

The History of Meerschaum

The noble Meerschaum is unique among pipes. Its mysterious properties make it a perfect smoke and, at the same time, a work of art; a pipe highly prized by the Connoisseur and beginning smoker alike. Meerschaum is a German word meaning sea foam. The geologist knows the light, porous Meerschaum as hydrous magnesium silicate. The pipe smoker knows it as the perfect material for providing a cool, dry, flavorful smoke. The mineral itself is the fossilized shells of tiny sea creatures that fell to the ocean floor over 50 million years ago, there to be covered and compressed over the ages by layer upon layer of silt. Profound movements in the earth's crust raised the creamy white stone of Meerschaum above sea level. There men eventually discovered it and created an incomparable pipe from it. The first record of Meerschaum as a pipe dates from around 1723.

The Major Steps in Creating a Meerschaum Pipe

1. **MINING** - Meerschaum is mined in up to 450 feet of clay, sand, and gravel near Eskishehir, Turkey, and in Tanzania, Africa.
2. **WASHING** - The raw lumps of Meerschaum are washed to remove the dirt and gravel.



3. **GRADING** - The meerschaum stones are graded into five categories with twelve qualities in each. Grading is based on size, density, color, and homogeneity.
4. **SPLITTING** - When the manufacturer receives a shipment of raw Meerschaum it must be split into smaller pieces for fashioning into pipes. A senior craftsman examines it very carefully, calculating precisely where the clumps should be split, much as in the cutting of fine gem stones. The many natural "fault lines" must be eliminated. As much as 80% of the raw material may be discarded at this stage.
5. **CARVING** - The Meerschaum blocks are soaked in water for 15 to 30 minutes to further soften the material to a cheese-like consistency before carving. Skilled craftsmen then fashion the Meerschaum into standard shape pipes or the magnificent sculptured pieces so highly prized by collectors.



6. **HAND FITTING OF THE STEM** - Before Polishing, a Meerschaum pipe is fitted with the stem or mouth-piece. In days gone by, stems were made of pure amber. Today, amber-colored lucite is used almost exclusively. Pure amber is fine for collectors' pipes, but for the steady smoker, lucite is much better because it is stronger, more resilient, and more comfortable in the mouth.
7. **POLISHING** - Only the finest abrasives can be used for polishing the soft Meerschaum. This step is long and tedious as too much pressure would mar the smooth finish.
8. **WAXING** - How well your Meerschaum will color is largely determined by the waxing. The pipes are dipped in molten bees-wax as many as 8 times to ensure proper coloring.
9. **FINAL INSPECTION** - A specialist carefully examines each finished pipe. The slightest flaw even at this late stage is just reason for the pipe's destruction. Finer quality Meerschaums are protected by a fitted case made for each individual pipe.



Caring for Your Meerschaum Pipe

1. Your Meerschaum pipe is quite fragile and requires more careful handling than other pipes. Handle the pipe lightly to avoid rubbing off the wax and to prevent any dirt or oils that might be on your fingers from discoloring the pipe. Some smokers prefer to handle a Meerschaum only by the stem. Of course, you should always take care not to drop your Meerschaum on a hard surface.
2. Caution Do not overly tighten the bit. Most of the leading manufacturers are now using a Teflon fitting to join the bit and shank of high grade Meerschaum pipes, improving their durability. However, excessive tightening can still cause the shank to crack.
3. Never ream a Meerschaum pipe. After each smoke and after letting the pipe cool, use a paper towel or a Handi Wipe® and gently wipe out any residue left in the bowl. You do not want a meerschaum bowl to build a cake like a briar.
4. When using a pipe cleaner, take care not to push the cleaner too far into the bowl. The wire would eventually wear a hole in the heel of the pipe.
5. If you use a pipe sweetener to clean the inside of the shank, be careful that none of it drips on the outside of the pipe.

Meerschaum Pipe FAQ's?

What types of tobacco are best for coloring a Meerschaum?

A Meerschaums color results from the light, volatile oils found in all tobaccos. While smoking a tobacco with a high oil content, such as the Latakia in an English blend, may yield a darker color, your Meerschaum will also color nicely with your favorite tobacco.

How long will it take for my Meerschaum to color?

This depends greatly on the porosity of the Meerschaum, the type of tobacco smoked, and the frequency of smoking. While a better quality Meerschaum will begin to color almost immediately, the complete coloring process is gradual and could take a year or even longer.

Can I smoke my Meerschaum pipe the same way I smoke my briar pipes?

No. One of the fascinating qualities of Meerschaum is its ability to change color from white to golden to a deep reddish brown. This results from the oil in the tobacco and wax on the outside of the bowl. If it is smoked too fast or too hot, the wax may melt down and only the base will color. Do not touch the bowl with your hands when the pipe is warm. The softened wax may cling to your fingers and the pipe will color in blotches. However, some pipe smokers prefer Meerschaum for its smoking properties, rather than for its ability to change color. If the coloring is not of importance, then, of course the Meerschaum can be handled and smoked in the normal manner. Note: Some manufactures produced antiquing or re-wax kits that can be used to touch up a Meerschaum pipe.

Do I have to break in my Meerschaum pipe?

No. Since Meerschaum does not burn as briar does, no protective carbon cake is needed on the inside of the bowl. To the contrary, the cleaner you keep your Meerschaum, the better it will smoke. However, to cure the Meerschaum, you should smoke several loads of your favorite tobacco. Meerschaum is a neutral tasting material and requires the light, volatile oil of several loads of tobacco to give you the mellow taste of which Meerschaum smokers are so fond.

Other Meerschaum Products

The Calabash

The calabash is a gourd similar to a squash, grown specifically for use in pipes. The shape is determined as the gourd grows by placing small blocks under the stem, forcing it into a gentle curve. The mature gourd is cut and dried, then fitted with a cork gasket to receive a Meerschaum bowl. The finished pipe offers one of the coolest, driest smokes available.



Meerschaum lined pipes. The Meerschaum lined briar pipe gives the porosity and sweet smoking qualities of Meerschaum along with the heat-absorbing qualities and durability of briar. Its actually sweet and cool smoking from the first puff and needs no breaking in.



African Block Meerschaum

Large deposits of Meerschaum was discovered in Tanzania, Africa. The African pipe differs from the traditional block Meerschaum pipe as it is baked at an extremely high temperature to increase its durability and is often stained in varying shades of brown, black and yellow. This is an excellent pipe for the beginner or fast puffer.

