

Hardstones and Organics

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Quartz is one of the most common materials used to make snuff bottles. The quartz family is a very large one, 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, carnelian, etc.

Because of the limitless range of colours to be found in the quartz family of stones, snuff bottle artisans were able to give free rein to their imaginations, often with amazing results. Maximum use was made of these distinctive markings in the stone. In many cases, this natural colouring was so striking that no further carving was required other than the actual forming of the bottle. The stone was left to speak for itself. When these bottles are beautifully made, perfect in line and form, superbly hollowed and with dynamic markings, they become exciting works of art.

Other bottles were decorated in “cameo” style: the top layer of colour was 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 lapidary in selecting a piece of stone and cutting it in such a way that any natural inclusions suggest a design. Usually, a small amount of relief carving was needed to bring the design to completion. Bottles of this type, when carved by a master craftsman, are among the most dramatic of all snuff bottles.

Many organic materials were used in the creation of snuff bottles, derived from animal and vegetable origins. Ivory was the most popular choice, carved into very intricate designs in relief. Others include amber, coral and bamboo. These snuff bottles are a reminder of the tactile nature of these objects as throughout their lifetime the oils of the hands create a glossy sheen, a process known as patination. Amber, gourd, and lacquered wood were also used.

25. Agate, honey-coloured with natural darker inclusions ingeniously fashioned and minimally carved to reveal the silhouette of a bearded bearded scholar inscribing on rockwork, his full sleeves balancing the poised brush, with an intriguing tree to his back which could almost be a giant *ruyi* fungus, the white inclusions in the agate giving the piece a really whimsical dreamlike quality.

1780-1850

Height: 5.7cm

Provenance: Robert Hall, 1987

This image of a scholar inscribing into stone is more often found on Suzhou School bottles. This example of a silhouette agate is rare.



26. Agate, light honey colour with darker inclusions carved in low relief to represent a horse tethered to a post, the well hollowed bottle resting on a protruding oval footrim.

Official School, 1760-1820

Height: 6cm

Provenance: The Coerwinkel Collection, The Netherlands

The horse tethered to the post, *Ma tao kong song* means 'The horse has arrived at the post'. Such a bottle expresses a wish for speedy success for an undiscovered talent. When the time is ripe and the opportunity presents itself, the donor is confident that the recipient of the bottle will prove his mettle.

27. Amethyst, pebble form, the material with darker purple areas and some white crystalline areas, with a natural bubble of air trapped in water in an elongated fissure. The bubble moves as the bottle is tipped. Carved using the natural flaws with Liu Hai and his three-legged toad on one side and with a man looking up at a fierce dragon on the other, and the air bubble in the water moves between the mouth of the dragon and the mouth of the three-legged toad.

1770-1860

Height: 5cm

This intriguing pebble-form bottle is from one of the groups that Bob Stevens wrote about on page 152 of *The Collector's Book of Snuff Bottles*. Stevens talks about some quartz bottles having water in cavities and how it is extremely difficult to photograph. What is amazing though is that the carver must have seen it in the stone and decided to incorporate it into the bottle.

There are two other documented examples, one in The Crane Collection, Bottle ID 509 where the air bubble moves between two *chi* dragons. The other is in Qiu Donglian, *Zhongguo gudai biyanhu mulu*, China: Nanfang chubanshe, 2002, p 169.

Zhao Zhiqian wrote the earliest complete book on snuff bottles in the 1860s and the ICSBS commissioned Professor Richard Lynn to translate it and its various commentaries ( *JICSBS*, Autumn 1991, pp. 5-26; *JICSBS*, Spring 1994, pp. 4-17, and *JICSBS*, Summer 1995, pp. 4-19). In the body of the main work is the following reference, under the heading of 'crystal' (*JICSBS*, Autumn 1991, p.18):

*There is a 'moon spirit' (yuepo) type that has beads of water trapped inside it that can move up and down.*

Here we have an unambiguous reference to precisely this sort of material. Today this bottle is of an extremely rare material, but Zhao's rather blasé passing reference suggests that perhaps he had seen more than one.

There are also a few objects other than snuff bottles with trapped bubbles of air, mostly in agate not crystal.

28. Crystal, clear, the material with a smoky hue, well carved and resting on an oval foot rim.

1780-1850

Height: 6.9cm



29. Lapis lazuli, of spade shape, incised in low relief with orchids and magnolia springing from rockwork, the reverse left plain.

1780-1850

Height: 5.9cm

Provenance: The Coerwinkel Collection, The Netherlands

Lapis lazuli has been valued since ancient times and, in its powdered form, was until the early nineteenth century the source of ultramarine (blue) for painters. Lapis during the Qing dynasty could have come from a variety of sources available to the Chinese from the South near Burma and the west in the Xinjiang region.

The orchid has been associated with the high integrity of the Gentleman since the 3-4th Century BC. The Magnolia is an emblem of purity.

