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Food Journeys: The 'Social Life' of the Pumpkin

The focus of this investigative research centres on the Pumpkin and thus consists of a historical account of the journey that this edible plant has shared with humanity. The pumpkin has come to represent more than merely an item of food, holding unique status as art, through which it has become an easily recognisable icon, and an important part of folklore bound to the annual cultural event of 'Halloween'. This study aims to trace the history of this obscure humble squash, from its origins in the Americas, to the cultural significance it retains today. Throughout the course of this investigation, it will be shown how the pumpkin has transformed, becoming a cultural symbol and the embodiment of Halloween, and how this simple plant has been turned into a contemporary artistic exhibit. This investigation will therefore examine how the pumpkin has evolved from being a staple food of the American continents, to becoming part of an annual cultural phenomenon. Additionally, the evolution of cultural traditions such as Halloween, have not remained static, instead existing within a constant process of transformation. Therefore, how this particular aspect of culture has been shared, interpreted, and transformed around the globe will also be explored. Here, the observation of how cultural phenomena can transcend the physical limitations of geographic location, migrating along with the movement of humans across the globe will be examined. This process allows for the dynamic expansion of cultural phenomena and the 'import' and 'export' of cultural 'traditions'. The culmination of this investigation aims to document how the concept, image and interpretation of the pumpkin, together with its physical habitation, has been transformed along with the cultural tradition of Halloween itself.

To begin this investigation into the journey of the pumpkin from past to present, it is pertinent to explore the remarkable history of this peculiar and multifarious plant. As David Trinklein (2013) explains, the name pumpkin is derived from the Greek word “pepon” meaning ‘large melon’, and is somewhat of a generic name given to various members of the Cucurbita genus of plants. Pumpkin, or squash, are names that are commonly attributed to several similar species within this genus which originates in the Americas. Although similar squashes are now found throughout the western hemisphere, these are the plants that are attributed with the name ‘pumpkin’ today.

Perhaps reflecting the unique nature of this investigation, historical accounts of the pumpkins early relationship with humanity are somewhat thin, therefore acknowledgement of the ensuing use of Colonial Williamsburg writer, Mary M Theobald, must be given, as the historic foundation has received criticism regarding historical authenticity of its ‘living museum’ (Handler & Gable, 1998). Nevertheless, for the purposes of this exploration into the pumpkin, this risk of authenticity is negated, as it is suitably detached from the representations of past displayed in the foundations living museum. The ancestry of the pumpkin then, as noted by Theobald (2009), can be traced back to its origins around central and south America and what is now the south west of the United States, where evidence of its existence and use as a food date back around six thousand years. Laura Reilly (2015), focuses this a little further, stating that the pumpkins true origin can be traced to Mexico, some 7500 years ago. The appearance of these original Mexican pumpkins, or *calabaza* as they are locally known, was quite different to that of the much more recognisable large, smooth, round and bright orange fruit of the Connecticut Field

variety that are now so widely cultivated. It is this variety which is associated with the iconic 'Jack-o'-lantern' that is so synonymous with contemporary pumpkins. Instead, they appeared small, hard and bitter, being more durable in harsh climates and through meagre harvests. As a result, the calabaza became an essential part of the ancient Mexican diet and was used in a multitude of different dishes and cooking applications, many of which have endured to present day. After numerous generations, the calabaza that now appear in contemporary Mexican markets are much more varied than the small and bitter fruits of the past, with produce that can be gnarled, misshapen, elongated and colourful, as years of cultivation and extensive utilisation have led to changes to the fruit itself (Reilly, 2015).

In pre-colonial America, the pumpkin is one of the regions oldest native crops, historically being consumed, particularly its seeds, as a dietary staple of the indigenous population. As was with the fruits of Mexico, the flesh of these early pumpkins was similarly bitter to eat, therefore the seeds were the main source of food from the plant. After intensive cultivation made the flesh sweeter and more palatable, nearly all of the plant was then consumed in some form, with the pumpkin itself existing in an assortment of shapes, colours and sizes. Correspondingly, pumpkins were consumed in far greater numbers than is seen in contemporary America, as they had considerably wider utilisation (Theobald, 2009). Pumpkins would be prepared by being baked, roasted or boiled. They would be cut open and the seeds removed, then filled to make soups and broths. The skin and flesh are known to have been sliced into thin segments and dried to form a kind of jerky preserve. Pumpkin shells were hollowed out and dried for use as containers, bowls and receptacles. Even the durable skin was stripped, dried and woven into mats and coverings. Theobald (2009) goes on to describe how early European explorers noted the abundance of

pumpkins throughout the American continents, being particularly fascinated with the extent of its utilisation, and likewise how it was cultivated. Squashes were often sown and planted amongst beans and maize, as these plants complimented one another throughout the crop growth cycle, being referred to as 'the three sisters' by natives. This method of combined cultivation was an innovative way of boosting crop yield for these three staple foods (ibid).

