

A Symbolic View of Cigarette Holders

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Abstract

The cigarette holder became a fashion accessory for women in the early 1920s and remained popular until the 1960s. *The New York Times* was used as a data base to evaluate its symbolism and function during this period. It is argued that the artifact became a symbol of assertiveness for many women both in real life and fiction including the ballet mistress Bronislava Nijinska, the mythical and fictionally portrayed Dragon Lady—who was a glamorous but larcenous female war-lord, the fictional Satin Doll, an astute potential lover who would not let herself be manipulated by men, young flappers in restaurants, great, gruff ladies who were ballet *aficionadas*, Sappho, an overbearing Russian governess, and Nathalie de Ville, a fictional female social predator. The article points out in detail how the cigarette holder was isomorphic, with and reflected in, the new 1920s women's fashion silhouette which quickly replaced the somewhat "squat" Gilded Era women's costume. It had no pinched waist, an almost nonexistent bodice and hips, and gave an overall tall, slim and graceful impression.

Keywords: cigarette holder, smoking, women in war, female assertiveness, fashion history

1. Introduction

When the fashion accessory “cigarette holder” is mentioned many people are reminded of the very long one used by Audrey Hepburn in the now classic film “Breakfast at Tiffany’s.” In this paper we will examine at greater depth the history and symbolism of this fascinating artifact. It was popular for women from about the 1920s into the 1960s. It was an urban artifact used in the larger cities of the Western World including the Americas, Europe, the United Kingdom, and Russia. It usually consisted of a tube with a mouthpiece on one end and a socket into which a cigarette was fitted on the opposite end. Thus, a lit cigarette was smoked until it was mostly consumed.

Cigarette holders were made in many different lengths and of many materials from the most commonplace to the most expensive. They were variously decorated or left plain. In terms of theory we assume that cigarette holders like most objects of adornment had meanings, they were invariably symbolic and were designed to be attractive. They “fit in” with other articles worn or carried by the smoker and were meant to be admired by others. Our analysis is *meaning--oriented* and symbolic.

Our data are largely drawn from press accounts in *The New York Times*. In the United States it is the newspaper of record and its accounts are usually complete and informed. New York City is a major center for fashion study, education, and production. The fashion writers and critics who work and study in the city usually write with a certain authority. The data, both in the form of ads and articles offered by *The New York Times* are copious. We chose this uniform data source spanning four decades because it made available *unusually* numerous examples of cigarette holders in behavioral and symbolic contexts which could be readily “mined,” and analyzed.

In 1922 *The New York Tribune* cited:

A new jewel fashion of Deauville origin is noted by “The Westminster Gazette.” English society women returning from Paris and Deauville have brought a new craze with them in the jewelry line, in which black onyx and red coral are utilized as a background for diamonds. A West End manufacturing jeweler explained that black onyx and red coral were an ideal setting for diamonds and other precious stones. And the combination was being utilized in a variety of ways. He produced a cigarette holder of onyx and coral studded with diamond bands. This he said was for the Countess of X_____ who had brought the idea from Deauville, where she had seen one in use and was fascinated by it (“appended to an article ‘Germans eating fish,’ ” 1921, p.4).

Deauville is a coastal resort town northwest of Paris and a center of upper class culture. The materials described, especially red coral and diamonds, are precious and the customer, being royalty, was used to the best. Europe, especially Paris, was probably the chief point of

diffusion for cigarette holders early in their origin, and they rapidly spread to the British Isles, New York City and North America.

World War I seems to have had a very noticeable effect on women's decisions to smoke and eroded a taboo against the practice. Arthur S. Draper (1920) wrote about British women who did "war work," and relates "Only those who lived on the edge of the fiery furnace appreciated what a strain the war was. If we call smoking a vice we must record that thousands and thousands of British women succumbed to it during the war, and they are still addicted to it." (Draper, 1920, p. F7). If the sharing of tobacco establishes consciousness of kind, solace, and solidarity among the military, it is likely that its sharing became inclusive to the women who, on an everyday basis, supported and served the military.

The specific aim of this paper is to document how cigarette holders eventually became symbols of female assertiveness and also served as templates for a new costume silhouette which replaced that of the "Gilded Era." This fact does not exhaust the symbolism and behavioral characteristics of the cigarette holder. Other meanings could be discussed but we limit ourselves to these two roles.

