

TORTOISESHELL SNUFF BOXES

From the ancient Romans to the modern Japanese, the shell of the sea tortoise has been prized. Most tortoiseshell, and certainly the best, comes from the Hawksbill turtle which has paddled serenely around the tropical waters of the world before the arrival of man. Unfortunately we did arrive and the population has declined precipitously. In 1975, the Hawksbill was declared an endangered species.

Tortoiseshell is unparalleled as the material for snuff boxes. It can be molded into large medallions of famous individuals or embossed with small intricate geometric patterns. It can be used in thin sheets to display the rich brown and yellow mottled patterns that are its identifying feature or layered to larger thicknesses that display a deep, rich, dark brown color that when held to the light give an indication of the pattern within. It can be inlaid with tiny dots of metal to form delicate patterns or with cut pieces to make detailed scenes. It can be polished to a bright smooth surface that seduces the fingers to stroke and linger. It has always been scarce and always desirable.

The shell grows in overlapping plates on the turtle's back. The Hawksbill has a distinctive pattern of 13 sections that can be removed from their underlying bone and then further divided with heat and skill into thin layers like removing sheets of paper from a pad. These plates can be used to make the entire snuff box or be held in gold, silver, or gilt metal mountings.



The most common form of tortoiseshell snuff is the rectangular molded horn box with a roller hinge. The entire box is horn except for an inlay on the top of tortoiseshell. Unfortunately the majority of these covers are not really tortoiseshell. The inlays are made from a thin sheet of horn that has been colored and patterned to resemble the

costlier shell. A friend claims to be able to tell the difference at a glance, and identified all the boxes illustrated above as colored horn. From a collector's buying perspective, it doesn't make much difference. All these boxes are commonly sold as tortoiseshell and at a common price.

Real tortoiseshell can be distinguished from painted horn by the watermarked surface. There are swirls with minute grainy appearance as if the material had been lightly etched by a liquid. This is easier to spot when the surface is not highly polished. Also, if there is pique work, the material is likely to be tortoise which holds the metal by tightly shrinking around the inlay after heating. Finally, there is the patterning in which the brown is displayed against the yellow like wisps which build up into clouds of darker color. To make life a little more difficult, there is dyed mottled tortoise and the rarer, blonde tortoiseshell which is clear and translucent and a uniform light yellow to orange color.



However, the place to begin any discussion of Tortoiseshell snuff boxes is with the incomparable John Obrisset. The box of Queen Anne (1702-14) although unsigned is clearly his work. There are many variations (12 by my count) of this box and some speculation about the source of portrait. Most boxes are dated 1705, but the Croker medal thought to be the image source is dated 1707. This box is dated 1702, which is the date of her ascension to the throne, and could have been made later. With Obrisset the mind numbing variations of signature, date and legend lettering trumps the source of the image. This box is English and early 18th century.

Artisans and masters had only secondary sources for their illustration and all copied from each other. In a time where there were no photographs and portraits from life were kept in palaces, the artist creating the popular images often had little idea what the subject looked like. But the boxes are lovely, although Anne is no beauty. The last of the Stuarts, she conceived 18 times but miscarried 12 and no child lived to adulthood. Poor lady! No wonder that she looks sad.



The box above is typical of a very early 18th century boxes. It is a simple oval with a pull off top. The lid is made of tortoise and is domed; the bottom is flat and also tortoise. There is a large silver oval attached by pins to the shell. The larger three are from an old repair. The plaque is engraved with a flowing swag border and each pin head is surrounded by flower petals. There is a monogram with tendril styled letters. The edges of these boxes have raised beadings and incised grooving as part of the rim profile. Modern repairs and replaced parts usually have simple profiles that do not duplicate the complex contours of ridges and grooves that adorn the silver sides of old boxes. 18th century continental.



Another fascinating box is the oval, tortoiseshell box above. These boxes often have tight fitting tops that resist opening even when a thumb nail is inserted near the latch. Some oval boxes have damaged lids from being forced. Many boxes of this shape open by squeezing the sides at the smaller ends which deforms the shape enough to allow the top to open.