The pumpkin remained solely native to the Americas until 1492, with the coming of explorer and colonist, Christopher Columbus. With Columbus' arrival, a pivotal cultural exchange took place, which is now referred to as the 'Columbian Exchange' (A. Crosby, 1972). Between the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries forward, there was an extensive and fundamental transfer of plants, seeds, foods, animals, people, cultural ideas and also disease, between the 'old world' of Europe and the 'new world' of the Americas. During this period, some of the most important and significant exchanges in food items took place, crossing over into new continents from either side of the Atlantic Ocean and subsequently being embedded into the pre-existing foodways. Items that were introduced into the Americas included a range of domesticated animals, such as cattle and horses, numerous root vegetables, fruits, and spices; and an unfortunate number of infectious diseases. Notable foods that came back to Europe included potatoes, sweet potatoes, maize, tomatoes and a variety of nuts, among many others. In amongst this cache of new foods, was of course, the pumpkin (ibid). Theobald (2009) noted that European colonists and settlers in the Americas appreciated the importance of the pumpkin as a mainstay food source, with the pumpkin appearing in literature as far back as the 1600s. This is perhaps best encapsulated by a settler's poem dating from circa 1630:

*“Instead of pottage and puddings, and custards and pies,
Our pumpkins and parsnips are common supplies,
We have pumpkins at morning, and pumpkins at noon,
If it was not for pumpkins we should be undone.”*

(Hovey and Company, 1845)

Nevertheless, the pumpkin was not quite so enthusiastically embraced in its new European home across the Atlantic. Upon arriving in Britain, it was at first grown as something of a curiosity. However, it hastily garnered the reputation of being associated with the poor. As Theobald (2009) illustrates, appearing in *The Gardeners Dictionary* (1763): “...[pumpkins are] frequently cultivated by the country people in England, who plant them upon their dunghills”. Similarly, seen in *The British Housewife* (1770): “The pumpkin is a very ordinary fruit, and is principally the food of the poor.” (Martha Bradley, 1770). For many years, here is where the European pumpkin would remain. A curiosity for some, a prudent source of seasonal food for those out in the country. It is also here a temporary pause must be placed upon this investigation into the social journey of the pumpkin, as another important aspect of human culture crucial to the history of the pumpkin now needs to be explored.

With the ‘Columbus Exchange’ and the steady arrival of European settlers in North America, came the gradual introduction of cultural practices and traditions from Europe. Yet it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that one such practice, Halloween, arrived to the shores of North America. Long before the traditions of Halloween would reach

American shores however, its ancient pagan origins can be traced back to the Celtic festival of Samhain. Some 2000 years ago, the Celts inhabited much of what is now known as Britain, Ireland and Brittany in northern France. As the Celts were mainly agricultural community, the Celtic year was established by means of the growing seasons. The Samhain represented the end of the summer and the growing year, the conclusion of the harvest period and the beginning of the long bitter winter. This marked change was epitomised by the Samhain festival, which symbolised the transition from the world of the living, to the world of the dead (Johnson, B. 2014). Characterised by this transitional period into a new year, and with the cold dark winter drawing in, it was believed that this, along with the short days and long nights, brought out the ghosts of the dead, who could once again walk amongst the living. Many celebrations were held as a result, with bonfires being lit to deter evil and offerings being left to appease any wandering spirits. Costumes would also be donned and lanterns carried, these being made out of hollowed out vegetables with a piece of hot coal placed inside. Ghoulish faces would then be carved onto these lanterns to ward off ghosts of the dead (ibid).

With the arrival of the Romans in Britain in 43 AD, these ancient pagan traditions slowly began to change. Much of the Celtic lands were conquered by the Romans and over the next four centuries, many of the Celtic festivals and Roman celebrations coalesced, forming new traditions. One such tradition, and one that is now almost exclusively associated with Halloween, was 'apple bobbing', as the apple tree was introduced to Britain by the Roman Empire (Johnson, B. 2014). After the departure of the Romans in the fifth century, new conquerors arrived in the form of the Saxons, followed later by Germanic migrants landing on the south and east coasts of England. Over the coming decades, the

native Celts gradually receded into the western and northern parts of the isles, recognised today as Cornwall, Wales, The Isle of Man, Cumbria and Scotland. This would coincide with the additional arrival of a new religion, Christianity, which brought with it the formation of the early Celtic Church out of Ireland, whose teachings and faith expanded down from Scotland and the north, through the western boundaries and then into remaining areas of Britain (ibid).

