

HORN SNUFF BOXES

Animal horns are made up of layers of keratin surrounding a core of bone that attaches to the skull. It is a protein molecule used by Nature to build fibrous structures. Keratin not only appears in animal horns, claws, and hooves, but also in human hair, finger and toe nails. The horn used for snuff boxes comes mostly from cows, oxen or other cattle with an occasional piece made from deer antler or the horn of a small antelope.

Everything you need to know about keratin, you can learn from your own finger nails. It is strong, light, softens and becomes pliable with heat (why your manicurist soaks your fingers in hot water) but can become brittle with cold.

However, it is the plasticity of horn that makes it valuable for shaping small items. Removed from the core and heated, the horn can be split and flattened, scraped to the desired thickness and pressed between metal plates to yield a strong, thin, leaves of translucent material. However, heating horn makes a stench. The City of London decreed that “horners” should be located outside the city limits. Snuff box makers probably bought these leaves limiting the smell of heating to small pieces rather than working with raw horns.

The box maker heated the horn to form shapes, pressed it with metal dies for images and subjected it to chemicals and more heat to give it color. In fact, the word greenhorn, meaning inexperienced, is derived from the resulting color new apprentices got when over-heating the horn.

Although there are some boxes from the 17th century, usually with horn bottoms and cedar wood tops inlaid with kidney shaped ivories, the early 18th century features oval boxes made of horn with horn covers that fit loosely like shoe box tops. These covers are primarily impressed with magnificent, intricate designs of biblical and classical scenes or the busts of monarchs. The premier maker of these English horn boxes was a French Huguenot, John Obrisset. Although not all of his boxes were marked with his “OB” hallmark, his fame gives him credit for most of the quality horn boxes made from 1700-1730. Similar boxes were made by Lamberlet and John Osborn. These early boxes were used for both tobacco and snuff.



The most famous of the Obrisset boxes is that which bears the name and arms of Sir Frances Drake. This box is often sold as Drake's own box or as an object contemporary with his life, but a quick review of the dates causes reality to intervene. Drake circumnavigated the globe returning to England in 1580. Queen Elizabeth was impressed with his 3 year feat of seamanship, but perhaps more grateful for the treasure of Spanish gold and spices of which she had a royal 50% share. She knighted him aboard his ship, the Golden Hind. Obrisset made the boxes circa 1712 and often marked them with the date.

The next legend begins when the third Baronet, a direct descendant of the famous Drake, stands for Parliamentary election from Tavistock. According to Lady Elliot-Drake, the boxes were given as a campaign token. P.A.S. Phillips who wrote the ultimate book on Obrisset suggests that the boxes were given for the coming of age of the fourth Baronet, Sir Francis Henry Drake. (They all appear to be named Francis!) To make matters more confusing, there are 4 versions of the Drake box differing only in the small details of the design. All versions are of the same value except for type A which is the most common (see left, center and below) and can be recognized by the name of the maker on the base: JOHN. OBRISSET. FECIT. 1712. This type is more desirable because it is the only version that bears both the name and the date. Of course, if a collector has this version, he is likely to pay more to get a rarer version.



Obrisset, perhaps prescient of the confusion to come, added his own joke: a small swan near the lower left corner of the coat of arms shield and just above the dot before "SIC". The male swan is called a drake.



The raised designs pressed into horn lids can be very detailed and reminiscent of the medals from which many of the profiles are copied. The box on the left show Charles I in plain armor and is copied from a medal struck c. 1670. The box on the right depicts the monarch in decorated armor and has a legend around the image. The condition of this box crisp and superbly detailed. Round horn boxes from this period are rarer than the oval shape.



Unfortunately, many of the images encountered are severely worn reducing the figures to rough silhouettes. Condition of the image is most important in determining value. The box on the left illustrates the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus taken from the pediment of St. Paul's Cathedral by Christopher Wren and was likely made in 1710 when the church opened. The box on the right is quite rare but less appealing in subject. It is thought to be the last style made by Obrisset and dates to 1728.

Obrisset made a number of boxes that are nearly identical except for small details. For example, the central monarch's images appear identical. The variations are limited to the edges of the boxes: wording and word spacing, a small flower, lettering

style and, of course, the OB maker's mark. These variations imply a new die being made for each change. This seems unlikely to the modern mind. Die sinking was a time consuming, precise and expensive business.

