



Valentines Day: a

A&M prof studies kissing; teaches cultural diffusion

By Susan Hopkins

Some people collect stamps. Others scuba dive, ride horses, collect coins or make crafts. Dr. Vaughn M. Bryant, Jr., head of the anthropology department at Texas A&M University, studies kissing.

So, naturally, the actions of people on Valentine's Day and Christmas play a vital part in Bryant's hobby, because when love is prevalent, so is kissing. But his research has gone far beyond the study of these two love-oriented holidays. Bryant may well be a world authority on the subject.

"When I lecture to introductory anthropology classes about the impact of cultural or technological diffusion on society, I can talk about airplanes or kissing. One will make every student in the room fall asleep, and the other will keep them awake and interested," Bryant said.

The origin of customs is a typical and interesting topic for anthropologists to study, but 15 years ago when a student asked Bryant about the kissing custom, he didn't have an answer.

In his spare time away from teaching and researching — an extensive study of prehistoric diets has become his research speciality — Bryant began hunting information about the history of kissing.

Bryant thinks the first kiss came from the Eskimo-like custom of lovers rubbing their noses across the cheeks and lips of each other attempting to smell the perfume those in India are known to have worn.

If Neanderthals or earlier fossil men and women kissed, he said, we have no way of knowing, since they left no written records or paintings of kissing on cave walls.

However, there is what Bryant calls the world's first how-to manual on kissing, called the *Kama Sutra*, written in the first or second century A.D. This book on Hindu religion and love, says the kissing customs it describes were already centuries old when finally written down. More than 200 passages in the *Kama Sutra* tell how to kiss a lover and where. It even tells how the kissee should respond to the kisser, Bryant said.

Through studies of Middle East customs, he found that "to eat" and "to kiss" had identical definitions, since eating and kissing both brought satisfaction by way of the mouth. However, he said, no murals of kissing have been found from that region.

Babylonian song lyrics say the males desired women with "honey lips," which Bryant said may indicate kissing, or simply the desire for a "sweet" person.

The Greeks are believed to have adopted the custom from India. Although they were generally more concerned with sports and politics, there are occasional mentions of love and kissing in Greek manuscripts, the professor said.

Kissing took awhile to get from Greece to Rome, but it hit with a boom when the custom finally reached the area. "The Romans were very kiss oriented — more so than people in the U.S. are today — and their decadence, highlighted by becoming the first 'kissing missionaries,' spread the custom to all of Europe," Bryant said.

"Literally, they kissed everybody who waited on them in shops — from the butcher to the baker to the blacksmith. Kissing was as commonplace as shaking hands, at all age levels and both sexes."

The Romans even developed and defined three levels of kissing:

* **The osculum:** a friendship kiss, usually on the cheek, like a kiss to your grandmother or the hostess of a party. Those in France, Spain and Latin America still show reverence by kissing on both cheeks, while the Greeks and Russians prefer the lips.

* **The basium:** an affectionate kiss between lovers. This Latin word is the basis for the word meaning "to kiss" in most cultures today. "Buss" also became a synonym for "kiss" in the English language.

Under ancient Roman law, a virgin who could prove she had been kissed in this manner could press for legal marriage to the kisser.

* **The savium:** defined as a "little kiss", but in *Amores*, the Roman poet Ovid describes savium when writing about the girl who "eagerly kissed me with her tongue, in my lips her whole tongue hid." From this, Bryant believes, came the American "French kiss."

However, with the rise of Christianity, came the fall of Roman customs, according to Bryant. Sexual frivolity, as the early Christians thought of it, was channeled into reverence with the "holy kiss," which is referred to in Romans 16:16 of the Bible: "Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you."

Although the Christians made an effort to

do away with the Roman decadence, Bryant said, the seeds were already planted for kissing in most of Europe, and in the Middle Ages, kissing became popular again.

This time, though, European Christians developed a form of kissing that was strictly governed by rank. People of equal rank, male and female, kissed on the lips. The greater the difference in rank, the further from the lips one kissed — the cheeks, hands, feet or even the ground.

Bryant said that even this reverent kiss got out of hand — people were greeting each other with French kisses during church services. In an effort to restore reverence to the kiss, Pope Innocence passed two laws at the Council of Vienna: Any Roman Catholic who kisses with intent to fornicate commits a mortal sin; those who kiss for mere delight commit the lesser venial sin.

The sexiest people in the world reportedly live on the South Seas island of Mangaia, Bryant said, but until recently they knew nothing of kissing although the frequency of intercourse for Mangaians in their late teens and early 20s is said to be 21 times a week.

In fact, the professor says, the kissing bug probably didn't reach them and other Asian, Pacific and sub-Saharan areas until the arrival of explorers in the 1400-1800s.

Until that time, many myths had developed in these cultures. Bryant said some people believed one's soul entered and left through the mouth, so to kiss someone would be to risk having your soul sucked out, causing death. Others thought disease entered and left through the mouth, or that the mouth was a very dirty place, both ideas making kissing undesirable.

It became vogue in England to show affection and love by extreme politeness. Kissing was replaced in the mid-1600s with a bow, courtsey or tip of a hat. Bryant said kissing may have come to such an abrupt halt when the Great Plague hit London and people were leery of any kind of mouth-to-mouth contact for fear of catching the fatal disease.

In the Western culture today, kissing is widespread, serving purposes that range from the usual greeting to psychological therapy, Bryant said. "People need touching, affection and caring, and we meet some of these needs through kissing, whether passionate or more like a handshake."

Valentine's Day trivia

Although Valentine's Day is a well-known occasion, the origin of the celebration is rather vague.

The name Valentine comes from St. Valentine, a Christian martyr who has become the patron saint of lovers. Although little is known of Valentine, it is believed he was a Roman who suffered persecution and death in the year 269.

Dr. Vaughn M. Bryant, head of the anthropology department at Texas A&M University, said Valentine may have been put into jail by Claudius II and was told he had to renounce his faith or be fed to the lions. Valentine stuck to his guns and was devoured on Feb. 14.

The holiday bearing his name became popular in England during the Middle Ages, when the custom of sending Valentine

cards became popular. It was thought that spring began on Feb. 14, when birds began to mate. For this reason, the day was devoted to love-making and kissing.

Geoffrey Chaucer, the English poet, wrote: "For this was on seynt Valentine's day, when every foul cometh ther to chese his make."

Today, flowers are synonymous with Valentine's Day and different meanings are associated with different flowers.

Although roses are the true heart's desire of many women, tulips are also traditional Valentine flowers.

The association of tulips with love is older than Valentine's Day. An ancient Middle Eastern legend says that the first tulip sprung when the tears of a lovesick Persian boy hit scorching desert sands.