

## MULL SNUFF BOXES

The practical mind of humankind is always looking for a solution to a problem. And if the problem has been solved, then someone is always looking for a way to re-solve it cheaper or better. Imagine the delight of the thrifty Scot in figuring out that the tip of a horn could be hollowed to make a suitable snuff box. Goat, rams and cattle horns were all used with a primitive stopper. Then, some artisan solved the problem of the tip wearing holes in frugal pockets by flattening the tip of the horn and curling it backward. Eventually silver mountings, hinges, cork stoppers and an extra twist to the tail were added to create the snuff mull: a practical container for snuff used primarily in Scotland.

These boxes are called mulls, likely a reference to the hand mills in which snuff was ground, but the origin of the word is unclear. There is an old tale that early Scottish, horn boxes had grinding ridges on their inner surfaces and that the carotte or twist of tobacco was turned against these ridges “milling” the snuff. The curly tip mull was preceded by the corset shaped mull which is smaller, plainer and harder to find.

The lid of most mulls sits on the top of the horn with an inner bung that fits tightly into the opening holding the lid firmly closed and keeping the snuff fresh. Normally this bung is made from cork, but leather and wood are encountered. Replacement of this closure was common to keep the mull workable and does not affect value. The value of a mull is based upon its appearance. Their horns can have attractive shapes, silver plaques, fancy hinges, and inscriptions. Many have silver tops fitted with citrines, topaz or cairngorm, a highland agate. Mulls range in sizes from tiny to large horns meant to sit on a table.



The small mull on the left is barely 1.25 inches tall and bears the date 1839 on top and with an inscription on the silver band that secure the hinge, “Willm Stephen”. This mull incorporates all the features of larger versions: curled tip, typical shape, hinged lid attached a silver band.

There is a preference to assign diminutive items to women as if small things better suit female needs and personality. In this case the inscription mostly likely denotes male ownership and William helps to strike his own small blow for snuffing rights between genders.

The larger horn is remarkable for its curled shape considering it is only 4 inches tall. The silver bands separate a series of diminishing sized oval silver plaques each with an engraved saying in a dialect that so far has defied translation. The top is all silver with a bezel mounted oval agate surrounded by repoussé flowers that is hinged to the silver band that surrounds the upper edge of the horn.

Almost all the mulls in this chapter are Scottish and date from the early to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.



The most basic mull is made from the tip of a horn with the end blunted and a cork shaped to fit the open end. The cork is friction fitted and has a leather tab wedged through the center so it may be drawn. The design is so simple and efficient that version have been used for many purposes for centuries. This example has a leather top plate secured to the cork by decorative brass studs. The hot needle decoration features birds, bushes and bugs and is not Scottish, but there is a residue of snuff inside confirming its use as a snuff box.

Following the basic mulls and preceding the scrolling curved mulls are those described as corset shaped. It is best to picture the corset on a girl of ample proportions to achieve an accurate visual impression. These mulls were usually made before 1750 and some are from the Jacobean era. It was in this period that tobacco use became popular in England despite the opposition of James I . These mulls are constructed from a variety of quality materials

including ivory, tortoise and mop often used together as alternating staves as in a barrel.

Note in the illustrations below, both mulls have the early butterfly hinge with a large offset knuckle hinge. Less obvious but still visible in the profile images is the typical raised ridge that encircles the mulls at the narrowest point, above the base by about a quarter of the total height.



This ivory mull is less than 2 inches tall. Although much smaller than most mulls which average about 3 inches, it is elegant with a mellow ivory color and has all the features of bigger corset mulls. However the size has allowed the maker to use the cross section as the bottom of the mull rather than fitting in a separate piece



The horn mull above is less diminutive and judged to be later because of the simpler hinge. The shape is the same including the raised ridge near the bottom. The escutcheon is monogrammed: CJJ, and the silver plate which frames the lid opening is quite substantial extending over the tip and

underneath to the leather covered cork stopper.



