

Michelle Attoh

The History of Seneca Village's Perfume

Abstract

What you might now know as Central Park used to be land where African-Americans and immigrants lived, and it was named Seneca Village. The people who inhabited Seneca Village were forced to evacuate their homes in the mid-1800s in order to build what you now know as Central Park. Even though the land has since been demolished, about two centuries ago, if you dig deep, you can uncover many artifacts that still lie deep underground. In this essay, I will examine and unfold the history of perfume bottles that were found in one of the homes in Seneca Village, that of the Wilson family.



Figure 1, Perfume bottle from Seneca Village found in the Wilson's family residence. Image from NYC Archeological Repository: The Nan A. Rothschild Research Center

Introduction

Seneca Village was demolished in the mid 1800s to create what we now know as Central Park. Many artifacts lie deep beneath the surface, causing researchers to dig up artifacts

in that area. The artifact that I will be introducing you to is a perfume bottle from Seneca Village. We will not just be looking at and studying the perfume bottle, but also, what significance it could've had to the people of Seneca village (the Wilson home specifically) and the many things it could've been used for. As I continue sharing my research, keep in mind that what might seem like nothing to you now could have been everything to someone then.

Technical Details

The perfume bottle made out of glass is very small in size: 5 centimeters in height and 1.7 centimeters in width. It has 6 flat faces going around the bottle and it is clear so that it is possible to see the inside contents of the perfume. It is currently being displayed at the NYC Archaeological Repository which is located at 114 W 47th Street, New York City. The exact method of which they would've made the perfume is indeterminate because it isn't exactly known how the civilians from Seneca Village made them. We know that it was obviously molded per the 6 faces of molded glass, but the exact process remains unknown because no primary or secondary sources were uncovered pertaining to the process it took to make them at Seneca Village. However, we can infer that they may have gotten the glass bottles from other people that lived in New York. Obviously, the ingredients used to make the perfume were natural because in the 1800s there weren't as advanced ingredients to use to make the perfume at the time. They used natural ingredients such as herbs, spices, tree bark, leaves, fruits, seeds, flowers, etc. to make the perfume. They were not as advanced as us with their technology so they utilized what was around them.



Figure 2, ancient people using naturally made perfume



Figure 3, natural ingredients used to make the perfume

Social Meaning

Perfume in the 1800s had many purposes. They were used for medicinal and health reasons, which included inputting mint or mint-like herbs into peppermint oil and smelling it for the aroma. This would unclog mucus in the nose and help you breathe better. Another purpose for the perfume was for religious reasons. In some religions, they would anoint themselves or their Gods with it (whichever way they used it religiously). They used it for cleaning purposes which included spraying perfume around to mask odd and foul smells around the house and for sleeping and relaxation. For this, they would leave perfume out in the open for them to smell as they sleep or relax. It's really similar to how we use incense now. Lastly and most commonly, perfume was used for beauty purposes and for just a desirable smell to the body. It can be inferred that there were more purposes for which they used the perfume bottle, but this is what I came up with based on what was around them. Having perfume did not necessarily mean you had a lot of money, but also could have meant that you cared a lot for your health, beauty, and your religion as well. We can understand that the Wilsons lived a better than average life because it's quite obvious that perfume isn't something that you needed. However, piecing together the fact that they had a lot of more than average items in their home and the nice design and material of their home, it's quite obvious to see that they weren't struggling. They were mostly well off from what my research shows. My object relates to my group's theme, which was 'body and self,' because it is associated with self care. Buying perfume was not a necessity and the Wilson family still made sure to take care of themselves physically and mentally as well.

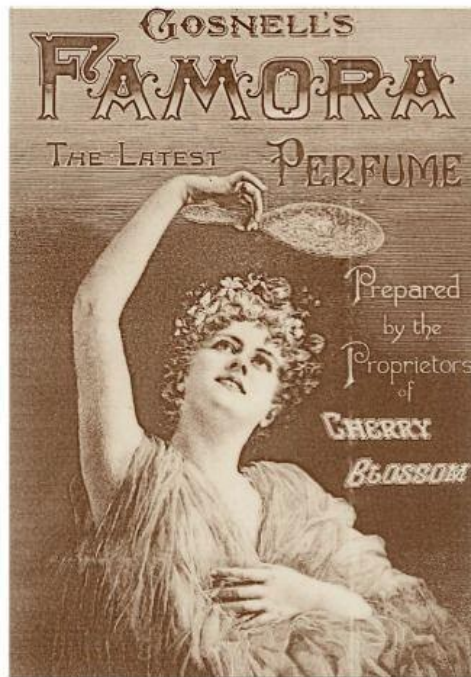


Figure 4, perfume advertisement in the 1800's (no traced source)

Conclusion

Overall, the perfume bottle found at the Wilsons home in Seneca Village was a valuable item that was used for many reasons besides just what we mostly use it for now. As you all know, perfume now is a very popular item to have. They range from all different brands, prices, and ingredients. It is even made differently now. Although you can still make perfume like how they made it in Seneca village two centuries ago, making perfume now is more advanced because almost everything is infused and mixed profusely. I do not think perfume is used differently now because, though some purposes that the inhabitants of Seneca Village used it for aren't as popular, somewhere in the world people are still practicing them. It also still holds the same meaning that you liked taking care of yourself, your home and your health. The price range has definitely shot up due to the fact that there are top brands such as Gucci and Chanel who charge a lot of money for their very fancy bottles of perfume. The size and smells are also very different due to their larger glass pieces and the way perfume making changed. After comparing pictures of perfume in that day and age versus now, it's more than clear that perfume making has changed a lot over the centuries.



Figure 5 and 6, perfume bottles prior to the 20th century



Figure 7 and 8, perfume bottles in present day

Brun, Jean-Pierre. "The Production of Perfumes in Antiquity: The Cases of Delos and Paestum." American Journal of Archaeology 104, no. 2 (2000): 277-308. Accessed July 29, 2021. doi:10.2307/507452.