This box has the tortoiseshell worked to create ribbing in a sunburst pattern on the lid and bottom. There is an early, offset hinge with an engraving of an angel holding a crown, perhaps as a remembrance of the departed Charles I. More interesting are the engravings around the silver rim. Below the latch there are crossed clay pipes with the initials W.C.

and the date 1723 flanked by a decanter of wine and a filled, footed glass. The remainder of the rim has alternating images of crossed tobacco leaves and rolled carottes of tobacco all around . The shape of the carrotte is the same as in the Didierot engravings of tobacco manufacturing showing a cylinder made from“ropes” of twisted tobacco leaves. The snuff box is an homage to the pleasures provide by tobacco and wine. English.



When tortoiseshell is heated, the surface changes allowing layers to be fused together. In this way the craftsman can increase the thickness of the walls of the box. Because of the layering, the appearance of the tortoiseshell becomes a rich, chocolate brown. When held to the sun, only a little of the characteristic mottling shows. These heavier boxes were more expensive because they used more material and were often embellished with gold and silver inlays.

The snuff box above is divided into two separate compartments so that two kinds of snuff could be carried. Divided boxes are unusual in tortoiseshell and bring a premium. Most impressive are the tortoiseshell lids which are 1/2 inch thick . Each lid is decorated with a floral arrangement utilizing different colors of gold and silver. The inlays are deeply engraved to add texture to the flat surfaces. The hinge is engraved. Late 18th or early 19th century.

The color of gold is changed by it's purity or by adding other metals: for Rose gold add copper, for White gold add nickel, for Green gold add silver. Gold is most often alloyed not for color but to improve it's strength. Pure gold is 24 kt. Which is soft and malleable.



The snuff above has an arabesque of flowers inlaid into the lid that is more stylized and vibrant than the arrangement of petals in the previous box. There is something quite alive in their vigor and yet stately in their repose. But, the inlay, thumb piece and the frame of the box are all gilt metal and not gold. Most of the mounts encountered on tortoise boxes are bronze gilded with gold. These frames are stronger and less costly.

But the glory of this box is the embossed pattern on the tortoiseshell that covers the sides and bottom. The background is a “woven” lattice of squares with raised dots at each corner overlaid by swags, flowers and romantic motifs. Each of the five sides has a different motif over the same woven background. Late 18th century, French.



The box on the left has had the tortoiseshell built up to adequate thickness for engine turning. Although the interior sides have been built up with silver, some damage has occurred to the sides of the cover as indicated by an old repair using small silver pins to hold the shell in place. Repairs that are contemporary with the use of the box are forgivable, but still diminish the value. The box is an unusual combination of inlay and mechanical engraving.

Tortoiseshell can also be ornamented by pressing simple patterns into the surface. The box on the right has an overall geometric pattern pressed into the shell. The lid and base edges have been shaped into a curving hexagon with indentations at each corner. Tortoiseshell is durable but brittle yielding to chips and splits. It is also plagued by an insect that eats small irregular pieces out of the surface. English late 18th century.



The snuff box above is all tortoiseshell with a gold gilded hinge. It is somberly plain except for the macabre enamel showing the angel of death rising from the fires of hell

with a casket. Under the lid is a decorated gold bezel holding a reverse painted glass of a candle burning over the word: "Constant." Love conquers death. French, first third of the 19th century.



The box above is beautifully made with a concave side edged with rims at the top and bottom. The inside of the lid is lined with matching tortoiseshell. A gold bezel holds a disc of ivory on which there is the finest, delicate handwork. All the lettering is hand painted as are the berries, the bird's eyes and legs. The remainder is all hair work. It is not rare for a loved one to give their hair to be used in a snuff box. Usually it is made into small plaits and placed under glass. Pictorial hair work is quite rare. The phrase translates roughly as "A pledge of friendship." French, first half of the 19th century.



The two boxes above are examples of pique pose . Pieces of silver and mother of pearl are inlaid into recesses formed into the surface of the heated shell. For dots or tiny pin inserts the blows of the hammer were said to heat the tortoiseshell enough to fix the inlay in place. These pieces are secure because as the heated shell cools it shrinks around the inlay holding it tightly. This inlay is referred to as pique and, as in all French realms of decorative nomenclature, there are specific names for small styles differences. Pique point refers to patterns made up of inserted tiny rods that appear as dots. Pique pose uses small pieces for inlay. Pique plaque uses larger pieces. For the average collector it

makes little difference. Finding a pique box in good condition is a sufficient challenge.