With the onset of Christianity in Britain, Christian festivals naturally appeared alongside. Amongst these new festivities was 'All Hallows Day', known also as 'All Saints Day', a time to honour those who have died, and all saints known and unknown (Johnson, B. 2014). Around the eighth century, the Catholic Church acted to extend its influence over that of pagan rituals by merging them with their own. In doing so, 'All Saints Day', with its celebratory feast, was moved from the 13th of May to November the 1st to coincide with Samhain. Thus, the eve of 'All Saints Day' became October the 31st, which in turn would come to be known as 'All Hallows Eve'. Over time this was contracted to 'Hallowe'en', and of course more recently, the familiar 'Halloween' (McKechnie, S, & Tynan, C. 2008. p1012). Customs gradually grew around the festival of Hallowe'en, where masquerading as roaming spirits and ghosts became commonplace. Here, prayers would be offered for the dead in exchange for food or drink, giving rise to the customary tradition of begging throughout the Hallows Mass period (ibid).

As has been revealed through exploring the history of Samhain, Ireland's connection with the festivities surrounding Hallowe'en date back to pagan times, having a pivotal role in the formation of the Celtic Church and the subsequent spread of Christianity throughout

Britain, leading to the evolution of Hallowe'en itself. The Irish influence on the tradition, especially the contemporary celebrations associated with Halloween, would continue into the nineteenth century. The population of Ireland had been steadily increasing over the course of the 1800's, partly due to the assurance large families provided regarding continuing sustenance and survival (Trueman, C, N. 2015). The increasing population however, generated the increasing need for food, and potatoes had become essential to the diet of the rural Irish. However, by 1845 Ireland was in the grip of 'The Great Famine', which was prompted by a new form of potato blight that, since its discovery in America a year earlier, had now made its way to the fields of Europe (ibid). This new form of potato blight had a drastic effect of the potato harvests for the next two years, leading to countless deaths in the country from disease and famine. 1847 saw the beginnings of emigration from Ireland, both forced and voluntary, and over the coming years it is believed that over one million people left the country to try to secure themselves a better future, many arriving by ship into ports in Northern America (ibid).

With the immigration of large numbers of Irish into the United States, it was not long until their customs and traditions started to appear. McKechnie & Tynan (2008) describe how the Irish celebrations for Hallowe'en included innocent games such as the Roman inspired bobbing for apples, but also introduced masked tricksters into communities, who would stage light-hearted pranks. These began as harmless fun, but by the late 1800's had descended into 'hooliganism and vandalism'. McKechnie & Tynan (2008) continue, describing that by the 1930's, 'Halloween' had become such a troublesome celebration that unwilling participants took to offering 'treats' as a preventative bribe to reduce the chance of being 'tricked'. This eventually resulted in parties travelling from house to house

in search of these treats with the now familiar greeting, “Trick or Treat” (McKechnie, S, & Tynan, C. 2008. pp1012). Part of this trickery was associated with the Irish folk legend of ‘Stingy Jack’. Although there are many variants of the legend, the common recount is that Jack was a trickster whom had played tricks on the devil and lived a life of sin. As a consequence, upon Jacks death, he was banished from both heaven and hell, being cursed to an eternity of existence between the world of the living and world of the dead, with nothing but a hollowed out turnip containing a hot coal to light his way. This crude lantern came to be known as the ‘Jack-o’-lantern’ (Jack of [the] lantern) (Brinn, J. 2015). The tale of ‘Stingy Jack’ is where we now re-engage in the journey of the pumpkin, as these next events see the humble pumpkin acquire a whole new identity.

Irish immigrants in the United States would soon come to recognise that the native pumpkin was much better suited for conversion into a Jack-o’-lantern than the more traditional turnip or marrow. The abundance of the pumpkin throughout the United States in the autumn also helped solidify its new role of Jack-o’-lantern. Gradually over the coming years, Americans would come to adopt these cultural practices, carving their own pumpkins with ghoulish and extravagant faces to put on display (Brinn, J. 2015). The pumpkin thus became an integral part of American festivities, being transformed into one of the most iconic and recognisable symbols now so synonymous with Halloween itself. McKechnie & Tynan (2008) mark the post war period as the start of the American observance of Halloween as a festivity, which would only grow in popularity. From the 1980’s onwards, Halloween in America became big business. The commercialisation of the festivities saw mass marketing and production of Halloween related paraphernalia quickly begin to inundate the marketplace (McKechnie, S, & Tynan, C. 2008. p1012). America’s

commercialised rendition of Halloween was subsequently exported, being introduced into Europe, with particular success in Britain, in the 1990's. Here it was widely embraced and assimilated into the pre-existing celebrations and has since become an extremely popular annual mainstay of cultural traditions spanning many countries (ibid).

