

SHOE SNUFF BOXES

The most common shapes for snuff boxes are the geometrics: round, rectangle, or oval. But after these regular shapes, the next most popular is the irregular shoe shape. For the reasons that so many shoes were made and that their appeal continues today, they deserve their own chapter encompassing all the materials from which they were manufactured.

The collector will quickly observe that many shoe shapes have striking surfaces meant for matches. Paper mache boxes will often have sand glued to their soles. Metal boxes have corrugated areas. The snuffer has no use for this feature and these boxes are better considered as match safes or vesta cases. Many collectors add these match boxes to their snuff box collections based upon their appeal as an instructive example rather than totally eschewing them based upon their intended purpose. There are some boxes that combine both snuff and match use, but they are rare.

Shoes are more than just footwear. The shoe is a romantic symbol that has been with us a long time. In the middle ages, a father would hand the bridegroom a shoes to transfer the authority he had over his daughter to her husband. Today, we tie shoes to the bumper of the honeymoon car. Stripper will remove all their clothing, but retain their high heeled shoes. Fetishists adore shoes as symbols of the female sex. In the Victorian age, the peek of a shoe from under the all encompassing, many layered skirts could arouse a passionate interest. Shoes and Eros are soul mates: Cinderella loses her shoe, the 12 Princesses dance holes in their shoes and finally, there's Puss in Boots!

With all snuff boxes there is a lot of choice and collectors need to choose carefully. There are not a lot of reproductions of snuff boxes. Most snuffs are old. But there are many newer boxes made for pills, pins and sundries that are made in the old style. There are an endless number of metal boxes made first in Italy and now in China that have been inspired by snuff boxes or match safes. Usually, they are easy to distinguish from old boxes. They are not as well made, have little or no wear, and use old motifs in a modern way. Many are silver or plate and have repousse, enamel, or glass stones. Some have a tribal or middle eastern look. Some are just crude. They are not the concern here.

However, wooden shoe shaped boxes are being made today that look old. The construction is right, they have brass pin inlay, the carved lines for sole and toe are convincing, and the finishes seem authentic. This seems to be an offshoot of the British industry that has been re-making new furniture from old. These shoe snuff fakers have the quality of workmanship and the understanding of how the old wooden shoe snuffs look. Personally, I regard all wooden shoe snuff box as new until proven innocent. Caveat emptor!

The first two shoes shown were collected before similar reproductions started. The first has the elegance of shape of a true artisan's hand. There are subtleties of design that probably delighted the maker more than the user. The duckbill shape of the toe is defined and then enhanced by a slight indentation in the wood above. The same occurs at the instep and where the heel meets the sole. This workmanship is most easily discerned

by touch. The knowing eye is often led by the inquiring fingers.



The sole of this large shoe is capped by a tin plate at the toe. The heel is surrounded by another tin plate. The sole is picked out with brass nails or pins along the edges with a few added for decoration within this border. Large and small nails represent the eyelets for laces and the toe has a decorative pattern made up of both. The top of the shoe has a sliding beveled lid that opens back to front with a pewter plate inlaid. The lid has an iron nail that passes through to prevent the lid from sliding off. The top of this nail was probably covered by a wooden cap. There are decorative nails on the top and the lid.



The second large shoe is equally well made with decoration using three sizes of brass nails on the sole and the upper. The pattern on the toe is reminiscent of the triple feathers of the Prince of Wales. It is longer and more slender than the first example. Both these shoes seem large for the pocket even though 19th century pockets were in the coat and quite large. These shoe boxes sit nicely on a table and probably were used that way.

Both these styles are commonly reproduced with varying levels of accomplishment.



The shoe snuff box above is particularly attractive. It combines copper nails which pick out the areas of stitching with braided brass roping which outline the intersection of the

sole and upper. The toe and the sides of the shoe have been darkened black and contrast nicely with the warm red mahogany. The decoration is enhanced by three wooden buttons nestled in grooves to resemble buttonholes on the side of the shoe. The lid has decorative nailing and a brass hinge.

