correction houses for example, as associated to the vicious ways of former communities)<sup>11</sup>. Smoking could even confer honor and status (since there were silver inlaid pipes made for weddings, pipes and paraphernalia made of precious metals, with inscribed mottoes and devices). In the case of still-life genre devoted to tobacco pieces, it is unlikely that all depictions of pipes were in fact moral condemnations<sup>12</sup>.

There are also several studies mentioning contemporary English depictions of smokers, especially women that also highlight the ambiguity of such images. In different series of engravings of the five senses, smell was illustrated by smoking women. The impropriety of women smoking is indicated by accompanying inscriptions and their cross-dressing. The famous theater heroine Molly Frith was depicted in engraved covers of the play dressed as a man and smoking a pipe, but the play itself reveals several ambiguities. In her case tobacco consumption was also deemed benefic, since it granted her manly autonomy (by suppressing hunger and lust, thus helping her preserve her chastity)<sup>13</sup>.

A number of Turkish miniatures of the seventeenth century depicting smokers were published without any visual interpretation<sup>14</sup>. They show male smokers indulging in the habit both indoors and outside, riding. The latter scene is particularly interesting since two riders seem to point to their companion who is enjoying his pipe, laughing and commenting upon it. Strong debates on the legality and morality of tobacco smoking arose soon after the introduction of the habit in the Ottoman Empire<sup>15</sup>. The miniature does not show a confrontation, but neither does it illustrate a full acceptance of smoking. The practice of the new habit certainly raised interest and triggered various reactions, even if limited to pointing it out and making fun, as the two Turks in the image seem to be doing. Later, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there are mostly travelers' depictions of smokers in the Ottoman Empire and then the Balkan areas and they rather reveal ethnographic interest in national costumes and habits<sup>16</sup>.

### Tiles depicting smokers

Recreational tobacco smoking spread throughout Europe in the seventeenth century and pipe production developed accordingly, first in England and then in the rest of the continent. At first, it was potters who engaged in pipe production, hence the depiction of smokers on other ceramic products such as floor and wall tiles and tableware<sup>17</sup>. In time, production became specialized and masters dedicated themselves exclusively to pipe production, establishing guilds and, in the nineteenth century, small pipe manufactures. Craftsmanship in pipe-making increasingly resembled that of goldsmiths, considering the various metal implements employed (especially perforated lids), but village potters continued to include pipes among their products.

The earliest depictions of smokers on stove tiles are to be found on a small group of such items produced and used in Transylvania in the seventeenth century. The best preserved among them is an entirely preserved panel tile, unglazed, decorated in relief with the depiction of a man riding a

<sup>7</sup> Tummers 2011, 140–147.

<sup>8</sup> Dekker 1996, 172.

<sup>9</sup> Knaap 1966.

<sup>10</sup> Shama 1999, 198.

<sup>11</sup> Shama 1999, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Shama 1999, 195.

<sup>13</sup> Rustici 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Robinson 1985, Pl. 33–35. Other examples at <http://www.bildindex.de/obj20836758.html#|homec> and <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/111.5/grehan.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Grehan 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Robinson 1985, plates 36–43; other examples, sometimes without mentioned sources, in Oişteanu 2011.

<sup>17</sup> See for example smoking men, angels and even sirens and mermen on Dutch tiles produced during the Golden Age, preserved in the collection of the Tabaks Historisch Museum Delft. I thank Mr. Louis Bracco Gartner for allowing me access to his impressive collection.

horse and smoking a large stub-stemmed pipe (Fig. 1). It is preserved in the collection of the National History Museum in Cluj-Napoca, just like a similar smaller fragment archaeologically discovered in the city. The third item was found in Sibiu<sup>18</sup>.



Fig.1. Seventeenth-century stove tile from Cluj depicting a soldier smoking on horseback.

This group of Transylvanian tiles is relevant for the fact that the habit was popular or interesting enough to be depicted on home interior objects such as stove tiles and that smoking was at that time associated with the Turkish military. The latter conclusion is based on the rider's costume, with sword, mantle and head dress reminding of Turkish Janissaries. It also worth noting the Turkish-type pipe depicted, made of separate bowl and stem (though pipes of that era were certainly not so large). The creation of a series of tiles depicting smokers in seventeenth-century Transylvania indicates that the new habit was a topic of public interest; the viewers of these tiles recognized its Ottoman origin and maybe appreciated the fact that pipe-smoking could be practiced anywhere. Even in the case of pipes with long stems, they were usually made of several segments and could be easily carried and assembled, thus making horseback smoking a pleasurable pastime while traveling<sup>19</sup>.