Horn boiled in water is quite pliable and easy to mold. Obrisset may have used a separate ring die for the lettering and small dies for his hallmark. Also, there is the possibility that Obrisset touched up, chased, and embellished the design while the horn was still hot. The edges of the extra dies should have left a mark, but he may have worked these out by hand. This theory does not work well for the Drake box variations and the large number of Queen Anne boxes that are the same at first glance, but differ in small detail. But, these were very popular boxes and may have justified the sinking of new metal dies. Another possibility was that he cut dies for other shops to use. Perhaps cutting dies was what the master did on a daily basis. It was his skill and he enjoyed practicing it.



Like a magic trick, all this puzzling of how it was done, can destroy the effect of the illusion. Raising the worn lid of a horn box to let the light stream through the back reveals a small world caught in warm amber shades. The detail and composition stand out against the background. The molding of the figures changes from flat to round. Features that seemed worn are revealed in substance and shadow. This box is rectangular and continental based upon the legend: "The Judgment of Solomon" in French



The box above depicts and highly detailed forest bacchanal, including nymphs, satyrs, and baby bar tenders. Everybody loves a party! The sculpting of the figures, trees and landscape are superb. Obrisset has left an open spot for his OB mark. However, other examples have no hallmark.

There is no price advantage to most of these these variations. The OB initials add about 20% but do not overcome diminished value from wear to the image. For their age and importance, these boxes are under priced. Few objects are rare, beautiful and 300 years old. Many of the lids will be found with a crack in the rim caused by the warping of the horn with age. However, the lids usually fit the bottom in one direction only and an unknowledgeable handler may have cracked the lid by forcing it on the wrong way. Cracks in the rim are acceptable, but a patch of horn added to fill the space reduces value.



The box above differs in style and design. It seems continental and from a later period. Sometimes it is not possible to tell much about a box. This box has quality but is executed in a stiff manner. There is no fun in the skating scene.

For the remainder of the 18th century embossed horn snuff boxes seem to diminish. Perhaps, it is the death of Obrisset, the improved supply of tortoise shell, which gives a richer, sharper, more defined image, the arrival of more colorful paper mache boxes or just a change in fashion. More sophisticated boxes with attached, functional lids replaced the rustic design of the early horn box with their easy-off tops.



At the beginning of the 19th century pressed horn boxes again become popular, particularly in France. The bottom of these boxes are formed from one piece. The lids are then pressed with steel dies to make an extremely detailed impression, usually with a legend that identifies the scene. These boxes are predominantly rectangular and use the roller and pin hinge. They are sometimes made from black buffalo horn. The three above from left to right illustrate Napoleons tomb, the Palais de l'Institut, and Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, who presented her sons, Tiberius and Caius as "her jewels" to a rich woman visitor. These boxes are not difficult to find perhaps because they are molded in low relief and seem mannered and formal.



The most charming of these French horn boxes are *le petit chapeaus* that resemble Napoleon's bicorne hat. These range in size from 2 - 4 inches and feature a battle scene or a figure of the emperor on the cover. They utilize the roller and pin hinge to open the front of the hat from the top. The back of these hats feature a cockade which consists of a V made with metal strips intersecting a round three-color inlay of bone or ivory. Often this cockade is damaged or replaced and the collector should always look for all of the above details. The box at the top is sharp and crisp while the lower example shows a worn Napoleon on horseback.



Pressed horn boxes were also exported from China. They usually have pressed geometric detail on the sides versus the western boxes which are usually plain or have parallel ridges. The scenes are identical in these two boxes including the center raised circle which may have been intended for a monogram. Many the other boxes observed appear to be the same pattern, although it would require carrying one around to compare the small intricate detail.



Other charming snuffs are made from horn. The fierce Turk has glass eyes and a splendid moustache. He has been molded in halves down the center to help with the symmetry of the face or the height of the relief: he is 2 inches from nose tip to ear tip. He is very heavy and molded from thick horn. The other box is just fun. It has 3 loose bone dice mounted under glass and has surely won more than one drink in a crowded bar.



Round boxes made of shredded horn are also popular at this time. They are made from different formulas as each molder usually had his own recipe containing ground horn, glue, resin, paper, clay, and the odd chemical. Because their appearance is grainy and their finish matte, they are covered with a surplus of detail. This excess not only imitates the engine turned metal boxes of this period but more importantly helps to disguise the mottled sometimes grainy appearance. These round, composition boxes are made throughout the first half of the 19th century. Because of their varied formulas the pressed horn often discolors and deteriorates, lessening the survival rate.

