

Splendor & Surprise: Elegant Containers—Antique to Modern

Pandora's box and the idea of containers and the secrets they may contain have fascinated humankind. In the Greek myth, Pandora was the first woman created by the gods on the instruction of Zeus. As a married woman she discovered a jar (*pithos*), in modern accounts some-times mistranslated as box, she was told not to open. Despite this warning, Pandora, the beautiful mischief opened the jar, letting forth all evils into the world; only Hope was left inside. In contemporary times, to say that "you may be opening a Pandora's box" speaks to containment and to the uncertainty and sometimes unintended consequences that can result from satisfying the urge to—literally or figuratively—open, discover and explore contents mysterious . . . or even taboo.

This exhibition explores the beauty and myriad functions of vessels created for containment. These containers' forms, functions, and decoration illustrate the changes in both social practices and artistic development over three centuries in Western Europe and Russia. Collectable works of art, containers have been appreciated through the ages by their owners and collectors for their practical use as well as their beauty and cultural meaning.

As a noted collector of eighteenth to nineteenth-century art, Marjorie Post amassed hundreds of boxes and artistic containers in her private homes. Masterpieces of this collection, enriched by remarkable loans, are gathered in this special exhibition and in the mansion. Close consideration of these elegant and often intimate containers promises to reward viewers with detailed descriptions and interesting insights into their many splendors . . . and surprises. Unless otherwise noted, the objects here belong to Hillwood and were acquired by Marjorie Post.

Sacred Containers

Objects of sacred significance have often been associated with vessels used to store and protect them. One of the most famous is the Ark of the Covenant, said to contain the tablets carried by Moses inscribed with the Ten Commandments and other objects revered by the Jews.

The magnificent silver coffer on display in the adjacent case might have been designed to serve as a reliquary, to house sacred remains. The nearby icon shows St. Cyril of Jerusalem carrying a reliquary shaped like a small casket. Other containers associated with Christian tradition include the censer, for diffusing the scent of the incense used in liturgical worship, and the small communion set, for carrying the sacraments to the sick. For ease of transport, it can be worn around the neck on a chain.

Coffer

Paris, Firm of Boucheron, 1875–1876 (coffer);
Russia, Kremlin workshops, 17th century (plaques)
Paul Legrand, designer
Charles Glachant, silversmith

Silver, gold, enamel, labradorite, velvet
On loan from a private collector

This nineteenth-century French silver coffer is embellished with a variety of enamel plaques created by the imperial workshops at the Kremlin in the 17th century. The enamel plaques in the *en ronde-bosse* technique of enameling in high-relief was introduced in Russia by foreign craftsmen in the early seventeenth century. Although it resembles a reliquary, the purpose of the coffer remains a mystery. The coffer was commissioned in 1875 by Count Paul Demidov, an industrialist and philanthropist whose great wealth stemmed from his family's large silver, copper, and semi-precious stone mines in the Ural Mountains.

Censer

Moscow, 1797
P. Krag, silversmith
Silver gilt and enamel

Icon of St. Cyril of Jerusalem

Russia, late 16th–early 17th century
Tempera on panel
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Don K. Chapman, 1996

Portable communion container with chalice and box

Moscow, 1793 Silver
Gift of Mrs. John F. Wilhelmy Jr., 1993

Practical Containers

Containers were also designed to be practical, such as to provide handy storage, facilitate transportation, and secure valuables. The chest, one of the oldest forms of furniture designed for storage, typically included handles for easy transport. Trunks, suitcases, and the smaller *nécessaires* and *étuis* are all modern heirs of the chest. The *nécessaires* and *étuis* are perhaps the most refined and intimate of the portable containers. Intended for personal use, they are specifically designed to aid in the rituals of daily life—dressing, sewing, writing, and so on—and feature various fittings and implements for all the necessary utensils.

