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ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

**NOTHING
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CHINESE SNUFF
BOTTLES IN THE
SPOTLIGHT**

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Snuff love

Nothing connects you with the past like a Chinese snuff bottle. Miniature works of art in their own right, they are easy to handle and extremely collectable, writes specialist Susan Page

There is nothing like a snuff bottle, which is as beautiful as it is tactile. Small enough to nestle in the palm of your hand, when you hold one you are getting as close as is possible to life in China in the 18th and 19th centuries. Years of wear brings a deep polish that is exquisite to the touch. These stunning miniatures, which measure between one-and-a-half and three inches high, illustrate the technical virtuosity of Qing dynasty craftsmen, while providing a window on life and culture in late imperial China.

In addition to which collecting them may inspire you to learn about their iconography and rebuses, and discover the myths and legends at the heart of Chinese culture. You will also discover more about the multitude of materials from which they were made, ranging from semi-precious stones to glass, porcelain and organic materials.

HIGH PRAISE

Snuff, a mixture of finely ground tobacco leaves and aromatic herbs and spices, was introduced to China by European missionaries, envoys, and merchants in the second half of the 17th century. With its medicinal and stimulating effects, it soon caught on and the increasing use of snuff led to the making of snuff bottles – small containers with a corked stopper that

Below (left to right) An 18th-century blue and white snuff bottle with pierced foot, decorated with a scholar and attendant; an 18th-century pink glass snuff bottle, blown into the form of a peach; an underglazed red snuff bottle decorated with quail and bamboo. All images courtesy of the author, photographer Robert Hall

were easily portable and airtight to preserve freshness and flavour.

Just as snuff taking in Europe was primarily a habit of the elite, so it was in China. As early as 1684, the Kangxi Emperor (r. 1661-1722), on the first of his six great tours of inspection to the south of the country, was presented with gifts, including snuff, from two Jesuit priests in Nanjing. While he rejected many of the tributes, he kept the snuff.

He wasn't alone in his newfound love and soon championed a new craze. In 1702, Wang Shizhen, a high-ranking minister of the Kangxi Emperor (who is well known to all serious collectors of snuff bottles) said: "Snuff is said to be able to improve one's sight, especially to exorcise epidemic diseases. It is put into glass bottles, which are of varying shapes, in colours of red, purple, yellow, white, black, green and brown. The white is clear as crystal, the red like fire. The snuff bottles are manufactured by the Imperial Court. Snuff bottles are also imitated among the people but are far inferior in quality and design."

BY ROYAL APPOINTMENT

The Kangxi Emperor conferred presents of snuff and bottles on worthy recipients with gift-giving records from 1703 and 1705 widely published. The Qianlong Emperor (r. 1735-1796), whose long reign was responsible for a large number of artworks, also commissioned a wide range of snuff bottles.

While snuff taking in the late 18th century centred on the capital, a wealth of evidence points to a rapid expansion of the habit across the empire within 20 years, as court officials visited the provinces taking their habit with them. References to snuff and snuff bottles, particularly in the writings of travelling Westerners, are numerous from the 1790s onwards. Lord Macartney, the UK's first envoy to China who met the emperor in 1793, said of the Chinese: "They also take snuff, mostly Brazil, but in small quantities, not in that beastly profusion which is often practiced in England."





SNUFF SAID

By the mid-19th century, snuff taking had become commonplace throughout China. The scholar and merchant classes replaced the court as the most important consumers. The result was a greater demand for bottles and the growth of regional workshops to meet it. This rising interest led to mass production, and the Jingdezhen kilns cranked up their firings to churn out thousands and thousands of bottles. The end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) saw the end of the great snuff bottle-producing era. Although an interesting coda is that the art of painting the inside of snuff bottles continued in China throughout the turbulence of the revolution and there are today many wonderful examples of that art form.

QUARTZ BOTTLES

Quartz is one of the most common materials used to make snuff bottles. The quartz family is large, and embraces a great many different stones. Crystal and chalcedony are the most obvious, but these can be further divided into several different types: agate, jasper, amethyst, citrine and carnelian.

