

*Southeastern*

August 2009

# *Antiquing*

*and Collecting Magazine*



**The Accoutrements of Class:**  
Collecting Antique Snuff Boxes and Tea Caddies

# The Accoutrements of Class: Collecting Antique Snuff Boxes and Tea Caddies

By Bill Rau

From Pandora's Box of mythological fame to chests of treasure buried by swashbuckling pirates, boxes have always held a particular fascination, not only for what they actually held, but for the *promise* of what they *might* hold. Whether large or small, unadorned or beautifully decorated, made of wood, porcelain, metal or precious materials, boxes have a charm and mystery that many find irresistible, and they are among the most widely sought after collectibles on the market today.

When it comes to antique boxes, the collector is spoiled for choice. There are a number of ways to build a collection depending on your interests. You could focus on a specific type of box (snuff boxes, powder boxes, glove boxes, jewel boxes, patch boxes, cigar boxes, lock boxes, deed boxes, neccessaires, etc.), collect according to the style of the decoration (enameling, miniature paintings, engravings, repoussé, inlay, jeweled, etc.), or by type of material (ivory, wood, silver, gold, tortoiseshell, glass, etc.). Antique boxes can also be found at any price, from a few dollars to several hundreds or thousands of dollars, depending on the age, decoration, maker, condition and material of construction.

Boxes are, essentially, useful items, and it seems that our ancestors had a purpose for every box and a box for every purpose. Thus, one of the more popular and imaginative methods of collecting boxes is according to their use. Two types of boxes, in particular, combined function with form in exceptionally beautiful ways, and they are extremely popular with collectors. Snuff boxes and tea caddies can be found in a seemingly endless number of variations and offer collectors a host of options.

## Small Size, Big Impact...Snuff Boxes

When it comes to boxes, smaller can often mean better for some collectors. Diminutive boxes came into fashion in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and were often crafted of porcelain, gold or other "exotic" materials and adorned with hand-painted images, jewels or other types of inlay.

Small boxes with original artwork are of particular interest to collectors and depending on the quality of the design, can command lofty prices. These small boxes were often carried by well-to-do ladies and gents as a reflection of their status and power. Artisans went to great lengths to create these tiny masterpieces, using the most expensive materials and hand decorations to create the biggest impact.

Snuff boxes are the most collected of the small boxes. Although it had been around for hundreds of years, snuff, which was essentially pulverized tobacco, was the tobacco product of choice among Europe's elite by the 1700s. Napoleon, Pope Benedict III and Queen Charlotte were among those who enjoyed this luxury. Soon, the snuff sensation caught on amongst the classes, and artisans began creating special accoutrement for



The Rothschild Snuff Box.



A rosewood brass inlay tea caddy set.

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the taking of snuff, among them the snuff box.

Snuff boxes were crafted from all types of materials, including papier-mâché, silver, gold, pewter, enameled copper, tortoise shell, wood and horn and were often highly decorated. They ranged in size from very small, to be carried in a lady's purse, to medium size, to be carried in a gentleman's pocket, to the larger table snuffboxes. Snuff boxes have tight fitting lids, which could be hinged or lifted off completely. Snuff box manufacturers were regarded as artists, creating and designing these elegant little boxes with a high level of skill and artistry.

Snuff boxes were among a gentleman's most expensive and elegant personal effects, and he would often carry a number of them to hold his various snuff varieties. These small boxes were highly personal and were a reflection of the carrier's tastes and social standing, often more cherished than even their jewelry or other personal effects. Even during their heyday, snuff boxes were coveted collector's items. Wealthy and fashionable men would have a fair number of them and often offered them as gifts.

**The Rothschild Snuff Box.** One of the most exquisite snuff boxes in existence today is an 18th-Century French snuff box that once belonged in the private collection of the prestigious Rothschild family. Crafted by the famed French goldsmith Robert-Joseph Auguste, this delicate, oval-shaped gold box is exquisitely decorated with luminous guilloché enameling on every side, raised enameled flowers and finely-painted porcelain on the lid. Such an exceptional keepsake crafted of solid gold and enamel and boasting the detail found in this piece would only have been made for someone of great wealth and power.

Like gold, porcelain snuff boxes were among the most precious among aristocratic men and women. For today's collectors, porcelain snuff boxes are in a class all their own. The absolute finest examples were made by the Meissen manufactory. Porcelain by Meissen was considered the "white gold" of Europe, and snuff boxes made by the company are of exceptionally high quality. Meissen wares were so desired and highly regarded that many of the most exemplary early pieces immediately became part of the historical royal collections in Denmark, Germany, Sweden and Russia where they remain today. Meissen porcelain also became the most popular gift exchanged among royalty and heads of state. Meissen snuffboxes began to replace the ubiquitous gold snuffboxes usually presented to ministers and high-ranking officials during this time.

**Precious Boxes for Precious Cargo.** Tea caddies or tea chests—the decorative boxes that contain canisters—epitomize a whole era of English society. Introduced to Europe in the 17th century, tea was one of the most precious commodities, and it continued to be so for nearly two centuries. Storing it had a greater importance than simply preserving freshness. There was, of course, a matter of security; tea was a precious commodity and was always kept under lock and key. But there was also the matter of status. Tea was expensive and often only available to the wealthy classes, and tea caddies were crafted to reflect the owner's social status.