Note that the heel has only one half of its double row of nails. Since the shoe is definitely for the right foot, it is possible that shoemakers of the time only put traction nails on the outside of the heel. Or this could be another case of small shops and cottage industries producing wonderful items with puzzling omissions. The connoisseur of antiques will often study an object muttering over an area that is undecorated, unfinished, or just underachieved. Perhaps in an age where the spelling of your name could vary wildly, or many makers marking some pieces and not others, the concept of uniformity was more of a goal than an end. Today, with mass production, quality control maintains uniformity without any regard for individuality or achievement.



This old fashion, 18th century shoe is recognizable by its shape: the heel is moved forward towards the toe. There are profuse inlays of metal on the lid and the sides. These inlays appear to be pewter which in modern formulas does not corrode. But old pewter usually contains lead which does deteriorate. There is incised detail made by scratching on these inlays which has been partly obscured by the corrosion. The lid has two women toasting with a pedestal table between them. Most of these shoes have a “fall off” lid indicating that they are intended for table use rather than the pocket. The literature assigns these shoe the Netherlands with a date circa 1750.

TALES OF THE TRADE

There is another kind of touch besides that of the fingers' sensual appreciation of swelling and indentation, curving and carving, detail and decoration. How does the item feel “in hand”? This is a measurement of aptness and appropriateness. Hold the item in your hand. Heft it for weight, finger it for size, judge it for fit and comfort.

Picture yourself in an 18th century coffeehouse. You're dressed as a gentleman and as you discuss the matters of the day with friends, you turn your snuff box aimlessly in your hand. You feel relaxed and your snuff box feels comfortable.

If this “in hand” judgment seems overly sophisticated to you, find a dealer of Japanese netsukes and ask him to show you the difference between a good and a great example.

One of the hardest things about buying on eBay, is that you don't get to hold the item. A

few seconds in the hand is worth minutes of studying pictures.



This painted shoe is about as small as shoe snuff boxes get. The entire surface is black with red used as a contrasting color for effect. Again the silhouette is unusual and the shoe has been carved into a sensuous shape with many curves and hollows. The outer sole pivots allowing the heel and inner sole to slide forward like a sailor's puzzle. The tiny keystone is at the back of the heel. The high ankle provides enough cavity to hold a reasonable amount of snuff.



The Persian slipper shape on the left is probably not a Persian slipper. But, the connection to the famous slipper in which Sherlock Holmes kept his tobacco is too delicious to abandon. However, the many examples of this style shoe snuff may also be fiction. They are still made for sale in today's bazaars. The upper surfaces are usually totally carved with tiny geometric, decorative detail. This style of hinge which is made from coiled brass wire with the ends poked through the wood is actually a quite old method, dating from the 16th century, but still used today.

As shown on the left, wooden shoes with metal tops are infrequently encountered. Perhaps, the woodworkers were reluctant to add the additional cost of a smith's work when they could fit their own wooden cover. The shape is elongated for effect and the use of brass nails restrained: eight for eyelets and one in the heel.



The carved shoe above has a silver buckle on which is engraved JEAN LEDEVIN which is both a surname and the name of a Rousseau opera which is translated as the “wise or cunning man.” Regardless, the box is French with a large *fleur-de-lis* on the toe. On either side of the heel there is a bird with a silver eye eating the grapes off a vine. Perhaps a commentary on Aesop. The cover has what appears to be stylized, crossed quill pens with a shield in the center surmounted by a crown. There is a wire hinge made of silver. The warm patina, workmanship and the box’s design indicate a mid 18th century date.



The snuff above is clearly a shoe for the right foot. The histories tell us that most shoes were made undifferentiated from approximately 1600 to 1800. But the heeled shoes favored by the wealthy were usually made for a specific foot because the heel required a supporting instep and upper. Quality snuff boxes also were made for people of quality who could afford them. Of all the shoe snuff boxes in this survey only a few are shaped for the left or right foot. Pairs of identical snuff shoes are known, perhaps as gifts for snuffing sweethearts, but they are rare. Pairs shoes are usually joined into one box for a romantic gift.

This shoe snuff box is large, very well made, and afflicted by haphazard diamond shaped inlays. Most of the inlays are blackened horn but some are mahogany. It is as if a youth learned to inlay diamond shapes and practiced on Dad’s snuff box. There is no discernible pattern except on the toe. The side not shown has no inlays while the other side and the lid are crowded with inlays. The sole is has the pattern for three sizes of the six petal flower we learned to make in a circle with our compasses at school, but only one

has been inlaid. The box has that folky quality that is so appealing.