When used to safeguard valuables, containers were strengthened by metal structures and fitted with locks. In some instances, the elaborate and costly decoration of such safes and strongboxes rivaled the rare and exotic valuables they were intended to protect.

Traveling trunk

France, 1924
Louis Vuitton Malletier
Wood, leather, textile, metal

This lingerie trunk or *secrétaire à linge*—a must for worldly elegant travelers—features several compartments and drawers for gloves, ribbons, lingerie, shoes, and hats. In addition, a surface at the top slides out for use as a small writing desk. This trunk is part of a full travel set Marjorie Post ordered in 1924 from the famous Parisian firm of Louis Vuitton—founded in 1854—and later personalized with the initials “MPD” for Marjorie Post Davies, her name while married to Ambassador Joseph E. Davies.

Étui

South Staffordshire, England, ca. 1770
Enamel on copper and gilt copper

Nécessaire

Vienna, 1845
Jos. Sauer Wein & Company
Wood, silver, textile, brass, mother-of-pearl, ivory, mirror

Safe

Neuwied, Germany, ca. 1770–1774
Abraham and David Roentgen
Wood marquetry, mother-of-pearl, metal

This strongbox is decorated with precious marquetry, an inlay made of veneered woods and mother-of-pearl. It is one of more than 40 secret compartments and inserts from the roll-top desk on display in the French Drawing Room of the Hillwood mansion. This particular component is secured by a lock and slides into a case which folds into the inner sanctum of the desk. In this sophisticated game of revealing and concealing, the safe vanishes from sight, making it the perfect place to keep important papers and cherished valuables. The Roentgens and other highly skilled European cabinetmakers crafted furniture with all manner of mechanical wizardry and hidden compartments for many European courts and aristocratic clients.

Marie Antoinette and Her Children

France, 18th century
After Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun
Oil on canvas

Painted after court artist Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun’s 1787 masterpiece now in Versailles, this painting depicts Marie Antoinette and her children in front of that palace’s famous Hall of Mirrors. Behind the sitters is one of Marie Antoinette’s jewel cabinets, decorated with the Bourbon dynasty’s coat of arms surmounted by a royal crown. The artist cleverly included this magnificent piece in the composition to signify Marie Antoinette’s status as queen of France and mother of the heir to the throne in an attempt to rebuild her image and inspire support among French citizens in the years leading up to the Revolution.

Jewelry box

Bukhara, Uzbekistan, 1882–1894

Silver, enamel, rubies, diamonds, mirror

Table clock

St. Petersburg, 1896

Firm of Fabergé

Julius Rappoport (1851–1917), workmaster

Silver gilt, bowenite, watercolor on ivory

The complexity and sophistication of this piece raises questions about its actual purpose. Is it merely a clock, a miniature chest of drawers, a jewelry box, or simply a masterpiece of jeweler's work? Emperor Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra Fedorovna, whose portraits appear on either side of the clock, presented this object to the Dowager Empress Maria Fedorovna in 1896 for her saint's day, July 22, an occasion as important as a birthday in imperial Russia. In his diary, Nicholas makes note of the visit that year to his mother, mentioning the several presents they brought for her. This precious gift, inspired by an eighteenth-century English model of a clock by the renowned jeweler James Cox, was displayed in the Dowager Empress's Blue Cabinet, a room in her personal apartments at the Anichkov Palace.

Containers for Pageantry and Display

Over time, artisans began to design containers more for presentation than any practical use. Admired for their impressive design and technique, rarity, valuable materials, or uniqueness, such containers were often displayed in precious rooms in Renaissance *studiolos* (little studios), baroque cabinets of curiosities, and *Schatzkammern* (treasure chambers). Hillwood's Icon Room is an heir of this age-old tradition of treasury rooms. Whether displayed in cabinets, on buffets, or shelves, magnificent containers were often grouped with precious plates, bronzes, or rare ceramics to reflect the social rank of their owners.