The box on the left shows a typical sentimental subject. All the advantages of molding are presented: small raised dots, very fine lines, flat circles that catch the light, precise flowers and lettering and large central raised figure. The box on the right with its lively swags and pinwheel has a shield shaped mother of pearl inlay which is unusual.



The box above shows a complex rustic image of smoking and drinking in a detailed orchard of apples trees and flowering bushes on the lid and a molded representation of engine turning on the bottom. Most of these boxes have patterned bases.



This box of Voltaire is shown here rather than with the other boxes bearing his image because it demonstrates the quality difference in the composition of the material from which these boxes were made. There is no graininess or dull surface. The surface is matte but lustrous. The back image is very sharp with tiny lettering and shaded architectural detail. The front shows the image against a smooth background with no tiny background detail that most makers required to hide the imperfections. In this case the maker has gilded the lily or rather the raised dots that surround the lid. Each has a tiny metal cap individually attached.





The box above is likely part of a series of accomplished men that includes Shakespeare and Handel box and other notables who are famous for their work in England. Both Inigo Jones and Christopher Wren were famous architects but not contemporaries. These boxes are unusual because of the twist on design for the lid, the deep cut and unusual geometric decoration and the wood like appearance. They are definitely molded, with indifferent detail, and of a composition that seem to have no fibrous content causing them to be brittle and break on impact. This may account for their scarcity. They are probably from the mid 19th century but could be much later.



The box above appears to be made from the unique horn of the Alpine Ibex which is illustrated on the lid. The ibex population stretched clear across the Alps, but because of their supposed medicinal qualities they were hunted nearly to extinction. They were saved only by the intervention of an Italian king who prohibited hunting and established a preserve for them in the early 19th century. The box is all silver including the inside cover and continental, perhaps Austria or Italy. The ornate thumb piece and lug hinge indicate a date circa 1780.





Musical snuff boxes are more costly than rare. Gold boxes sport singing birds with bright feathers that pop up from under a hinged lid to sing their song. Other boxes have clocks as well as musical movement. They are still made today but more likely as a decorative box rather than a snuff. The only thing that makes this box a snuff box is the curved translucent horn that shields the movement from the snuff powder which would clog the gears and ruin the works. The problem for collectors is that many small music boxes could be converted to musical snuffs just by adding a horn insert.

Many composition horn boxes that have musical movements are all similar to the box above. They have complex molded scenes with small detail on the lid. The front side has nipple shaped, horizontal sliding buttons to select and start the melody. The key wind is in the bottom. These boxes seem too heavy to be carried and probably were used at home. Mid 19th century.



Like all snuffs, horn boxes come in a large variety. The box on the left has an unusual inset lid and is made of buffalo horn which was imported to Europe from Africa and Asia for snuff boxes in the early 19th century. Nearly all “black” horn boxes are made from buffalo with some having colored highlights under the surface brought out by the stress of molding. The box on the right is made from a beautifully figured horn enhanced by silver mountings. The silver strips that surrounded the edges are

missing with only the pins that held them remaining. Both boxes have interesting features but are undistinguished.



The same could be said for the 3 boxes above. The box on the left has better than average metal inlay made from wire and pieces. The larger pieces are often silver plate with silver wire. Sometimes german silver, a combination of nickel and tin, is used. Condition is more important than metal composition, but it is the artistic composition makes the box desirable.

The center box has the unusual feature of a reverse painting on the transparent horn inlayed into the lid. The detail is exceptional and although the first impression is oriental, the scene and the hand are European. The remaining box has a transfer, reverse printed on glass and hand embellished with iridescence, bezel mounted into a fancy horn inlay on the lid. All 3 boxes are black horn with roller pinned hinges and a shallow, lateral indentation on the sides to fit the fingers.



The above group represents the most commonly encountered horn boxes. They have indented sides, roller pin hinges, and are rectangular. Made from buffalo horn with their lids inlaid with a thin piece of translucent horn that has been stained to look like tortoiseshell. These boxes are usually represented by dealers to have real tortoise inlay, but they were made for mass distribution and were inexpensive to purchase. Real tortoise shell has always been a luxury material. They were produced throughout the 19th century.