30. Amber, mottled clear honey colour with ochre carved with a lady in a skiff, an attendant with a wine vessel on a table under a tree, the other side with a sage with staff and a lady at a door, the shoulders with mask-and-ring handles.

1770-1860

Height: 6.5cm

Provenance: The Coerwinkel Collection, The Netherlands

Amber is the fossilized resin of an extinct species of conifer. During the Qing dynasty it was made available to the Chinese from Burma in its traditional dark honey material and from the Baltic part of Russia in its opaque golden form. China does have some large natural deposits of amber in Fushun.

31. Seed pod, mounted with silver to form the base and mouth; the base inscribed *Yang Henlong* which is probably the name of the owner.

1780-1850

Height: 6.5cm

As snuff taking became increasingly popular, snuff bottles began to be made of more unusual materials. The seed pod could be easily dried and then metal applied to make them functional as snuff bottles. For a similar example see Bob C Stevens *'The Collectors Book of Snuff Bottles'*, no 731.





32. Gourd, grown into a three-part wooden mould, and with a raised inscription on each main side, the narrow sides with vertical ribs, the foot squared and showing the node end of the fruit, the flat mouth made with soft wood. The inscription reads:

興來得意無真草, 滿紙煙雲筆下生

And is part of a poem by Liang Wu Di (464-549) complimenting the calligraphy of Wang Xizhi and includes the words:

'His calligraphy with cursive script in it, is as beautiful as smoke and clouds on paper'.

Possibly Imperial, 1780-1850

Height: 7cm

Provenance: English Private Collection

It is interesting to see the 'bulge' where the gourd is grown into the mould used in the formal design of the bottle. For a similar example see Moss, Graham, Tsang, 'Treasury of Chinese Snuff Bottles from The Mary and George Bloch Collection', Volume 7 Part 1, 1504.





Porcelain

## Porcelain

China is the birthplace of porcelain, and the ceramic arts have flourished more vigorously there 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 is possibly because neither of the two qualities for which porcelain was valued, its translucency and its sonority, was apparent in a small object like a snuff bottle.

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. 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.

As the snuff-taking habit began to expand down the social scale from the exclusive Court and literati circles, 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, and production of porcelain bottles then increased enormously to meet the demand.

Porcelain snuff bottles can be simply moulded and enamelled, moulded with relief decoration and enamelled, carved and left unglazed or covered in glaze over the biscuit, or decorated in underglaze-blue or copper-red.

Perhaps the most familiar of all Chinese porcelain is that which is 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 since the Ming Dynasty for tea wares, 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 of snuff.

33. Porcelain, painted in *famille rose* enamels each side with a cricket, with its eyes picked out in gold, the base with an iron red Daoguang mark.

Jingdezhen Imperial Kilns, 1821-1850

Height: 6.3cm

The cricket (*xishou*) either alone or with its cage became a very popular subject on snuff bottles of all types in the 19th Century. This may be due to the interest in keeping and training crickets for sport and entertainment, a habit which started in the court at Beijing in the late 18th and early 19th Century. Another reason for the popularity of the subject is suggested by Victor Graham (see 'Chinese Snuff Bottle Lore', *Journal ICSBS* Summer 1984, pp 12-13. He suggests that crickets on either side of a bottle could conceivably suggest a pun which meaning 'be loyal to one's country' (meaning be loyal to one's Emperor). Large quantities of Imperially made porcelain bottles were used as presentations to officials around the country, and many of these have Daoguang marks.





34. Porcelain, of unusual egg shape, painted in *famille rose* enamels with butterflies in flight above colourful sprays of flowers.

Jingdezhen Kilns, 1821-1850

Height: 6.3cm

Provenance: The Fragrant Snow Collection

This is one of a rare series of egg-shaped bottles, another being illustrated in *The Nordic Butterfly Collection of Chinese Snuff Bottles*, by Robert Kleiner, Part II no 154. In China, the butterfly is an emblem of joy and a symbol of summer. It is also a sign of conjugal felicity and can be called the Chinese Cupid. The origin of this is to be found in the writings of the Taoist philosopher Zhuang Zi who, as a young student, was running after an exotic butterfly and unknowingly intruded into the private garden of a magistrate. In the garden was a beautiful young girl (daughter of the magistrate) who he became instantly besotted with. In order to capture her heart and obtain her as his wife he strove to do well in his exams, he was successful in this and rose to high rank and fame. Thus a snuff bottle bearing a butterfly motif is a perfect gift for a loved one.

35. Porcelain, iron-red with a fiery dragon against a chrysanthemum background.

1850-1880

Height: 7.3cm

The Coerwinkel Collection, The Netherlands

Iron-red enamels are thinner than others and can be used like ink to paint both broad brushstrokes and more minutely detailed pencilled lines.



甲辰  
清初寫  
於京師  
葉仲三