The next shoe is not for the storage of snuff but to rasp a dried twist of tobacco into powder. It is well designed and fits rasp side up into the hand with the thumb around the high heel and the fingers wrapped around the tongue and lace area. A long thin tunnel runs from beneath the rasp to the cover. The snuff would have to be transferred to a box immediately as there is no practical way to keep the snuff within the rasp, even though the shoe rasp will balance upside down on it's toe and tongue. Probably, the snuff was freshly ground, poured into a snuff box and the thin, cigar shaped carrote stored in the tunnel.





One of the biggest and most charming snuff shoe ever made is this wooden snuff. Over 6 inches long and over 3 inches tall, the vamp of the shoe has been carved into a face with glass eyes and ivory teeth. The heel has a copper horse shoe used as a plate and the sole has a monogram of decorative brass nails. The toe is enhanced inlaid brass roping and nails. The lid is a hat with a missing element at the front, perhaps a tassel, and lifts off to access the box. The rough stippling on the top of the hat is repeated on the instep of the sole.

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London has a similar box in their collection. It was owned by the artist Talbot Hughes who had a collection of historical dress and accessories. They date their box 1850-60 and probably English made. The author votes French.

Paper mache, or papier mache with a carrot and a graf, a spelling which will only be used once in this book as a gesture of accommodation to the printer, is a likely material to use for shoe shaped snuff boxes. While the shape remains the same, the construction is quite different.

The wet paper mache strips are layered over a shoe shaped mold, cut in half vertically, removed off the mold, and each half glued back together. Then, the entire box is built up by overlaying more strips paper and glue which cover the seam and gives the required thickness. Inlays were likely added while the material is moist. Once it has dried, the shoe can be further shaped and detailed with cutting tools, sanded, painted, lacquered and

buffed to a high polish.

The description of a manufacturing process for paper mache is a combination of book research, folklore and speculation. It is like asking a group of Grandmothers how they make an apple pie. Some use lard, vegetable shortening, butter or combinations for the crust. Some use cinnamon, nutmeg or lemon in their fillings. The end results look pretty much the same, but everyone has their own recipe.

The same is true of paper mache. It literally means chewed paper. The Chinese invented it after inventing paper. A practical civilization, the Chinese needed a use for waste paper. European manufacturers may have used different papers, the French supposedly used old street posters, and “chewed” it into strips, shreds, confetti or granules. The binders added to water could be flour, glue, honey or spit. It was pulped, boiled and mostly molded over or into metal or wood forms and dried in low heat ovens. Since the items made of paper mache ranged from small snuffs to furniture, manufacturing techniques varied with the item. The end result was hard, strong, durable and did not shrink with age. It could be carved or turned. Hinges could be glue in or screwed through. It was better than wood and cheaper too.

But what made a paper mache snuff box a carrier for the poor man and an accoutrement for the rich man was lacquer and decoration. But this discussion is better placed in a later chapter.



Collectors will see lots of paper mache snuff shoes. The ones with sand on their soles are mostly match safes. If too good to pass, a few examples are always instructive. Interestingly, they sell at the same price whether for snuff or matches.

These boxes come in different sizes. The large one illustrated above right is 5 inches long and its little brother not quite 2.5 inches long. The comparison is greater than the numbers indicate because all dimensions of the larger shoe grow. Collectors need all 3 dimensions when describing snuff boxes. A 4 inch diameter round box is huge when compared to a 2 inch round box. The most common size is a shoe slightly over 3 inches.



The three styles above show the most commonly encountered paper mache shoe snuffs. Left to right: the slipper, the blunt square toe and tapered square toe. The latter seems the most common, probably because it is the most visually appealing. All have lids with side hinges and a rim underneath that runs along the opposite edge to create a secure closing. There is an inlay of zig-zag wire along the vamp and often small metal dots to simulate shoe buttons. All are of equal value as the collector is most interested in the types he does not have.



The snuffs above illustrate the variety of decoration on lids. The plain oval is the most common followed by some wire or metal inlay, and finally the mother of pearl inlay is the least common.