2. Cigarette Holders and Hostility

- "Like the cigarette holder of yore the Accord [a new kind of cigarette lighter] demands [N.B.] to be displayed and wielded with style—perhaps a silver-plated model could be sold at Tiffany's. (Nanes, 1997, pp. 30-A3).
- "...the hostess, wielding a cigarette holder and pearl ropes, is elegantly rapacious" (Macaulay, 1987, p.7).
- "[About Beatrice Lillie] Miss Lillie who used a long cigarette holder to punctuate the barbed ripostes for which she was famous." (Albin, 1989, p. 34).
- "Miss Almy is a woman with a great sense of humor who can wield a three-foot-long cigarette holder with sultry contempt and she seems to be born to slither across stages with plumes in her hair." (Macaulay, 1987, p.7).
- "Stylized business cover girls wield cigarette holders like rapiers." (J.C., 1982, p. 14).

Even though the Accord is inanimate it still demands! The "elegantly rapacious" hostess lends an aggressive nuance to the wielding of her cigarette holder and Bea Lillie's cigarette holder is part and parcel of a weapon-like "barbed wit" and indicates a testy tone. Miss Almy's cigarette holder is armed with sultry contempt and indicates passive aggression. The business cover girls handle their cigarette holders like swords and impart a bellicose character to their movements. *These women take charge*. We are reminded of the comedienne Phyllis Diller. "There is no question about notice, demanded or given, when she strides on stage in a glittering black checkerboard dress, white Courrèges boots and short white gloves, waving her yardstick cigarette holder and combining the appeal of a waif with the sophistication of a woman who knows that whatever it takes, she's got." (Nemy, 1965, p. 5). Disgusted with Friday dress-down days Maureen Dowd suggests at six, there would be a cocktail party. "Instead of letting down your guard, as you are wont to do in khakis, you could wave your cigarette holder and put down your rival with a biting Noël Coward line: 'You're a vile-tempered, loose-living, wicked little beast, and I never want to see you again, so long as I

live.” (Dowd, 1995, p. 9). Here we note, a wave accompanies an insult, and especially that the cigarette holder itself is clearly associated with the insult and its intent is belligerence.

3. Secondary Sexual Characteristics as Symbols

One commentator notes: “When I began going to the theatre immediately after the first World War, ballet was still ‘long haired:’ its audience was a stock joke among the Philistines, consisting as it did of wispy little gentlemen with light voices and great gruff ladies with long cigarette holders and blobs of amber thumping against unlikely portions of their flat anatomy.” (London, 1952, p.24). Here we see that long cigarette holders were associated with a lack of female secondary sexual characteristics. Compare this state of affairs with the results of a 1961 advertising study polling public attitudes towards types of women models: “Certainly one of the most controversial types—particularly among men—is the high fashion model, at times referred to derogatively as a bean pole with a cigarette holder.” It is, perhaps, with a touch of irony that the researchers continue: “However, most women feel that they ought to strive for the kind of life and looks that this kind of model apparently has achieved.” (Alden, 1961, p. 59). The great gruff ladies and the bean pole models lacked pronounced secondary sexual features (breasts and buttocks) valued by some respondents. Here the stigma of atypical body types is associated with cigarette holders. They take on a negative image and in the case of the great and gruff ladies cigarette holders suggest dominance.

4. Female Dominance and Danger

In 1925 one article laments, “Look at what young women have become! In cafés and restaurants you will see the girl stride in with an air of mastery and assurance, her brimless hat crushed over her eyes, a long cigarette holder suspended from her lips, and behind her trots a little man. She orders the meal, and if there is any swearing at the waiter to be done she does it.” (The Modern Samson, 1925, p. 18). We see another little gentleman, trotting like a pony this time, and the long cigarette holder in the lady’s mouth becomes an emblem of dominance. In a 1925 movie, young Jacqueline arrived in Dedham “armed with a long cigarette holder.” Here too, the artifact seems to indicate potential aggression, i.e. “armed.” (Hodgson, 1925, p. 30). We see a similar stance in “Sappho,” characterized “as a Russian Grand Dame who wore a turtleneck black sweater, flourished a six-inch pearl cigarette holder, and decided to correct defects in the children’s education and deportment.” (Display ad 395 – no title, 1958, p. 54). A totally depraved and deadly character is the Brechtian-Weill’s “The Fly,” described as “... a master criminal who is actually a woman though she may appear as a newsboy when the fancy strikes her. It is known that whenever she asks a man for a match—she uses a very long cigarette holder [use a long spoon when you dine with the devil]—that the man will die in not more than three hours time.” (Kerr, 1952, pp. 3-D3). Of all the characters we found in this research, she is the most malevolent.