In the nineteenth century, manufacturers were inspired by these antique items, producing new objects using historical styles and techniques. International fairs became showcases for exhibiting sumptuous objects, demonstrating their creators' virtuosity, status as worthy heirs of their masterful predecessors, and the global import of their home country. Indeed, during the second half of the century, the increasing recognition of decorative arts objects as works of art led to the creation of masterpieces like those displayed in this section.

Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna

St. Petersburg, 1841

Christina Robertson (1796–1854)

Watercolor on ivory

Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna's elegant posture, precious jewels, and ermine cloak convey her high rank to viewers of her portrait. She is also surrounded by an assembly of containers—including an elaborately carved ebony cabinet, golden vase, and crystal covered cups—used

here to signal her rank and to underscore her interest in the arts, of which she was an important patron. Born Princess Charlotte of Württemberg, Elena Pavlovna entertained St. Petersburg's high society in her palace, which today is home to the State Russian Museum.

Covered cup

St. Petersburg, ca. 1851

Firm of Sazikov

Silver and silver gilt

This cup's interlaced designs and stylized leaves illustrate a revival of late Renaissance decoration that became an ubiquitous feature for items produced by Russian silversmiths in mid-nineteenth century. Ignatii Sazikov was one of the first artists to bring this newly developing style to international attention at London's Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, also known as the Crystal Palace exhibition, in 1851.

Drinking horn with mythological hunting scenes

Vienna, 1890–1908

Karl Rössler

Silver, enamel, lapis lazuli, pearls

Tankard

Moscow, 1890

Firm of Pavel Ovchinnikov

Silver gilt and enamel

Covered vase

Peking, 18th century

Jade

Presentation Pieces

The presentation of precious objects to mark such special occasions as birthdays and anniversaries represent a long tradition in the history of polite society. These gifts ranged from the simplest to the most spectacular, with the donor's or the recipient's wealth and social station reflected in the level of sophistication or value. The most elaborate of these, those in gold and set with diamonds, were sometimes considered monetary gifts in lieu of cash. When presented in a private context, these items, precious or not, could serve as vehicles for the expression of affection or love. A box offered by a close friend or a lover might reveal a great deal about the level of intimacy between the giver and receiver.

Boxes came in all sorts of shapes, materials, and decorations. Among them, the snuffbox was the diplomatic token par excellence. In eighteenth-century France, snuffboxes and other small precious containers were the cooperative result of a large number of craftspeople: designers, goldsmiths, chasers, engravers, enamellers, and the skillful marketing of merchants of luxury.

To Honor

The official distribution of presentation boxes has always been strictly controlled. Special administrations oversaw their commissioning, storage, and delivery. For example, in nineteenth-century imperial Russia, the Cabinet of His Imperial Majesty, attached to the powerful Ministry of the Imperial Court, was entrusted with this task. In addition, protocols clearly outlined the kind of gift appropriate for each occasion or type of reward. The most distinguished boxes featured a portrait of the sovereign, like those displayed here with miniatures of Emperor Nicholas I. The first depicts a double portrait of Nicholas I and his wife Empress Alexandra Fedorovna, and the second, crafted in part with platinum, might be one of the earliest jewelry uses of this precious metal. Presentation boxes might also bear the cypher of the donor, like the Hahn-produced box with Empress Alexandra Fedorovna's cyrillic initials. Also featuring an initial is the round gold box from Dublin with a diamond crowned "R" cypher of the Earl of Rathdowne, recipient of the box.