In this era of decorum, containers of these precious tea leaves were objects of great pride. Made by artist cabinetmakers, they

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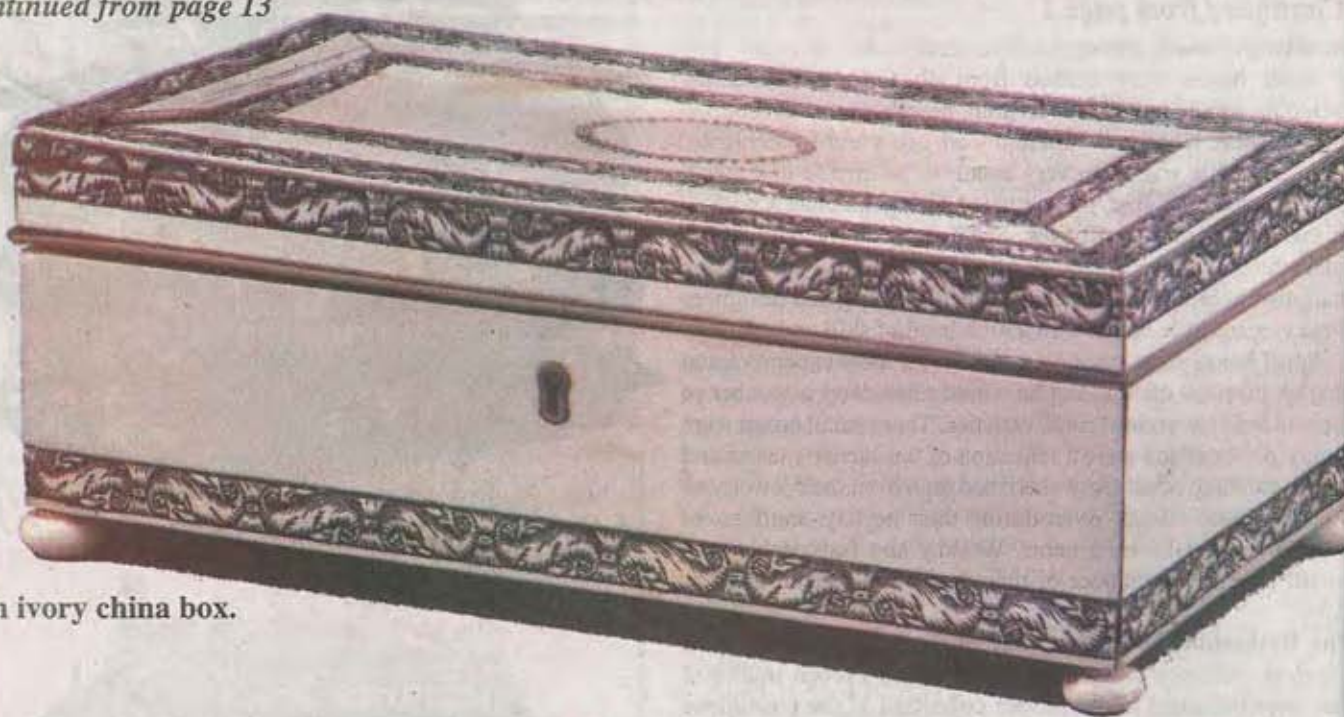
**A Georgian tortoiseshell tea caddy.**



**The Empress of Austria's jewel case.**



**Lord Suffield's Necessaire de Voyage.**



An ivory china box.

reflected the stylistic and cultural developments of the 18th and 19th Centuries as well as the idiosyncratic preferences of the commissioning clients. Lord Petersham, of snuff box fame, was one of the Regency Period dandies who elevated the art of affectation to exquisite refinement. He had a selection of tea caddies specially crafted so he could store his tea leaves according to their individual character.

Like snuff boxes, tea caddies were made of any number of materials in many shapes and sizes. Those crafted of exotic materials, such as tortoiseshell and ivory, are among the most desirable to collectors and among the most costly. Making use of the quality of the material rather than complex shaping or decoration, these caddies exhibit subtle and restrained shapes, and boxes whose sides are veneered in single panels of tortoiseshell are especially prized.

Because they are so coveted, these caddies are also frequently faked. A wise collector will buy from a reputable dealer who stands behind his pieces. In addition to the danger of buying a fake, remember that the use of these materials, if new, is illegal. A deep understanding of the aesthetic criteria of the period will hopefully help avoid the pitfalls.

**Tips for Collecting Antique Boxes.** As with any collection, there are a few basic rules for collecting antique boxes. First and foremost, collect a box because it appeals to you historically, visually or personally. Many of the materials used to craft the finest boxes, such as porcelain, gold, silver, tortoiseshell or ivory, tend to age beautifully if cared for correctly with many looking almost new! Look for clean surfaces, free of scratches or dents. Take care to look for missing decoration or shoddy repairs.

If the box has painted decoration, check that there are no duplicated scenes or decorations which often means the "painted" decoration is actually a decal. Make sure the box opens easily and closes properly with a snug or even seal. Check that the decoration lines up correctly and that the decoration on the top of the box is consistent with that on the body of the box.

If you are considering a tea caddy, check to see if the original interior lids are still available and intact. Many tea caddies were set on small balls or shaped feet, and an ideal example will retain the original feet.

For any collector, the best advice is to buy from a reputable dealer. But don't let a real find pass you by. Visit antique stores, museums and special collections to study the very finest examples of whatever type of box you wish to collect. Apply what you learn from the masterpieces, and you should be happy with your growing collection.

Antique boxes offer an incredible opportunity to collectors. The range of style, materials, origins and techniques involved in their manufacture present not only a glimpse into the craftsmanship of bygone eras, but into the tastes and societal practices, as well. And that is truly a treasure you'll want to uncover!

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