With the contemporary celebrations of Halloween becoming a prominent and popular festival observed in many Christian countries across the globe, the role of the humble pumpkin has evolved from merely existing as a source of food and nutrition, transitioning into becoming a symbolic representative of Halloween, and finally emerging as an item of fascination and high art. There are now a variety of professionals and artists who specialise in the craft of pumpkin carving and pumpkin artistry. Indeed, there even exists 'professional pumpkin carvers', such as John Neill. Although specialising in conceptual design, he is most recognised as a 'world renowned champion pumpkin carver' and 'the pumpkin guru', appearing on numerous television programmes and attending many annual festivals and events carving giant pumpkins for display (Neill Art Studios, 2012). Similarly, there is a company based in Brooklyn, New York City, entitled 'Manic Pumpkin Carvers', who offer a wide range of pumpkin carving services to order. The business describes itself as having "[...] *elevated pumpkin carving from craft to art form*". Some of their carvings have even been placed on display in The Museum of Modern Art (Manic Pumpkin Carvers LLC, 2015). Their enthusiasm for this new form of artistry is epitomised through a quote from their company website:

"Maniac is focused on advancing the art of pumpkin carving, exploring this exciting medium and taking the classic pastime to a whole new level. The nature of pumpkin

carving brings you into the moment, captivating your senses. It is ephemeral and temporary and all about the now.” (Manic Pumpkin Carvers LLC, 2015)

This exploration into the journey of the pumpkin has exhibited the intricate relationship this foodstuff has shared with human culture. This journey dates back many thousands of years and has been responsible for the numerous changes that this plant has undergone as a result. Its ancient origins in the Americas saw its use by native populations whom, through cultivation, would gradually come to change its character making it more palatable, thereupon growing it in far greater numbers. The discovery of ‘the new world’ by Christopher Columbus at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries noted the abundance of this curious new food, with the ensuing cultural exchanges facilitating the pumpkins arrival to the European continent. Having traversed the Atlantic Ocean, here the pumpkin would thus remain, little more than a curiosity and a new but a somewhat unremarkable source of nutrition, for quite some time. However, the complexity of historic diverging cultural celebrations in and around Britain that were set in motion thousands of years ago would soon see the pumpkin undergo change once more. This would not become apparent until ‘The Great Famine’ that hit Ireland in the mid nineteenth century, which happened as a result of another exchange across the Atlantic, this time an unwelcome one. The potato, upon which Ireland had become so reliant as a source of food, was hit by a new form of blight that had travelled over the ocean from the native Americas. After extensive crop failures in the following years, widespread famine forced over a million Irish to emigrate over the ocean to the United States in search of better futures. The immigration of the Irish to the United States brought with it the importing of new cultural traits, which in turn were embedded into American culture. This prompted the

development of brand new forms of celebrations, including 'trick or treating', and importantly the pumpkins use as a Jack-o'-lantern. These festivities were quickly internalised, becoming an important part of American culture, and the use of the pumpkin would evolve once again to become an iconic symbol of a truly Americanised Halloween. In the late 1980's, the final twist in this journey of the humble pumpkin then took place. The massive commercialisation of Halloween in America was exported back over the Atlantic once again, re-embedding with ease back into the pre-existing celebrations. Over the coming years, pumpkin carving has developed far beyond its modest beginnings as simple Jack-o'-lanterns, with the pumpkin now taking centre stage as pieces of high art, being placed on annual display every year all across the globe.

To conclude, as has been explored in this investigation, the pumpkin has had a unique and lengthy social journey that has spanned many centuries and has been intertwined in many different cultures. On this journey the pumpkin has had numerous incarnations, holding the privilege of having a truly multifaceted relationship with humanity. It has existed as an important source of nutrition and dietary staple, evolving in both taste and form, and in harmony with its early cultivators. It became a curiosity for wealthy Europeans and prudent source of food for the poor. It then changed once again into a symbol of celebration and festivity, being utilised as both food and creatively as Jack-o'-lanterns across many cultures and countries. Finally, the pumpkin is now regarded by some as high art, with the sophisticated and intricate carvings that don its surface appearing in museums and being offered for sale alike. Truly, the pumpkin is a unique and special food that shares an exclusive history and relationship with humanity, having many different interpretations to many different peoples.

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