The only eighteenth-century stove tile known so far to show a smoker was produced in the Bavarian pottery center of Kröning that also made one-piece pipes in the first half of the seventeenth centuries. The green-glazed tile, preserved in the collection of the Heimatmuseum Vilsbiburg, shows a central medallion surrounded by rich vegetal decoration with a standing man in Baroque costume, hands crossed in front of him, but holding a western-type pipe in his mouth. It is inscribed DER GERVCH, the aroma, thus placing the representation in the genre of depictions of the five senses<sup>20</sup>. Series of tiles and even entire thematic stoves depicting allegories of the senses are known to have been produced in the sixteenth century and the first part of the seventeenth century in the German areas<sup>21</sup> but their iconography follows a different graphical tradition, where smell is illustrated by flowers, sometimes held and smelled by various characters. As previously mentioned, English engravings followed a different tradition, by depicting women smokers as illustrations of smell. The tile in Kröning combines the two traditions, by replacing smelling flowers with smoking as illustration for the pleasures of smell.

Smokers were more frequently depicted on stove tiles in the nineteenth century, especially on items produced in the Ukrainian center of Kutuy, in Bucovina<sup>22</sup>. One can see different variants of a man in a carriage smoking a large stub-stemmed pipe, while his non-smoking servant drives the two

<sup>18</sup> Gruia 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Grehan 2006, 1356.

<sup>20</sup> Mehler 2009, 266, fig. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Rosmanitz 1993. Another example at <http://www.bildindex.de/dokumente/html/obj20448178#|home>.

<sup>22</sup> Kolupayeva 2006; A significant lot is preserved in the collection of the Romanian Peasant Museum in Bucharest, published in G. Roşu 2001.

(sometimes four) horses<sup>23</sup> a peasant plowing and smoking in the same time<sup>24</sup>; and a smoking soldier<sup>25</sup>. Another item makes reference to the sense of smell, thus continuing previously discussed depictions: a woman smelling a flower bouquet and a man smoking a large stub-stemmed pipe are sitting on both sides of an oversized vase looking up at grape bunches, birds and flowers<sup>26</sup>. It is interesting to note both the continuation and combination of the traditional depictions of the sense of smell by flower smelling and smoking and the gender division, probably reflecting common associations, with smoking seen primarily as a male habit. There is no indication of an ironic intent, since the couple appears to enjoy resting in a bountiful natural environment.



Fig. 2. Eighteenth-century stove tile from Kröning inscribed “DER GERVCH”.



Fig. 3. Nineteenth-century Ukrainian stove tile with a man smoking a pipe and a woman smelling flowers.

A somewhat more moralistic scene is depicted on another tile from Ukraine that shows a smoking bear, playing music in front of a man holding up a drinking cup<sup>27</sup>. The bear, completely humanized through its posture and activities (smoking and cello-playing), is reduced to a drinking companion.

<sup>23</sup> Kolupayeva 2006, 235, 315.

<sup>24</sup> Kolupayeva 2006, 304.

<sup>25</sup> Roşu 2001, 74, 155, cat. C.1993.

<sup>26</sup> Kolupayeva 2006, 303.

<sup>27</sup> Kolupayeva 2006, 46.

Throughout the centuries, bears have been associated with numerous vices and on this tile the animal is linked with three of them: drinking, smoking and lay music<sup>28</sup>. Nevertheless, the tile might have been perceived just as an amusing depiction of marry-making and entertainment, or maybe an ironic scene of what a drinking man might imagine seeing after a few cups.



Fig. 4. Nineteenth-century Ukrainian stove tile depicting a smoking bear-musician.

Yet another example from Ukraine is relevant for both the connection between smoking and working and that between potters and pipe-makers. The stove tile depicts in the center a potter at work at his wheel while in the same time smoking his pipe. The background illustrates the workshop, with ceramic products and various characters: a man standing under a shelf of pots left to dry, a woman pouring water in a jug and a dog barking under a decorated tile stove<sup>29</sup>. The item also includes an inscription with text (stating the potter master's name and location) and the date of production (1878). All details point to a homey atmosphere, but in the same time carefully include all types of objects that Alexander produced (pots, tiles, jugs, possibly also pipes), making this a commercial-add type stove tile.



Fig. 5. Smoking potter in his workshop on a nineteenth-century Ukrainian stove tile.

<sup>28</sup> For depictions of bears on stove tiles see Gruia 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Kolupayeva 2006, 236.