Because of the quartz family's limitless range of colours, snuff bottle artisans gave free rein to their imaginations, often with amazing results. Maximum use was made of their distinctive markings. In many cases, this natural colouring was so striking it was left to speak for itself, with no further carving required other than the forming of the bottle.

Above Three jade snuff bottles, 1780-1850 (left to right) in apple green; carved basketweave design and a deep spinach green

Below Three silhouette agate snuff bottles (1780-1850), carved using natural darker inclusions

Jade, nephrite & jadeite bottles

While snuff bottles were made from a number of different materials, in the main they were produced in jade, quartz, glass and porcelain.

Jade is a quintessential Chinese stone and has occupied a place of importance in the country for several thousand years. Valued above gold or precious stones, it is held not only in admiration and affection, but even in reverence by the Chinese.

Jade snuff bottles were made in the palace workshops in Beijing. The best known was Suzhou, a southern town, long famous for the skill of its hardstone carvers. While nephrite and jadeite are both correctly called "jade", they are actually two different minerals.

Nephrite is usually of an opaque, creamy colour, and is most prized when it is pure white or yellow. It has been worked by the Chinese from their earliest recorded history, and it is the material from which most ancient jade artefacts were made.

Jadeite is slightly harder than nephrite and tends to be translucent, with an icy, crystalline structure. It comes in a variety of colours but it is renowned for its apple-green and emerald tones. It can also be found in shades of blue and lavender which are not found in nephrite. It has been available to the Chinese since the Qianlong period when it was imported from Burma.

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COLLECTING GUIDES *Chinese snuff bottles*

CAMEO BOTTLES

Some bottles were decorated in a cameo style: the top layer of colour being carved away to leave the design in relief against a ground of a different colour. Still others, known to collectors as “silhouette agates”, rely on the skill of the lapidarist to select and carve a stone in such a way that its natural inclusions suggest a design with a minimum of relief carving. Bottles of this type, when carved by a master craftsman, are among the most dramatic of all snuff bottles.

Good hollowing of hardstone bottles is very important – which is especially true of quartz. In this case the mineral’s striking colours can only be appreciated when the walls are thin enough to allow natural light to shine through.

MATERIAL GAINS

More rare materials became available as the empire expanded under the leadership of the Kangxi and Qianlong emperors among them Lapis lazuli, malachite, tourmaline, turquoise, puddingstone and amber which are all lovely bottles to collect.

The earliest examples, which were left plain to show the beauty of the material, are very hard to find. More common are bottles from the late 19th and early 20th century which were, by then, being made for the tourist market. These more fancy, carved designs are considered less attractive to collectors.

GLASS BOTTLES

Glass has been used for snuff bottles’ manufacture ever since the introduction of snuff into China. For this we only need to refer to Wang Shizhen’s 1702 quotation testifying to glass bottles in a range of dazzling colours. In fact the Chinese fascination with glass, both at court and among the populace, continued throughout the entire snuff bottle period.

Jesuit missionaries at the Qing court were vital to early glass production with the Emperor Kangxi’s

‘Collecting bottles may also inspire you to learn about their iconography and rebuses, and discover the myths and legends at the heart of Chinese culture’

glasshouse built near the Jesuits’ house. Their influence was great as they trained Chinese artisans in several glass techniques (including making aventurine glass) previously unknown to them. However it would seem that after 1760 only Chinese glassmakers remained. Although most glass bottles were blown, usually into a mould, many early designs were carved from a solid piece of glass – as they were in hardstone.

This technique was often used on glass-imitating precious stones, such as aquamarine, amethyst and beryl. After the bottle was created, either by blowing or by carving, decoration could take any of several forms including enamelling or engraving – both processes learned from the Europeans. Those made of cased or overlay glass would be carved and polished.

PORCELAIN BOTTLES

China is the birthplace of porcelain meaning ceramic arts have flourished there more vigorously than anywhere else in the world. It is therefore somewhat surprising that porcelain was not used by the court for the manufacture of snuff bottles until near the end of the 18th century. This may be because neither of the two qualities for which porcelain was valued, its translucency and its sonority, was apparent in small objects such as snuff bottles.

Porcelain is composed of two basic raw materials: kaolin (known as china clay), and petuntse, a kind of feldspar which, when fired to a temperature of more than 1,280 degrees centigrade, produce a glassy and nonporous substance.

