Health, Luxury, or Vice?

An Objects-Based Exploration of the 1894 Cambridge Drug Store Crisis

Before you proceed, read the sections entitled “Preface,” “Learning Objectives,” “Lesson Outline,” and “Preparation” in the document that accompanies this slideshow.
These are three objects from the late nineteenth century that were excavated from Harvard Yard. Take a moment to examine them. What do you think each object is? What features stand out to you?
What do you think this object is? What features stand out to you?

This is a pipe bowl fragment, probably produced by Maison Gambier, a French pipemaker that produced an estimated two billion clay pipes between 1850 and 1926. Their most famous pipe design was the “Jacob,” a representation of a Turkish man. Jacob was a hot commodity at Harvard, as shown by advertisements in the Harvard Advocate.
What do you think this object is? What features stand out to you?

This bottle is possibly a small container of Bromo-Seltzer, a popular tonic marketed as a headache remedy and sold in several Harvard Square drug stores in the late nineteenth century. Local druggists like J.H. Hubbard advertised their soda fountains as “the best soda in the country.” For this exercise, we’ll use the bottle to represent soda and soda fountains.
And what do you think this object is? What features stand out to you?

This cobalt blue glass fragment likely belonged to a patent medicine bottle. Patent medicine refers to proprietary drugs that became big business in the unregulated nineteenth century market, promising cures to all sorts of diseases, infirmities, and woes. Many drug stores had backroom laboratories where druggists brewed up custom medicines, and it’s possible that the “ILE” on this shard is part of Cambridge druggist A.S. Wiley’s name.
These three objects are connected because they represent goods available for purchase from Harvard Square druggists like J.H. Hubbard. Hubbard, who owned a drug store on Massachusetts Avenue facing Harvard Yard, proudly advertised his tobacco pipes, soda fountain, and patent medicines to the public. Is it surprising to you that these three objects were sold in drug stores at the end of the nineteenth century? Why?
In the late nineteenth century, the tobacco pipe, soda fountain, and patent medicine bottle were understood within shifting contexts of health, luxury and vice. In this exercise, you’ll have to make the case for classifying them under one of these distinct purposes.
These divergent purposes sparked conflict in July 1894 in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

These divergent purposes came to a head in Cambridge in 1894, when a coalition of ministers petitioned Mayor Bancroft to enforce the Sunday laws against drug stores like Hubbard's. Sunday laws had been on the books since 1658, when the Massachusetts Bay Colony declared that no one “shall prophane the Lords day by doing any servill worke.” It was actually illegal to make non-necessary sales on Sunday in Massachusetts until 1983. However, there were over 50 exemptions, including the sale of drugs and medicines, and the law wasn’t usually enforced in the late nineteenth century. You’ve all been invited to a panel arranged by Mayor Bancroft to figure out the best way to respond to the ministers' petition.
You are druggist J.H. Hubbard. You view these three objects as legitimate drugs and medicines that should be exempt from the Sunday laws.

You are Reverend Alexander Blackburn. You view the objects as luxury consumer goods that should not be sold on Sundays.

You are social critic Aleck Quest. You view the objects as instruments of vice that should not be sold at all.

In your small groups, take a couple of minutes to read your handout and prepare to explain why each object should be classified as drugs and medicines or luxury consumer goods or instruments of vice. Try to refer to the physical objects as much as possible.
Should the tobacco pipe be classified as a health aid, a luxury consumer good, or an instrument of vice? Why?

Each group has 30-60 seconds (depending on lesson length) to explain how tobacco pipes should be classified and why.
Should the soda fountain be classified as a health aid, a luxury consumer good, or an instrument of vice? Why?

Each group has 30-60 seconds (depending on lesson length) to explain how the soda fountain should be classified and why.
Should the patent medicine be classified as a health aid, a luxury consumer good, or an instrument of vice? Why?

Each group has 30-60 seconds (depending on lesson length) to explain how patent medicine should be classified and why.
Any closing words on how these objects should be classified and why?

Each group has 30-120 seconds (depending on lesson length) to make a closing statement.
In real life, Mayor Bancroft did not convene a panel. Instead, he vaguely instructed the chief of police to enforce the law, effectively modifying the law's implementation not by changing the law, but by changing the definition of drugs and medicines. In response, area druggists formed a Cambridge and Somerville Druggists' Association. Inspired by the labor movement and the ongoing Pullman Strikes, they collectively decided to completely shut down every local drug store on Sunday rather than try to conform to the policy.
These closures caused massive inconveniences and sparked public outcry. Storeowners put up signs like “Bancroft closed us up. In November we’ll close him up.” Mayor Bancroft tried to walk back his actions, explaining that he merely wanted “to enforce the law whatever it might be” and that he “always regarded these articles as drugs and medicines.” He hoped the ministers would voice support, but most of them went on vacation as soon the controversy began.
This all backfired gloriously on the ministers, who damaged their public credibility, inspired the druggists to get organized, and lost the political support of Mayor Bancroft. Most significantly, their effort to enforce the Sunday laws had the opposite effect. When a judge refused to hear a case about ice cream delivery on Sundays, he effectively nullified the Sunday laws, making it possible for any object to be interpreted as a necessity.
Even though today you might associate smoking with vice, soda with recreation, and medicine with health, all three of these objects could be interpreted within the context of vice or luxury or health, and they really were used in all three ways. These categories can be arbitrary and have been blurred throughout history, but that’s not to say that they don’t matter. To the contrary, the 1894 drug store crisis in Cambridge demonstrates how abstract debates over the definitions of words can have real-life consequences.

What do you take away from our debate? Are there any modern parallels to these debates? Do you agree that these categories are arbitrary?