The corset mull above has alternating staves of walnut and ivory bounded by end bands of ivory secured by silver pins. The lid has an inlaid ivory eight pointed star surmounted by a silver plaque engraved with a thistle and the initials: W S . These two material mulls are quite attractive with quality workmanship and bring a premium. The silver butterfly hinge is amazingly complex in shape. The silver rectangle on front is a repair that is contemporary with the use of the object. Most likely late 17<sup>th</sup> century.



The mull on the left is from the American Tobacco Museum collection is unusual in that its shape deviates from the corset mulls above. But it has all the other construction characteristics. Even more unusual is the incised decoration of circles and semi-circles. The lid is attached by a 5 knuckle copper hinge attached by copper nails. There is a decorative self escutcheon formed by incised lines and carved with the initials: JL. The tapered barrel shape fits well in the hand. 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Although it appears to be ivory it is a fine quality piece of bone. Bone can be distinguished from ivory by the small colored dashes referred to as rabbit furring. Ivory can be confirmed by the swirling moiré patterns that often can be seen.



The mull on the right is less frequently encountered, It is too accomplished to be considered a basic mull with a crude plug top. Similar in shape but it has a hinged top with an impressive silver, fully engraved leaf and thistle design. The advantage it has over its curly end cousins is how well it fits in the hand. Just the right size and curve for easy snuffing.



Rarer still is the large cat's paw mull. The end has been shaped to indicate the toes of a feline including small curious claws. The exquisite 5 lug hinge is nearly 2 inches across and beautifully scrolled. The top has been stressed

to create 7 parallel stripes within the horn as decoration. Over 4 inches long and 3 inches wide, the mull is a handful but an easy one with the little finger of the hand easily curling around the toes.



The typical mull is distinguished by being made of horn, having a hinged top with a silver hinge, band mountings and a spiral tip. The lids of the three mulls above are made of horn and illustrate the variety of decoration found.

The mull on the left has a simple round plate for the owners initials mounted on a nicely grained piece of horn. The lid is framed in a pretty scalloped rim. The hinge is three simple knuckles and attached to the band. The quality of the silver appears lower grade and is unmarked as is the case in most silver mounted snuff boxes. The plug or bung is cork covered with

soft leather for a secure fit.



The mull in the center has a detailed cut silver thistle and leaves surmounted by a fan shaped escutcheon for the owners monogram. The plant is fully engraved with cross hatching on the flower and veins on the leaves. It has a finely made five knuckle decorative hinge attached to the silver rim and the lid. It is monogrammed EMJ on both the escutcheon and the band. The plug shows remnants of the lead, which was thought to keep the snuff fresh, over the cork. The quality of the horn, the tight spiral of the tip, and the overall silver smithing typify a superior mull. However, the value will still be less than most mulls with stone lids

The mull on the right has a silver initialed thumb piece that protects the edge of the lid and a hand cut silver thistle with leaves that has been fully engraved. The five knuckle hinge is mounted to a rim that has been silver plated. This is often done for strength rather than cost. The rim is dated "Dec.25/81". This is most likely 1881 rather than 1781 based upon the overall quality. It does demonstrate that mulls were popular gift throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The plug is cork.



These three mulls are all mounted with semi-precious stones on silver lids. The silver rim bands are fancier with turnings, ridges, and scalloping. Two of the lids are domed. The horns themselves have more interesting natural markings. The overall quality is a step above the mulls shown in the earlier group.

The mull on the left has an orange agate cabochon mounted in the top of a silver dome shaped lid fitted with a scalloped thumb piece at the front. There is a five knuckle hinge at the rear that echoes the placement of the thumb piece between the ridges to give the mull a nice visual balance. There

is no plug because the top fits tightly onto the lower rim. The cover is engraved to signify a gift: "W.R. to G.L.B"

The center mull has a lavender gray variegated stone mounted in a scalloped bezel surrounded by a simple vine style engraving. There is a five knuckle hinge and a small swell at the front of the rim as a thumb piece. The inside of the top has been gold gilded to help prevent corrosion. The top fits tightly with out any plug onto the silver rim which has been embellished with a wavy bottom edge.

