

Press Release

From Past to Present, Natural Cosmetics Unwrapped

For thousands of years, cosmetic products have been made with a range of minerals and other organic substances. With the development of long distance trade routes during antiquity, the diversity of cosmetics increased drastically. Over the last few centuries, many classically influenced cosmetics have been produced, marketed, and distributed by the cosmetics industry. For example, the recipes of medical writers such as Hippocrates and Galen were utilised as sources of inspiration. Mythological and historical figures such as Hygieia and Cleopatra appeared prominently on the packaging and advertising. Even today, some cosmetics are still produced exclusively with natural substances and their advertisements often refer to ancient times.

Over the last two years, a multidisciplinary team led by Dr Thibaut Devière from the University of Oxford and in collaboration with Dr Szu Shen Wong from Keele University and Dr Jane Draycott from the University of Glasgow has been studying the evolution of ancient skincare products over time. This research has encompassed their formulation as well as their packaging. They have studied objects from the collections of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology (London), the Royal Pharmaceutical Society Museum (London) and the Boots Archive (Nottingham).

To conclude the project, the team organised, in collaboration with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society (RPS), a conference on the 15th of February 2018, a family oriented workshop on the following day, and a special exhibition on ancient cosmetics.

The conference was designed with a holistic approach to include specialists from different disciplines, all interested in studying ancient cosmetics. The conference started with an introductory lecture by the Dr Thibaut Deviese to give an overview of the results obtained by the team including results of some of the analyses performed on objects in collaboration with scientists from the Kew gardens. Then, ten international speakers presented their research across three different panels. The first panel examined literary, documentary, and archaeological evidences for cosmetics in ancient and historical periods. The second focused on archaeometric analyses of ancient cosmetics to identify their ingredients. The third explored the reception of ancient cosmetics in later historical periods and in the contemporary world. The conference concluded with a guest lecture by the ethnobotanist James Wong and followed by a wine reception over which participants could continue their discussions.

“All the talks were extremely interesting and it was great to see people from different specialties exchanging opinions, information and ideas for future collaborations around ancient cosmetics. Usually, conferences are organised by specialty and do not allow for such interdisciplinary exchanges” said Dr Thibaut Deviese.

The timing of the conference also coincided with the inauguration of a special exhibition on ancient cosmetics curated in collaboration with RPS Museum staff. This exhibition looks at the evidence for ancient cosmetics and treatments for skin conditions, some of the ingredients used throughout history, and the influence of ancient cultures on later advertising and packaging. The exhibition includes objects from the collections of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society Museum, the Boots Archive, and the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology at University College London.

“We are very pleased about the exhibition because it highlights the incredible collections of the RPS Museum, the Petrie Museum and the Boots archive but it also illustrates the complementarity of these collections for the study of ancient cosmetics. We were very lucky to work on these

collections for our project and we are very happy to see all of them represented in this exhibition” commented Dr Thibaut Devière.

‘It has been fantastic to collaborate with the research team on this project, expanding our knowledge of the material in our collections - particularly in regard to the use of ingredients in the ancient world - and showcasing the findings in the museum. The new exhibition allows us to widen our story of the history of pharmacy and to highlight more of our stored collections, many of which have not previously been on display.’ said Matthew Johnston.

The workshop, held the day after the conference, was designed as a family-friendly event. The team created a series of activities based on cosmetics and skincare made from natural substances. More than 130 free tickets were booked for this event. The activities included a sensory experience of cosmetic and skincare products made by Dr Szu Shen Wong and were inspired by ancient recipes found by the team.

“Recreating ancient cosmetics can be quite challenging as some ingredients can be difficult to source and recipes difficult to interpret as it can lack important details. Some could be toxic too. Also, the recreated products may not be to the liking of modern users. Reformulating them was a sensory experience with the different scents and textures created by the variety of substances used and it was fun” said Dr Szu Shen Wong.

Anisha Gupta invited participants to make their own natural substance based toothpastes and mouthwashes while Julie Wakefield showed participants how to make their own oatmeal face wash and cinnamon-based freckle remover. Children were also invited to decorate their own packaging box for natural cosmetics, and many produced amazing pieces of art!

In conclusion, these events have been a great success. The team would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Keele University, the Royal Society of Chemistry and G Baldwin & Co for supporting the project and these events.

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Group picture showing some of the participants to the conference.



Temporary exhibition on ancient cosmetics at the Royal Pharmaceutical Society inaugurated on the 15th of February and open to the public until August 2018.



Anisha Gupta presenting natural substance based toothpastes and mouthwashes (Left); Visitors testing some lipsticks made by Dr Szu Shen Wong and inspired by ancient recipes (Right).



Examples of packaging and advertisement for natural cosmetics produced by the children.