The round box above left has a swirling forest of flowers and foliage made of silver inlays, all engraved in great detail. Both the men shooting at each other have the buttons on their cuffs clearly shown although a glass is required to see them. There are tiny inlays of flowers made of mop (mother of pearl) placed throughout the scene to catch the light. Probably French, mid 18th century.

The box on the right takes its cartouche shape from the style of gold boxes. The tortoise shell body is beautifully shaped with tiny silver hinges. The cover scenes is a pastoral fancy with silver ladies and gentlemen playing in a garden. The two on the left are dancing while the one on the right a lady is being swung in a rope swing. The four mop pieces at the bottom are overly large and detract from the effect. Continental, first half 18th century



The snuff box above is shaped like an old bible. It has a hubbed spine, ivory sides for the page ends and traditional book clasps that have been extended to work as hinges for the lid. The pique work is restrained but effective. Continental first third of the 18th century.



The tortoiseshell snuff on the left combines the technique of inserting tiny dots throughout the central scene and around the borders with the inlay of larger pieces used for the figures. There is an unusual raised ridge that scrolls around the box acting like a picture frame for the center. A man and woman in exotic dress frolic in a pastoral setting. Mid 18th century continental.

The box on the left is an example of pique plaque. There are five figures all inlaid and engraved showing the Judgment of Paris, and written on the ribband above in French. Many early tortoise shell boxes with pique are shallow holding small quantities of snuff. Perhaps, because snuff was scarce or it just may have been the fashion of the time.



The boat shaped tortoise box above has all three elements of pique inlay. This box combines inlays of silver and mop with piques point work. Silver rims frame the edges of the top and bottom with a beautiful off set hinge secured to the base by two pins. On the keel bottom there are silver, sea shell blowing mermen, a background of pique point and four inlays of mop. The lid features a goddess, perhaps Venus, rising from the sea. Navette boxes are highly desirable. Probably French, late 18th century.



The box above is blond tortoiseshell with intense pique inlays of gold. Gold pique work is much rarer than silver. The workmanship is at the highest level. Again, we have the love symbols of Hermes delivering the golden apple on the lid and cupid searching for a victim on the bottom. There is an old repair to reinforce the corner and the thumb piece. On any old example of pique, the collector should expect to see some buckling and lifting of the inlay.



This snuff has it all. Gold pique inlay into tortoiseshell and a water color of the owner's beloved under glass on the inside lid. The frame is silver gilt probably for strength. The quality and workmanship is of the highest order. The characteristic water marks of tortoise shell can be seen on the bottom right. These boxes are seldom encountered and costly. French, late 18th century.



The boxes above are what the average collector will encounter. They have good pique inlay and attractive workmanship and design. The box on the left has silver and gold gilt inlay in a balanced design. The box is made from tortoiseshell including the roller hinges. The box on the right is inlaid with gold gilt, mop, silver and a central gem stone. The design is Victorian and has elements from the cover pattern on all the sides. Mid 19th century.

TALES OF THE TRADE

This year a collector is selling his lifetime collection at auction for several million dollars. He is well to do and has spent top money to acquire the finest examples in his field. He was the guy to call if you had a rare example in very fine condition. And every dealer did. He is selling his collection because he can not find anything to buy of the quality and condition of the items he owns.

And that is the point. He is a collector not an investor or a museum curator. He missed the excitement of the hunt, the thrill of obtaining an sought object, the fun of building a collection, and the learning about everything in it.

By the way. He plans to start collecting in another category immediately.



The box above is very large and unlike most carved Chinese snuff boxes, it is carved from tortoiseshell. Most are carved from horn. The cover carving is very deep and impressive, and although the scene is different from most, the detail overwhelms any recognition. There are the typical little figures among a great many trees. The carving on the base is raised less because the box would be damaged when set on its bottom. These heavily carved boxes were imported to the West through out the nineteenth century and are still probably being made today.