The mull on the right has a faceted grey smoky clear stone mounted into a silver dome lid. The lid has been constructed so that the bottom of the stone is enclosed by a gilded hemisphere that projects downward from the inside of the lid. The purpose of the dome is to provide a shiny surface beneath the stone to reflect the light back up through the clear stone giving it more brilliance and color as well as keep the snuff from dirtying the stone. The shape of the hemisphere helps to gather the light and focus it back up into the stone. The improvement of clear stones by "foiling" the back is an ancient trick in which a very thin, shiny, colored, metal leaf is placed between the stone and the setting. This mull has a lid that snugly fits over the rim to keep the snuff safely within and the air from ruining the snuff. It has a one inch plaque on the front with a 12 word friendship sentiment and is dated 1832.

These clear crystals are called cairngorms after the quartz that is found in the Cairngorm mountain region of northern Scotland. The quartz is colored various shades by the iron in the rock surrounding it ranging from smoky to yellow to dark brown. It is prized by Scottish artisans for brooches, pins, and the pommels of the Skean dubh, a knife worn with the kilt. Pipers wear this knife tucked into the hose top of their right leg.

There is an old story of a widow who dreamed that she would find a valuable stone in the Cairngorm Mountains and journeyed there. She did find a valuable crystal which the parish minister sold for her but the search for treasure infected her mind and she continue to scour the mountains seeking another stone for many summers until she disappeared. Like the old woman, most of the good cairngorms have disappeared and synthetics, topaz or amethyst are used for recently made Scottish items. Mulls may be the only place to see a genuine cairngorm.



Snuff appeals to the sense of smell and taste and a good snuff box appeals to the other senses. Mulls are a tactilely sensuous form. Their curved fullness twists into a spiral end that is delightful to the eye and pleasurable to the touch. The lids often snap shut in a satisfying manner.

Most unusually tactile is the superior mull above whose horn has been hand carved to imitate the ridges of some exotic animal. The tall lid is a masterpiece of silver repousse work in which the silver is pushed out from the inside to create a raised pattern of thistle plants. The background has been stippled to provide a contrast for the engraved leaves and flowers. The cairngorm is set into the enclosed back which helps to reveal the pale yellow color tinged with pink.



Another category of mulls are those with an animal end. There seems no end to the inventiveness of the mull maker. It is easy, if not accurate, to picture a stone hut on the lonely moor with the wind howling outside. Next to the fire a Scot is hunched over his work table looking at the end tip of a horn and seeing, with the tricks of the firelight, the face of an animal looking back.

In the case above, the face is a dog that seems inspired by a light spot in the horn that works perfectly as a nose. The eyes are circular bone inlays shaped like washers with their centers hollowed out to leave space for the pupils which are from the horn itself. Carved ears and a muzzle complete the head. The face has that curious/baffled look that only dogs can best express. This example appears to be cut down and a newer lid remounted by an owner whose fondness for the mull extended its useful life. There are examples of mulls with seals, horses, elephants, wolves and even a dragon. These mulls are priced primarily by appeal just like puppies at the pet shop.



This unusual mull has silver rim that is soldered to the neck band of the animal holding them permanently together. The lid is tortoise with a silver escutcheon. The serpentine neck provides an easy hole for the thumb when holding the box. The animal may be the loch ness monster counting for the odd ear and the red eyes.



There is the author's organization problem of where to put snuff boxes made from hooves. This deer's foot snuff mull is too good a segue to be resisted. The hoof retains a portion of the leg above complete with fur and dew claws. The bone has been hollowed out to make room for a metal cone that descends down from the rim into the leg. The snuff is maintained in this cone which like the entire interior has been gold gilded. There is a repousse silver lid with thistle plants and faceted quartz which is a pale rose color. The lid is attached to a hollow ball that rotates in a yoke to work as a hinge. Ball hinges are very desirable and appear on only high quality mulls. A silver shoe has been attached in the same manner as a farrier would shoe a horse.