Below left An 18th-century glass snuff bottle with a red overlay carved with a dragon

Below A porcelain, moulded snuff bottle painted with a dragon, the base with a Daoguang mark (1821-1850)





Left Three blue and white snuff bottles, 1800-1850

Below right A crystal snuff bottle, painted inside with a cat looking up at a butterfly. Painted by Ye Zhongsan in 1897

Below far right A porcelain snuff bottle, enamelled with magpies in a prunus tree, 1800-1880

Both these components were available in abundance around Jingdezhen, in Jiangxi province, and this town became the centre of porcelain production in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

BLUE AND WHITE

As the snuff-taking habit began to expand from the court and literati circles throughout society, the relative cheapness of porcelain made it a natural material for the vast numbers of snuff bottles needed for the use of the population at large. Production of porcelain types then increased enormously to meet the demand. There are a variety of techniques available: porcelain snuff bottles can be simply moulded and enamelled; moulded with relief decoration and enamelled; carved and left unglazed; covered in glaze over the biscuit or decorated in underglaze-blue, or copper-red.

Perhaps the most familiar of all Chinese porcelain is that decorated in blue and white. In the long history of world ceramics, there has been no single ware more appreciated and imitated than Chinese blue and white porcelain – it is perhaps the best-known category of all decorative arts. Enormous numbers of blue and white porcelain snuff bottles were produced in the 19th century and, although it is rare to find one with a correct reign mark, many of these bottles are delightful. The potteries at Yixing, famous for its Ming dynasty tea ware, also produced snuff bottles. The purple clay found in this area was thought to be the best for enhancing and retaining the colour, flavour and aroma of tea – and snuff.

London-based Chinese snuff bottle expert Susan Page is part of Asian Art in London 2020. She specialises in bottles from the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as inside-painted examples from the 20th century. Go to www.snuffbottlepages.com

Discover more

There are some excellent reference books on the subject including Lilla Perry's *Chinese Snuff Bottles: The Adventures and Studies of a Collector*, first printed in 1960. Other notable books include *The Collectors' Book of Snuff Bottles* by Bob C. Stevens and *Snuff Bottles of China* by Hugh M. Moss. The V&A (www.vam.ac.uk) has a great collection, as has the British Museum (www.britishmuseum.org). In Liverpool visit the Lady Lever Art Gallery (www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk), while Edinburgh's National Museum of Scotland (www.nms.ac.uk) is a great resource, as is Burghley House, in Stamford, Lincolnshire (www.burghley.co.uk). The Baltimore-based International Chinese Snuff Bottle Society (www.snuffbottlesociety.org), founded in 1969, is still going strong today.

GLASS & ENAMEL

Perhaps the rarest and most valuable glass bottles are the enamel on glass and metal versions, made within the confines of the palace workshops in Beijing. Again the Jesuit priests were a great influence as testified by Father Matteo Ripa whose 1716 diary entry read: "His majesty (Emperor Kangxi) having become fascinated by our European enamel, and by the new enamel painting, tried by every possible means to introduce the latter into his imperial workshops which he had set up for this purpose within the palace." Some of the finest examples of this group remain in the Palace Museum in Beijing and also in the National Palace Museum in Taipei.

DECIPHERING YOUR SNUFF BOTTLES

There are many rebuses associated with snuff bottles. For example, a bottle painted with magpies wishes the recipient "happiness up to your eyebrows". As the magpie is known as the bird of joy, it is especially used on pieces in association with weddings.

The word for cat (*mao*) is a homonym for the age 70, and the word for butterfly (*die*) is a homonym for 80, so a cat and butterfly together form a rebus to express the wish that the recipient will have a long life.

Similarly, basketweave snuff bottles wish the recipient many years of life and happiness, as well as many offspring, especially male.

Some snuff bottles depict myths and legends popular in Chinese culture. One version features Zhong Kui, the demon queller, who is traditionally regarded as a vanquisher of ghosts and evil beings, and reputedly able to command 80,000 demons. His image is often painted on household gates as a guardian spirit, as well as in places of business, especially where expensive goods are traded.