Vincent Canby in a review of the film “The Moderns” cautions us about “...Nathalie de Ville [Geraldine Chaplin], a rich, wanton predator who uses men, women and a two-foot-long cigarette holder.” (Canby, 1988, p. 21). But Nathalie comes in only as a distant second compared to “The Fly.”

Two other female characters are of interest: Dragon Lady and Satin Doll. Dragon Lady is an invention of the cartoonist Milton Caniff. She appeared as a regular in his “Terry and the Pirates” newspaper comic strip from 1934 to 1946. In the 1950’s there was a short-lived, half-hour series of television dramatizations based on the characters in the strip. Its hero, Terry Lee and his sidekick “Hotshot” Charley frequently have run-ins with Dragon Lady, a beautiful and glamorous Chinese *female* war-lord bent on larceny. She is almost invariably pictured using long cigarette holders. Terry Lee and Hotshot flew a DC-3 for an air transport company in a vaguely post World War II China. One particular episode stands out where Terry and Hotshot were involved in a mission to transport typhus vaccine. Terry suspects that Dragon Lady has stolen the serum and sold it for profit and the sick will end up without it. When he confronts Dragon Lady with this scenario she is indignant and angry and gives proof that she was innocent of such a thing. At the end of the episode they embrace and kiss, their brittle relationship [she appears to have a crush on Terry] temporarily mended. But we are still in a quandary about Dragon Lady’s scruples. It should be noted, that in her early comic strip material she was reputed to have ordered one of her servants a (nine-foot-tall) Mongol’s tongue cut out. So the jury is still out on Dragon Lady. One small detail may shed some light on the dilemma of the war-lord’s moral stature. In a review of the murder mystery film “Charlie Chan at the Wax Museum” (1940), we read: “All sorts of suspects crawl out of the gloom. Dr. Cream, the museum proprietor, who gives thugs new faces for old; [and] a mysterious lady with a cigarette holder a foot long...” (At the rialto, 1940, p.16). The commodity here might be “mystery.” Even though the movie is about murder, in its case perhaps the cigarette holder instills the scene with *mystery, glamour and the unknown*, and the rest of the details, albeit unsavory, are of secondary importance. Certainly, her cigarette holders lent Dragon Lady an air of dominance.

We cite the lyrics of “Satin Doll,” Duke Ellington’s, Billy Strayhorn’s, and Johnny Mercer’s famous jazz tune about the intricacies of man-woman attraction:

Cigarette holder which wigs me
Over her shoulder, she digs me,
Out cattin’ that satin doll.
Baby, shall we go out skippin’?
Careful, amigo, you’re flippin’
Speaks Latin that satin doll.
She’s nobody’s fool so I’m playing it cool as can be.
I’ll give it a whirl but I ain’t for no girl catching me...

A simple translation of the first six lines would go: Cigarette holder, it excites me / Looking over her shoulder she understands (digs) me / She’s out looking for love (cattin’) that Satin Doll. / Shall we go out together? / Careful friend you’re getting excited / Speaks Spanish that Satin Doll. The last two lines are cautionary and refer to the man’s expectations of a one night

stand and that Satin Doll might be savvy to his shallow intentions. We stress that the cigarette holder itself attracts him. Articles of adornment attract. That is what they are all about. We would be remiss not to mention the effect of a glamorous woman checking out a man over her shoulder.