There are substantially fewer hooves used for snuff boxes than horns. Horns are a symbol of masculinity, vigor and virility while hooves are just hard feet. Horn grips have been long associated with weapons handles. Antique bowie knives are found with stag horn grips. The grip of the jambiya, a curved weapon still worn by Arabs is traditionally made from the horn of the Black Rhino and demand by oil rich middle easterners helps keep the protected rhino population on the brink by encouraging poaching. Large racks of horns are hung over the fireplaces and door of both hunting cabins and sportsmen's lodges. Horns are used as signals in battle and to welcome the Jewish New Year. Hooves are used to make Jell-O.



The most common hoof snuff box is actually made from the dew claw. Fitted with a hinged top, the natural triangular shape makes a convenient if small snuff container. The value of these boxes is reduced by the low demand. This example could be 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not common but not desirable.



The box above is a hoof of another hue. Large and beautifully made the tip of the lid is sheathed in silver. There is a cast silver thistle and two plaques. The upper is engraved: "C Cunningham, New York" and the lower: "to D Fisher." The manner of making this snuff is not quite as accomplished as a Scottish horner and combined with the engraved dedication, it seems safe to assign this an American origin. American snuff are both desirable and rare.



In the Victorian period, the emphasis on romance and sentiment led to many decorative monstrosities. The hooves of pet ponies and prized livestock were turned into snuff boxes and inkwells. Most charming of this offsetting lot are the pony hooves that have applied decorative horseshoes. The shoes are nailed into the hoof just as the farrier would shoe a horse with the nails driven through the side of the hoof and twisted off. The box illustrated has a charming early engraving of a fox hunt.

The final hoof box makes the point that no matter how any category may be diminished by endless ordinary examples, it can be redeemed occasionally by an example that is extraordinary.



The large splendid moose on the lid of this box makes it likely that the hoof is from the same animal. Google research reveals images of large hoofs that appear to be the same making a dead moose a serious attribution but not a foolproof one. The lid is attached by a large, silver mount with a skillfully hidden hinge that holds the lid firmly and closes tightly. The hallmarks indicate scandinavia manufacture.



The outside surface is carved in relief with 4 figures wearing feathered headdresses and skirts made of leaves. They resemble some of the early trade figures used by tobacco shops, Three are processing the tobacco and the fourth is enjoying a smoke with a pipe nearly as long as his arm.



The bottom shows a nude maiden lying under a tree that a bearded man is reclining against. There is a goat resting in the background and a Pan like figure playing a long horn. Everyone is languidly lying about in a most contented afternoon of a faun manner.



The inside front panel shows two men involved in trading the tobacco. The figure on the right appears to be wearing pants and carries a large staff or pike indicating that he may be European.

The shape of the box is wonderful to hold with the “toe” of the hoof fitting into the palm of the hand while the forefinger and thumb encircle the rim. The tactile quality of the raised carvings enhance the pleasure.



The mull above is probably Scottish made but owned by an colonial American who lived in old New York. The band is engraved:” John Young,

Saddler, New-York 1770.” The top of the hinge is engraved” Virtue to the End” with a standing lion holding a sword upward. John Young was a man who made saddles and sold other leather goods. He is listed on some early legal documents that confirm his profession and residency in New York during the period. Ex Guthman collection.



Some mulls are too big for personal use and were placed on a table for use. A gentleman might keep one on his desk, or on the sideboard for use by the family. Larger examples were used for group meetings and in military messes where examples of a full rams head with twin horns and a snuff box fitted in the skull are still being used by the Queen’s Scottish regiments. It

takes a devoted collector and a tolerant wife to keep one of these monstrosities.

