

We Like Them Rough
By
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Following the recent NASPC Columbus Pipe Show, the authors were sitting around and smoking pipes. One was smoking a Castello GG-65 Sea Rock while the other a delicately carved Manuel Shabbi pipe. We were both trying the 'Union Square' tobacco acquired at the show. We had often discussed the elements, both tangible and intangible, that go into a perfect and memorable pipe smoking experience. These factors include the pipe, the tobacco, the packing of the pipe, the environment, the company, the amount and type of libation, etc. There are so many considerations on just what yields that elusive perfect pipe smoking experience. Many times we had had the 'briar versus brand', 'factory versus artisan carver', 'virginia versus english tobacco' discussions. Bill observed that we both tended to smoke, more often than not, a high quality blasted or rusticated pipe as compared to a smooth finished pipe. Our collections tended more to these types of pipes. Not that we were cheap and purchased usually lower cost non-smooth pipes, but that we felt that we tended to be more tactile-oriented rather than visual-oriented individuals. To us, a rough surfaced pipe was more enjoyable than a smooth-surfaced finished pipe. We often noted our fingers running across the irregular surface of the pipe bowl while smoking.

Most pipe literature suggests that a smooth finished pipe is superior to one that is either sand blasted or rusticated. It is often stated that sand blasting or rustication is performed to eliminate or hide flaws in the briar to 'save' a block that would be discarded because of its flawed nature. In general a sand blasted or rusticated pipe is viewed as being inferior to a smooth finished pipe.

On-the-other-hand we posit that sand blasted or rusticated pipe may be superior to the smooth finished pipe if one considers the importance of the 'feel' of the pipe to those that are more tactile-based individuals. But what does this mean and why is it so?

Aristotle described at least five senses, sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. When we smoke a pipe we engage in all five. We can see the smoke and appreciate the beauty of a straight grain. A gurgling pipe can make for a poor smoke and usually ends up with a load of unpleasant juice in the mouth. Aroma and taste are what it is all about. A great pipe with great tobacco can smell and taste heavenly - a most memorable pipe smoking experience. But the sense of touch is the one we wish to deal with in this exposition.

The senses are the means by which we react to change in environment. Our sense organs share common features in the way they convert stimulus energy into nerve impulses. Receptors in the skin of the fingers respond to mechanical displacement and temperature. The sensory cells connect (synapse) with secondary, ingoing (afferent) nerve cells that carry the nerve impulse to the spinal cord. Here, each axion from the skin terminates and synapses with the next (second-order) neuron in the chain. From such afferent nerves, still higher order neurons make increasingly complex connections with anatomically separate pathways of the brain stem and deeper parts of the brain that eventually ends in specific receiving areas of the cerebral cortex. Different sensory receiving areas are localized in particular regions of the cortex. The information transmitted over this pathway tells the brain whether or not you are touching a smooth or irregular surface and whether it is cold, warm, or hot. Through the sense of touch, you can differentiate between a smooth, straight Canadian; a deep craggy sand blasted bulldog, or a deeply rusticated nose warmer. You can also determine if the pipe is lit or had just been smoked by the temperature of the bowl.

This is the manner in which information is transmitted from our fingers to the body control center, the brain. It provides the objective information but does not do the interpretation which is subjective in nature. That which provides a sense of pleasure is very subjective. It varies from one pipe smoker to another. One person may find pleasure in a virginia tobacco, another in latakia; while another in a smooth pipe versus an irregular surfaced pipe; likewise, one with a straight pipe, another with a bent pipe.

Although we can appreciate a beautiful straight-grained pipe, there is nothing finer than smoking a good tobacco in a well blasted or rusticated pipe. There is just so much pleasure in holding the lit pipe in the hand and letting the thumb just roll across and stroke the surface. The feel of the high and low spots of the surface topography and the sensory input to the finger tips, for us, just enhances the pipe smoking experience.

So what is better? Is a slightly blasted pipe superior to a deeply, heavily carved briar? Is a sand blasted pipe superior to a rusticated pipe? Again, this is very subjective question. It is up to the individual pipe smoker. Personally, we like the deep blast of a J.T. Cooke or the heavily rustication of a Castello Sea Rock finish.

In our mind, it is not the 'briar versus the brand' rather the issue is 'smooth versus rough finish', or 'plain versus character'. It is time to dispel the notion that sand blasted or rusticated pipes are the poor step sisters to the smooth finished pipes. While some mass produced pipes are blasted or rusticated to

hide imperfections in poor quality briar, for many high grade pipe carvers, they blast high quality briar to enhance, highlight, and show off the grain of the briar. So what if they blast or rusticate the pipe? The tactile difference of the blasted or rusticate pipe enhances the pipe smoking experience.

There is the old story that, all things being equal, a pipe with a blast or rustication will smoke superior to a smooth finished pipe. Allegedly, this is due to the increase in surface area due to the blast or rustication. This, in turn, promotes a more efficient radiation of the heat from the pipe while being smoked. Our collected experience does not agree with this theory. Any difference in the degree between a smooth pipe and a sand blasted or rusticated pipe is so little, probably to a degree that is not really noticeable. This difference also may be lessened by the skill of the pipe smoker which has been developed over many years. Regardless, to us, this theory does not justify the choice of an irregularly surfaced pipe over a smooth pipe. However, we do agree with Georges Herment in his book "The Pipe " where he instructs the reader when selecting a pipe to purchase a larger pipe over a smaller one with more wood than less for a cooler smoke.

Does this preference for a blast or well rusticated pipe mean we never smoke or own smooth finished pipes? Of course not, we both own and smoke fine examples of smoothly finished pipes carved by very skilled pipe makers. However, we find that we gravitate to smoking the sand blasted or rusticated pipes in our collections. In Bill's case, he finds a straight grain or flame grain pipe to be boring. If he is going to smoke a smooth finished pipe, he would rather smoke a birds-eye or a guinea grain finished pipe.

So, that's it. We believe that we are both tactile and visual in our orientation and probably lean more to the sense of touch when selecting and enjoying a pipe. At the last Columbus show, John acquired a smooth S. Bang pipe with a grain that looks like it was painted on the bowl. He also acquired a Castello GG-65 Sea Rock finished pipe. Bill acquired a smooth Shabbi pipe and a sand blasted S. Bang pipe. Do we appreciate the smooth finished pipes over the sand blasted pipe or the rusticated pipe? No, we appreciate them both and smoke them both. However we notice that we enjoy the feel of the rough surfaced pipes and find our fingers running over the bowls much more than with the Bang or Shabbi pipes.

Can the tactileness be carried to an extreme? Probably the extreme example of a pipe for the ultra-tactile-oriented pipe smoker would be the ones carved by Mick Burnes, AKA Micoli. It turns out that Bill has the largest collection of Micoli pipes representing approximately 15% of the carver's total output. These are probably the most unusual pipes ever seen. They definitely are for the person

who wants to be able to feel the surface irregularities. Did he collect them for their feel or just because they were unusual? Did he do it consciously or unconsciously? You will have to ask him.

What about you? How do you feel about the smooth versus irregularly surfaced pipes? Are you a visual or tactile oriented pipe smoker?