5. Difficult Corporeal Symbols

Regarding Edger Wallace, the British crime novelist, “Wallace carries an extraordinary cigarette holder. It is long and black and polished. It never leaves his hands, apparently, and it causes him no end of trouble. When he first puts a cigarette into it, it seems invariably to fall out and when the cigarette is finished, he always has trouble removing the butt.” (Woolf, 1929, p.4). Similarly in the 1930’s, we learn about the exotic world of ballet and Bronislava Nijinska, one of its truly great dancers and choreographers. “An incessant smoker, Nijinska was frequently photographed with a cigarette holder (Albin, 1972, p. 44):

We sat in straight-backed chairs placed around the rehearsal hall with our eyes fixed on the small, plump woman. From the start it was obvious that she was all severity...She smoked constantly, using a long silver cigarette holder. The cigarette, still lit, would fall to the floor. One man or another would run and pick it up, returning it to her, with a slight bow, murmuring respectfully, “here you are, Bronislava Forminicha.” She would nod without a word and grip the holder, only to let it drop again moments later, when the whole process would be repeated. (Hodgson, 1980, p. BR2).

This vignette is sociologically interesting because it seems to be rooted in an ongoing ritual which backs up the customs and hierarchy of the entire ballet troupe. We note that the emotional tonus of the whole event *is* severe and in the 1930’s severity was more than likely part and parcel of being a Russian ballet mistress. Here the cigarette holder appears again as an emblem of female dominance. From a film review in 1939 we learn, “That long cigarette holder is the baton with which Norma Shearer leads the conversation in the film ‘Idiot’s Delight.’ ” (Crisler, 1939, p.5). Hence, the woman with the cigarette holder calls the shots.

6. Cigarette holders and Lexical Expansion

In a review of “No, No, Nanette” by Tom Burke (1971, p. D1) we read, “The curtain’s risen on the new ‘No, No, Nanette,’ the boys and girls are chattering and from stage left sidles this haughty, liner vamp in burnt orange, sleek [N.B.] as a lacquered cigarette holder who purrs a few sentences from the chest, not from the heart... .” Thus he describes the beauty and elegance of the actress-singer Hellen Gallagher using the smoker’s artifact as a metaphor for a desirable woman. We see another metaphoric play used in an advertisement; “Why is this so terrific? Eversharp C.A.’s* [sic] are to ball point pens what 14 carat is to jewelry.” (Display ad 46 -- no title, 1947, p. 7). “They’re the height of elegant writing—as smooth and shiny, as sleek as gold cigarette holders.”

7. Body Type and Cigarette Holders

In the last sentence a cigarette holder was called *smooth, shiny, and sleek*. *Webster's Third International Dictionary* defines *sleek* as “gracefully proportioned: SLENDER” (Webster and Gove, 1961, p. 2140). In one ad “Shell rimmed in silver is shown in a great assortment of small articles, from the toilet fittings for the traveling bag to the slenderest, most elegant cigarette holder.” (Jewel Hints, 1924, p. X13). Bonwit Teller offers “a slender, graceful cigarette holder,” (Display ad 14 – no title, 1951, p. 7) while “Saks Fifth Avenue sells a fragile and lady-like, Zeus feminized version of that new cigarette holder. In various colors 5.00, with marcasite rings, 10.00 and with marcasite mounts 15.00.” In the ad, a rather long cigarette holder is held in a sketch of a sophisticated women (Display ad 27 -- no title, 1938, p. 9). Marcasite is a metallic mineral used in costume jewelry. A 1928 advertisement offers “black Galalith [a type of plastic] cigarette holders interestingly made in new long, slender shapes which have the cigarette end finished with a metal edge and set with either emeralds or fine marcasite.” (Novelties that add a smart touch, 1928, p. X11). Another Saks Fifth Avenue ad notes “And there’s even a golden stem of a cigarette holder flowered to match.” (Display ad 53 -- no title, 1953, p. 48). The stem in question is slim (about 1/8 inch) and involves a rather long tube of gold colored metal joining its mouthpiece and cigarette end. Next, we see “Slender graceful cigarette holders, set with rubies \$80 and \$100.” These two holders are very similar to the last one mentioned, only they are in 14 carat gold. They are also described as “graceful and sophisticated.” (Display ad 194 -- no title, 1946, p. 63). Dunhill sells “The famous crystal filter cigarette holder, ‘The Lady De-nicotea’ now in a long, graceful model.” (Display ad 24 -- no title, 1948, p. 24). Bonwit Teller offers “just in from France [sic] Delicately light slim holders for your smoking fancy.” (Display ad 35 -- no title, 1954, p. 35).