These objects are interesting for showing both certain social groups associated with pipe smoking at the time (boyars, farmers, soldiers, potters, drinkers) and contexts of smoking (while working, in the company of others, traveling, sitting and enjoying a rest). But there is another trait worth discussing here. Several of the Kutu tiles have been scratched at a later date, probably by their owners or viewers, who felt the need to underline their interest in the habit by adding incised pipes in the mouths of depicted characters, even those already provided with such instruments by the potter masters. Figure 6 shows such a tile, decorated with a military musician on the left and a soldier on the right<sup>30</sup>. The soldier smokes a large pipe with a lid, but someone scratched another pipe, suggested by two lines, that seems to start from the top of his nose.



Fig. 6. Stove tile produced in Kutu (Ukraine), with a soldier smoking a pipe; a second pipe was incised later.

Such later interventions on tiles are an interesting phenomenon, similar to historical graffiti and modern doodles. In most cases, viewers scratched pipes in the mouths of characters originally depicted non-smoking: a hunter (depicted on a tile holding a weapon in each hand)<sup>31</sup> and soldiers<sup>32</sup>. It is interesting that the same automatism, similar to that of drawing moustache and glasses on posters nowadays, was applied to a series of similar tiles. Might they have once been part of the same stove and therefore suffered the same treatment by the hand of the same person? Could the interventions have taken place later on, by someone dismantling the stove or even by persons involved in their transportation, selling, or collecting? And was the scratching of pipes meant to show one's interest in the habit or intent to parody the depicted characters? More in-depth research on this group of tiles and their history of production, use and museum acquisition, might one day clarify such issues.

Other Ukrainian tiles of the nineteenth century depict smokers, either peasant riders (unclear if male or female)<sup>33</sup> or gentlemen<sup>34</sup>. Other, yet unavailable tiles certainly contain similar representations. It is interesting to see how pipes made their way on such images, through cigarette smoking became the preferred form of tobacco consumption since the late nineteenth-early twentieth century<sup>35</sup>. It is possible that tiles discussed here were produced and later altered during a time when in Central and

<sup>30</sup> Roşu 2001, 74, 155, cat. C1993.

<sup>31</sup> Florescu, Petrescu 1969, 565, cahlă din nordul Moldovei; Roşu 2001, 94, 153, cat. C1980.

<sup>32</sup> Roşu 2001, 96, 155, cat. C1989.

<sup>33</sup> Kolupayeva 2006, 240.

<sup>34</sup> Kolupayeva 2006, 251.

<sup>35</sup> Goodman 2005, vol. 1, s.v. "cigarette", 144–150.

Eastern Europe pipe smoking was still the most popular form of enjoying tobacco, by men of various social standing. Further research might extend the discussion to images of smokers decorating other types of ceramic products, mainly tableware.

## Conclusions

Research on smoking and its reception in Central and Eastern Europe, gaining new momentum over the last decades, will certainly have to include iconographical analyses of smokers and smoking implements. As tentatively shown here, such images made their way to the most varied mediums, including the so-called minor arts. The evidence of stove tiles indicates that smoking was depicted ever since the habit's introduction in the seventeenth century. According to the different geographical, chronological and cultural contexts of this type of images, researchers can use them as sources for who smoked and where, how was the habit perceived and what were its symbolic associations. The group of tiles from Transylvania shows that stove tile iconography was receptive to changes in everyday customs and habits. Portraying soldiers (probably Turkish) smoking on horseback points to people associating the habit to the military (since everywhere in Europe soldiers played an important role in the spread of tobacco consumption) and the Turks (all pipes discovered so far in the Principality of Transylvania are of the eastern type). The eighteenth century tile from Bavaria, showing the western-type pipe customarily used there, is part of a visual tradition of illustrating the senses. Previous German stove tiles associated smell with flowers, but English engravings soon adapted to illustrating smell by smoking women. The tile from Kröning combines elements of the two traditions. The most numerous group of tiles depicting smokers, sometimes with pipes later incised on their surface, have been produced on the present-day territory of Ukraine in the nineteenth century. They show numerous men smoking while traveling, at work, or simply for leisure and even strange sights such as a smoking bear. Some examples also continue the depiction of smell through characters smelling flowers and smoking.

All these examples are relevant to the persistent interest, even fascination with pipe-smoking reflected by the iconography of decorative objects such as stove tiles. Other types of depictions will certainly enrich and extend the topic, such as smokers and their punishment in Last Judgment scenes<sup>36</sup>, other categories of pottery items, engravings etc.

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<sup>36</sup> As pointed out by my colleague Raluca Betea.

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