The table mull above has two silver tools attached by a chain to the body. There can be as many as five tools: a spoon to bring the powder to the nose for snuffing, a brush or rabbits foot with the hair still attached for brushing the stray powder out of the moustache, a hammer, usually wood or ivory, to break up the surface of the snuff and a pick and a rake to reduce the clumps and smooth the surface.

Many table mulls are found with less tools and because of the chain it is difficult to tell if anything is missing. Considering the quality of these tools, it is likely there were more. The collector should be content with the implements attached because it is unlikely to find stray additions or that they will match. Beware of ubiquitous salt spoons passed off as snuff spoons.

The end of this horn is fascinatingly grotesque. The lid has a very large thistle with leaves surmounted by oval escutcheon with a difficult monogram mounted in a nicely scalloped rim that resembles drapery and tassels. A brush replaces the hare's foot and the spoon is hallmarked indicating two mid 18<sup>th</sup> century silversmiths.

Hallmarks are not common on mulls. They can be helpful to date the snuff but not the maker. The collector should remember that it took the services of many trades to make any object. A mull could pass through the hands of a stone setter, silversmith, engraver, horner and retailer before reaching the owner.



The final mull is a table version of only 11 inches. The textured ram's horn is quite attractive with its ridged surface. Small pegs have been set into the bottom to make the horn sit up properly. The base has been branded : RN most likely for Royal Navy. The tip has a remarkable silver thistle flower with an orange garnet stone held in a tripod of thistle leaves. The lid is roughly triangular with a raised all over foliate design and a large clear stone mounted in the top. The inside is hallmarked indicating it was made in Birmingham in 1847. The chains are attached to the horn by a four leaf clover device from which the tools hang. Great care was given by the maker to refine what is basically a big horn into something quite elegant, but still practical and masculine.

### *REPAIRS*

*Repairs are a part of collecting old objects. Different categories of antiques regard repairs in different ways. Everyone wants their antiques in pristine and mint condition, but this is unlikely unless you are both patient and rich. Glass and china objects with chips easily loose half or more of their value. This flawless state is more easily achieved by decorative items that sat on shelves inside vitrines. Objects whose nature suggests hard use are rarely found in mint condition. Occasionally an original packing crate is found with its contents intact yielding a trove of mint and unused objects.*

*But the signs of use on an antique helps to bring the romance of its history to the current owner. Wear helps to confer authenticity to an object. That's why fakers artificially age their creations to acquire the abuses that time and usage make. Fakes are buried, dunked in tea and manure solutions, and in the case of a famous Plymouth chair given ride in the surf.*

*With exception of wooden shoe snuff boxes, some Welch miners boxes, Dutch brass tobacco boxes and combination lock boxes there is little creating of new snuff boxes to pass for old. There are lots of new boxes made of silver, black horn, sea shells and have the Asian touch that are described as snuffs but that is more of a hopeful attempt to reclassify rather than to deceive.*

*But repairs are more common. The majority of snuff boxes spent most of their life in a pocket, probably jostled by keys, coins and more. Repairs made during the period of use to prolong the life of the box seem more reasonable the rarer the snuff box. So a common box that is damaged or repaired is a pass. But a snuff with President John Adams on the cover generates substantial tolerance for wear and scruffy appearance.*

### **The Ladder of Condition**

#### **Perfect, Mint, New--10**

#### **Very Good --8 to 9**

(Nearly new but with some wear or repair that is not noticeable)

#### **Good—5, 6, 7**

(Very good but with some contemporary repair. Particularly satisfactory if made to allow the box to continue to be used)

#### **Acceptable—3, 4**

(Good but with noticeable repair to the less important parts of the box, e.g., inner rims, hinges corners, chips, and beading. Box would not be purchasable if repairs were not made.)

#### **Poor—1, 2**

(Unsalable state without repairs. Major damage to the main features of the box. Missing parts. Defaced decoration. Lid not attached)