From an advertisement as early as 1918, [when cigarette holders for women were not openly advertised in *The New York Times*] we learn that “In one French woman’s bag was stowed away a shell cigarette holder, slim and beautifully formed.” (Style hints of Paris and Fifth Avenue, 1918, p. 48). Finally, we are told a *directoire* costume, “was a black satin as slim as a cigarette holder.” (Pope, 1942, p. 19). The descriptions of these holders abound with words like sleek, elegant, gracefully proportioned, fragile, lady-like, feminized, long, light and slim. It should be noted that such adjectives could describe women whose bodies, with the dawn of the 1920s, seemed to have gotten a new kind of attractive and desirable appearance. Designers, marketers and fashion commentators provided women with *accessories* that dovetailed with their new slim and sleek silhouette.

We also learn that “Paris has again acclaimed the long cigarette holder, although they are not in any way belittling the vogue of those in short and medium length... .The holders are long and slim down to the end, where they come out in squares, ovals and other shapes... the flared opening makes the holder at a distance appear to follow the general outline of a bugle.” (Season's novelties are unique, 1927, p. X8). For bridge parties the data corpus yielded “The new long cigarette holder, in two tones--turquoise with amber, green with black, blue with amber, and so on. In all three lengths (all very long).” (Display ad 12 -- no title, 1932, p. 5). In 1941 we learn “...for that final dramatic touch, Saks has long cigarette holders made in

China of silver covered with gold wash or many colored enamel designs.” (Hughes, 1941, p. D7). During the data collection phase of this research we got the impression that long cigarette holders were very much stressed over short ones, which were hardly mentioned, (q.v., above). We suggest the preference for longer cigarette holders would fit in with the preference for a new slim, and taller body plan. It provided a silhouette, which although shorter near the top of the knees, was still elongated starting at the back of the knees downward, suggesting an overall slimmer shape. The “disappearing” waist of the 1920’s also gave an overall taller air to its garments. Although they debuted in the 1920’s, cigarette holders continued to be popular well after that decade.

8. Conclusion and Summary

Cigarette holders and cigarette smoking seemed to have become popular for women in the latter part of the second decade of the 20th Century, or just after the First World War. British women who did war work learned the habit and brought it back to the British Isles after the war and the use of cigarette holders became popular.

Perhaps the most curious finding of this research was its presentation of certain women as having *dominant and/or assertive*, even *sinister* personalities—while at the same time exhibiting the use of (usually long) cigarette holders. Cases in point are 1.) The ballet mistress Bronislava Nijinska, 2.) the mythical and fictionally portrayed Dragon Lady--a glamorous but larcenous female war-lord, 3.) Satin Doll, an astute potential lover who would not let herself be manipulated by men, 4.) aggressive young flappers in restaurants, 5.) great, gruff ladies who were ballet *aficionadas*, 6.) Sappho, an overbearing Russian governess, 7.) Nathalie de Ville, a female social predator, and 8.) “The Fly” a female homicidal maniac. In the discipline of natural history, field biologists would remind us that potentially harmful creatures often exhibit some obvious characteristic with which they warn near neighbors of their danger.

We note a certain isomorphism between an ideal womanly body shape and fashionable cigarette holders. There is a tendency to describe cigarette holders as “slim and beautifully formed,” “[a] long graceful model,” “fragile and lady-like” and “new long slender shapes.” It is interesting that the vogue of cigarette holders for women and of a radically new female silhouette favoring slim and elongated garments began simultaneously in the beginning of the 1920’s. This silhouette was radically different from the one popular during the last decade of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century which is described by students of fashion as the “The Gilded Era” in which a woman's costume displayed a full figure body plan with exaggeration of the bust and buttocks, interrupted by a corseted, and pinched waist. This silhouette was at symbolic odds with the slender and long cigarette holders ushered in in the 1920’s. We recall the flat body plan of the “great gruff” ladies and the “bean pole” silhouette of the high fashion models that were detracted above, q.v., and we also recall these two women’s affinity for the cigarette holders they carried. Cigarette holders “go with” traits such as slim and tall and do not go with full figures. There is a tension between the two silhouettes. Further, we might even venture, from evidence cited above, that cigarette holders sometimes “go with” traits like dominance and aggression.

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