A technology of enchantment

Rodney Harrison has discussed Kimberley points in terms of a technology of enchantment. His argument was partly that the form of later glass and ceramic points was a result of a European collector aesthetic and aboriginal producer entrepreneurship. Aboriginals responded to the fact that European collectors were enchanted by the form and technology of these points. They did so by emphasising material potentialities such as size, colour and transparency. Within this reading the form of Kimberley points was a negotiated outcome between a colonised group and their colonisers. Whilst not without its critics, Harrison’s paper goes some way to explaining why the Manchester Museum has around ten of these glass points within its stores.

Number eight wire: a short story

Because Kimberley points have been made within the historic period it should be possible to follow quite closely the methods used. In relation to glass points Kim Akerman has stated that “Invariably the tool [of manufacture] from start to finish is a piece of no.8 fencing wire or a similar piece of thin soft iron. This varies between 12 and 20 cms. in length and has a flattened oval working tip with flattened edges” (Akerman 1979: 79).

As I was not familiar with wire sizes, or where to get it in urban Manchester I turned to Google. Surprisingly, Wikipedia has a page for number 8 wire (originally 0.016″, now 4mm gauge). Apparently widely used within sheep farming it became synonymous (in New Zealand) with improvised problem solving, a little bit like Gaffer Tape in the UK. Interesting, and then I had the measurements but still left with the problem of obtaining some.

The following day I took the dog out for a walk and came across the above disused fence post. With wire! I didn’t have either wire cutters or callipers with me, but it was surprisingly easy to repeatedly bend the wire until it snapped. Obviously, the length of the wire obtained depends upon the circumference of the post and where it was attached. I came home with three pieces of wire, the shortest being ~14cm and the longest ~35cm. But how thick? I got the callipers out and lo and behold: 4mm. I had found my manufacturing tool. Was this how aboriginal artisans had obtained theirs?


https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Number_8_wire

To organise a Kimberley Point workshop: johnpiprani@yahoo.co.uk
What is the (Kimberley) point?

So what is the point here? As discussed, Harrison has argued that these artefacts actually speak to us about a relatively recent coloniser/colonised historical event. It is also true however, that the vast majority of human prehistory, and at least the past 850,000 years of British prehistory is represented primarily by stone tools. The question we are left with is how can we begin to understand these archaeologically recovered artefacts? Kimberley points embody a traditional aboriginal knapping practice with a millennial history, albeit applied to new materials and emphasising new qualities (size, colour and transparency). This traditional production process has been documented in text and photograph. We also have examples of Kimberley points for reference within most of our larger museum collections. Furthermore, as experimental artisans we have access to all the same tools and materials available to the aboriginal craftsmen (and apparently they were all men). We can begin to understand archaeological stone tools by physically engaging with an ethnographically recorded processes associated with manufacturing artefacts such as Kimberley points. Learning through making in fact.

If you are interested in learning how to make stone tools: https://learningthroughmakingblog.wordpress.com/

What are Kimberley points?

Whilst reading this, imagine some didgeridoo music playing in the background. Or better still play the following clip by Neocabelly27 on Youtube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7V2wFHYqT7U

Kimberley points are stone, glass and ceramic points produced by aboriginal Australians hailing from the northern Kimberley region. The (bottle) glass and ceramic points date to the post-European contact and approximately span the 1880s to 1980s period. Points vary in length from some very small stone examples (40mm) to very large glass pieces (200mm). Whilst the sub 60mm examples were generally used as armatures for hunting, larger glass points were treated as media of exchange and ceremony. These points are pressure flaked, and in formal terms have serrated or notched margins with a needle like point at the business end. They are also notoriously difficult to make.


Kimberley point from the Manchester Museum collection. Photograph: John Piprani.

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