These boxes above are usually found in smaller sizes, perhaps to limit the space needed for the costly, tumbling block inlay. The optical illusion is created by using three different patterns of horn and fitting them together with the pieces cut as diamond shapes. Although boxes can be found with painted versions, the inlaid patterns are the most convincing and more valuable.





In every collection there are objects that confound the owner. This box is a wonderful example. The top was heated and wrapped around the sides and the entire box pressure fitted together with small iron pins spaced irregularly around the

perimeter.. The workman ship is crude but functional. The decoration consisting of lines and rune shapes is vaguely Celtic or Nordic. The impression is of great age, unfairly stimulated by the 1314 date on the cover, but the hinges although primitive are made of brass. Smoothed, rounded and worn by use, the surface has great color and patina. But as the King of Siam sings: "Is a Puzzlement!"



Not so puzzling but still difficult to date are these sterling boxes made in the Tirol region. They were made in the 20th century with the same construction and the same style of decoration as 200 years ago. Profusely decorated with alpine animals in a bold, unique graphic style, they are very appealing. The horn is usually very white and shiny with little patina. This box is probably 100 years old or less. Rust stains on the horn around the metal pins would be more convincing.



At the turn of the 19th century, a group of flattened horn boxes appear that might be of American origin. They are narrow and tall with a forced-fit top to keep the contents secure. The sides have simple geometric incised detail. But there is no evidence to limit their manufacture to the U.S. They are primitive and easy to make and suitable for a rural environment, where big boxes were impractical for an owner's hard day of labor. Such conditions also existed in Europe. Anyone who worked horn could see an example and make one. A small hole in the top is covered by an "arm" that pivots to reveal the opening. This arm occasionally ends with a human hand. Horner's Humor!



Later, these horn boxes become more oval and shorter with a ring inserted into the top. The fit of the top is very tight and opening the box without the ring would be difficult. This type of box was very successful worldwide because of its cheapness and practicality and was made well into the 20th century.



The box above is a better case for American origin. It has an eight pointed star, “bleeding” hearts and a tree of life scrimshawed into all the surfaces. It also has red cloth under the cut outs on the lid. The hinge construction is simple cylinder of sheet metal attached to the lid which surrounds a pin fixed in the bottom.

This box has been attacked by an insect that eats horn. These pest can be gassed, but the author has never encountered a snuff box or powder horn that had living creatures. Any new purchase can be left on a contrasting surface where the fine residue of an active creature can be spotted before resorting to poison. Holes could easily be filled with colored epoxy to improve appearance, but the collector should beware that a box is only in original shape before well meaning attempts are made.





While design can define origin, it is often misleading. Again, the design with the eight pointed star, the corner fans and the doves on the end panels invites an American attribution and perhaps a Pennsylvania heritage, but the inscription on the lid leads to southern Germany where Andrew(?) Bossert was the “watchman” in the village of Wimsheim. The materials and construction also hint of a turn of the century date, but the box is dated 1847. Part of the fun of collecting antiques is developing years of experience that allows for judgments when there is no definitive proof.

The silver collector has hallmarks, the porcelain collector has stampings and marks under the glaze, the gun collector proof marks and maker’s names, while the collector of snuff boxes has the general guides of style, shape and decoration.. The true connoisseur is a perpetual student with an attitude of humility.



The oval brass bound box on the left is probably oriental and of 20th century manufacture while the one on the right is often thought to be a priming horn for gun powder. The pointed end has a metal tip that allows a ball to turn by means of a protruding stud. Part of the ball has a dome shaped cavity that picks up the snuff by gravity from inside the horn and conveys it to the outside where it can be snuffed. The single size of the cavity and method of handling makes it less practical for filling the flintlock pan of a gun. The other conjecture is that these horns held salt. Horns like this are found with residues of all three substances. Our ancestors were not going to waste a fine container like this and put it to whatever use was needed. Mid 19th century.



The horn on the left with the hand made chain is for salt and inconvenient for the use of gun powder or snuff. The oval box in the center is well made with the top and bottom held in ridged rims. These early 18th century boxes are usually shallow and difficult for snuff but practical to use for any small items. The olive shaped horn on the right has a snuff spoon fitted into the top and is better classified as a snuff bottle probably of Asian origin.