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Why is the cigarette aesthetic so hot right now?

SHAWNA COHEN

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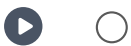


Lindsey Gazel, the Toronto pastry chef behind Lindsey Bakes says requests for cigarette-themed sweet treats have increased over the past year.

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At the opening reception for her recent exhibition at the Lobby in Toronto's Summerhill neighbourhood, artist Rundi Phelan handed out cigarettes to guests.

Some resembled the usual off-white sticks with light brown filters; others had glowing orange embers. But all were made of ceramic, not paper. "They went very quickly," Phelan said. The playful keepsakes echoed a series of decorative ceramic ashtrays displayed alongside the artist's lush, colourful paintings of flowers and trees. Some of the ashtrays featured lipstick-stained butts, along with the occasional joint, bracelet or hotel room key.

"For people my age, cigarettes are nostalgic," said Phelan, 74. "We used to say that a big, full ashtray was a sign of a great party."

Phelan hasn't smoked since her 20s. As it turns out, many who are embracing cigarette iconography have also long since quit the habit, or never started in the first place. Earlier this summer, I spent \$17 on a pack of cigarette-shaped candles for a friend's 50th birthday, mostly because they reminded me of Popeye candy cigarettes. That same week, I found myself coveting a set of chic European ashtrays at a vintage shop, even though I don't smoke. At a recent house party, I noticed incense sticks burning on the kitchen table that were designed to look like cigarettes. I later learned they're a cult favourite by New York-based lifestyle brand Boy Vienna.



Artist Rundi Phelan's recent exhibition included a display of ceramic ashtrays next to the artist's paintings of flowers and trees.

RUNDI PHELAN/SUPPLIED

According to the latest Health Canada data, only about one in 10 Canadians smokes cigarettes (down from about one in five in 2011). Yet cigarette iconography is quietly cropping up across art, home décor, fashion and even food. The new cigarette aesthetic has less to do with smoking than with what it represents: rebellion, freedom, nostalgia. It's not altogether surprising, given that cigarettes have worked their way back into pop culture. Fashion brands Khaite and Dôen handed out branded cigarettes at parties, while Mother's new Beverly Hills flagship counts a stylish cigarette case and lighter among its exclusive merch. Charli XCX served slim cigarettes on silver trays – along with custom matchbooks – at her wedding last September. And this year alone, both Hailey Bieber and Madonna posed with cigarettes for Interview magazine.

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It's not the habit that's making a comeback, but rather everything cigarettes have come to represent, according to Dr. Carolyn Mair, a Britain-based chartered psychologist and author of *The Psychology of Fashion*.

“Psychologically, we are often drawn to symbols rather than behaviours,” she said. “A ceramic ashtray, for example, may evoke rebellion, glamour, artistic identity or a slower, more cinematic way of life rather than any desire to smoke. For younger generations especially, cigarettes are more likely to be encountered through films, fashion and vintage design than personal experience, allowing them to function as visual icons rather than behavioural cues.”

Lindsey Gazel, the Toronto pastry chef behind Lindsey Bakes, has been making intricately detailed custom cookies for corporate clients – Hermès, Burberry and Sephora among them – for nearly two decades. She said requests for cigarette-themed sweet treats have increased over the past year. In April, Gazel baked a large banana-flavoured cigarette cake for a former smoker in his 40s. At a recent charity bake sale in downtown Toronto, her 3-D cigarette cookies sold out almost immediately. “People loved walking by and spotting them, then bringing them to dinner parties,” she said. “I think they’re whimsical.”

Gazel has been to countless weddings and events where there's a bowl of real cigarettes on offer. But her baked goods serve up the nostalgia without the smoke (or its links to cancer, heart disease and stroke).

Mair said the appeal lies in engaging with the taboo in ways that feel safe: “It allows [us] to experience the emotional appeal of something forbidden without the real-world consequences.”

At a time when we're inundated with ideas about health optimization, smartwatches tracking our every move and protein-everything, the cigarette could also be considered the ultimate, anti-Goop act of defiance. As Mair explained, “Cigarette-inspired aesthetics may reflect a reaction to today's

culture of wellness and constant self-monitoring. ... [The] imagery can symbolize spontaneity, imperfection and freedom from relentless self-improvement.”

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Could this new wave of cigarette motifs have the effect of normalizing smoking again? Dr. David Hammond, a professor and university research chair in the School of Public Health Sciences at the University of Waterloo, said there’s no evidence that smoking itself is making a comeback. (Smoking rates in Canada remain near their lowest levels on record.) “The scientist in me says until I see actual evidence in the numbers, I have to be skeptical,” he added.

At the same time, Hammond isn’t surprised that cigarette imagery is resurfacing. Smoking has been seen as so socially unacceptable over the past few decades that a cigarette now instantly telegraphs counterculture. “Maybe it’s one of those cyclical things. ... It’s been so out that it’s in again,” he said. “It’s something to keep an eye on.”

For Phelan, the artist, the appeal is much simpler. She sees her ashtrays as decorative objects, conversation pieces and, most of all, reminders of another era. “Look what we used to do,” she said with a laugh.



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LINDSEY BAKES/SUPPLIED

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