The crimp in the wire at two o'clock on the lid of the lowest box gives support to the

theory that the inlay was pressed into the unfinished paper mache rather than fitted into an incised line. Also, note the rare thin shoelace bow on the middle box.

Shoe snuff boxes with significant missing inlays are less than half the value of ones with all their inlays. Small losses that can only be discerned after careful scrutiny should be pointed out to the dealer for a discount if the box is desirable. Some restorers have had success refilling these inlays by adding a compound with a dull silver coloring . The shoe with the gleaming black surface and all its parts will always outshine the bargain box.



Snuff shoes with stenciled saying are not common, but those with paintings and painted transfers are even rarer. Unfortunately, the four shown above are all match safes. Since shoes with illustrations are likely to be match safes, the snuff box collector may want to include them for their colorful appearance.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

An empty box with no visual trace of snuff may still be a snuff box, Run a finger around the inside to feel for a fine powder. If there is any, it will adhere to your finger and you may be able to see the fine brown powder or smell the tobacco. If not, rub your finger and thumb together lightly to feel the powder. If you find a residue of snuff powder, the box will have been used for snuff even if that was not the purpose for which it was made. If there is no residue, it may have been cleaned. This is likely with silver snuffs. And then you are stuck with your knowledge, experience and intuition for a decision.



Finally , as in the category of RBWC (rare but who cares) there are the shoes of a different color. One with black stencils, the other with gold, these orange colored rarities are seldom encountered.

Most paper mache shoe snuffs were made in the middle third of the 19th century. This was the same period that tobacco use shifted from snuffing to smoking. The shoe snuff evolved into a match carrier as demand moved to the smoker. Eventually metal cases replaced them.



The most commonly found metal snuff is the pewter shoe. These are often believed to be for dual use, snuff or matches, because of the cross hatch pattern found on the soles. But the depth of the casting seems inadequate for match striking particularly before the 20th century match that country boys could light by a quick swipe on the back of their denim

jeans. There is some belief that some pewter shoe shaped snuffs were made in the U.S. but there are no hallmarks to support the theory.

The boot in center is iron and seems like a match safe from the tall shape, but it has a residue of snuff inside. The other metal shoe box is lead or spelter and has little artistic merit but it does have the word "SNUFF" cast in relief on the cover. It was patented by F.C. Heiser in 1868.



The last of the shoes illustrated are made from leather. The larger shoe has a lift off cover and is made like a shoe with pieces of leather to build up the heel and square nails in the sole. There is a thin fine leather inner sole to cover the nails. The front of the cover is worn where a finger would have lifted the lid.

The smaller shoe has a self hinge cover attached to the leather body of the shoe. The upper of the shoe is tooled with floral and dot punches and sole is attached with brass nails and has tooling along the edge. While the large shoe is bulky and clumsy, this one is elegant in shape and pleasant in the hand.



The silver shoe above has hallmarks that indicate that it is continental. It is profusely engraved with engine turned panels in between the hand engraving. The flat sole has engine turning but for visual texture as there is not enough roughness to strike a match. The lid is engraved to the edge on the rounded ends and fits so tightly that it disappears into the top. The interior is gold washed. The indentations on the sides are more to please the fingers than the eyes.

TALES OF THE TRADE

When evaluating the background of an antique, one should always consider the profit motive. Objects could be made by an artist, an artisan, a mechanic or by the user. All are influenced by cost of labor, materials and time. In Europe, the guild system was long established and many products are the assembly of many trades into one item by the final manufacturer or even the retailer. It was a mutual back scratching agreement that kept all employed as long as they did not poach in each others' fields.

The system changed in early America as apprentices left their masters to set up their own shops on the expanding frontier. With no guilds to enforce the rules, every man became his own man. No longer an employee for wages or piece work, the craftsman became the business owner seeking profit by following opportunity. By the 19th century Americans were inventing and reinventing everything without the restraint of controlling political or social authority. Tight money limiting expansion kept most in their own fields and they quickly developed chains of supply often welded by marriages. Barter kept the chains strong with the need to trade preferable to the use of scarce cash.

Often antiques are made in a certain way because it was more economical or there were limitations that forced the method. The aesthetics of an object can be even more significant when combined with commercial considerations. shaped, are of little value as an indication of age.