Presentation box with miniature portraits of Emperor Nicholas I and Empress Alexandra Fedorovna

St. Petersburg, ca. 1830

Firm of Keibel

Gold, enamel, watercolor on ivory, diamonds

Presentation box with medal of Emperor Nicholas I

St. Petersburg, ca. 1826

Attributed to Firm of Keibel (box)

Alexander Lialin, maker (medal)

Vladimir Alekseev, designer (medal)

Gold, platinum

Presentation box with cipher of Empress Alexandra Fedorovna

St. Petersburg, 1894–1899

Firm of Hahn

Carl C. Blank, workmaster

Gold, diamonds, enamel

Presentation box with crest and monogram of the Earl of Rathdowne

Dublin, 1823

Gold, silver, enamel, diamonds, emeralds, pearls

The musical instruments depicted on the lid of this box allude to the artistic interests of the Earl of Rathdowne who was an amateur musician and actor. The engraving on the bottom of the box indicates that in 1823, members of Dublin's Beefsteak Club, a dining club and musical society, presented it to the earl for his service as prefect president.

With Affection

The art of the gift and its corollary, the art of pleasing, were all-important customs among polite society in bygone eras. Tokens of affection were routinely given to inspire and express love and to cement romantic relationships, including those abetted by the political alliances of the time. The objects in this section speak to the human instinct to give gifts, especially in the realm of romance.

Easter egg

Moscow, 1899–1908

Fedor Rückert (active 1887-1917), workmaster

Silver, silver-gilt, enamel

This elegant egg plays on a taste for tradition as well as contemporary design. The color red is traditionally associated with Easter in Russia, but the abstract branches adorning the surface of this egg derive from the most avant-garde design elements of the day. Eggs, be they simple or as splendid as this example, are symbols of renewal given at Easter, the most sacred season of the Russian calendar.

Heart-shaped box with Dutch scenes

Paris, 1756–1762

François-Guillaume Tiron

Gold, enamel

This box's heart shape reveals its likely role as a token of affection. It possibly served as a container for small sweets or bonbons to remind its recipient of the "sweetness" of love. The box was perhaps part of a *corbeille de mariage* (wedding present). The tavern scenes are copied after ones by Flemish painter David Teniers the Younger and reflect the craze for Dutch popular scenes among French art collectors of that time.

Notebook (*carnet*)

Paris, 1784–1786

Antoine Louis Anthiaume

Gold, enamel, diamonds, ivory

The enameled scene on this notebook depicts Hector, a mythological soldier in armor leaving his wife, Andromache, and child. Their tale is associated with sadness, because this is the couple's final farewell. Hector would be killed in the Trojan War. The small notebook, containing an ivory tablet and pencil, speaks to affection with "*souvenir d'amitié*" (souvenir of friendship) inscribed in diamonds.

Box in the shape of a lady's head

London, ca. 1760

Agate, gold, enamel, diamonds

This bonbon box makes clear allusions to love as the applied gold, braided bowknot that adorns the woman's neck reads "*Marchez sur des roses et pensez à moi*" (Walk on roses and think of me).

Pendant watch

Paris, 1866

Charpentier Oudin, watchmaker

Lafon de Camarsac, photographer

Gold, enamel, mother-of-pearl, pearls, enameled photograph

This shell-shaped watch was an engagement present from Grand Duke Alexander, the future Emperor Alexander III, to his bride, Princess Dagmar of Denmark, the future Empress Maria Fedorovna. The shell case houses two small compartments: one for the watch's mechanism and the other for an enameled photograph of Grand Duke Alexander signed by Lafon de Camarsac, inventor of a photographic printing process on enamel that was celebrated at the 1867 Parisian World Fair, where the watch was exhibited.

Egg-shaped basket

St. Petersburg, 1886–1896

Firm of Fabergé

Mikhail Perkhin, workmaster

Gold, rose quartz, diamonds, emerald, pearl

Gift of Oscar Modig, 1983

This elegant little basket with its art nouveau style handle fashioned from two snake heads holding a pearl was a gift from Ambassador Joseph E. Davies to his wife Marjorie. At the time of their divorce in 1955, the basket returned to Davies and after his death in 1958, Marjorie had the opportunity to buy it from his estate. When she went to view the collection with her butler, Oscar "Gus" Modig, she expressed her distaste for buying something that had originally belonged to her. Gus then asked Marjorie if he could buy it. She replied that he could buy anything he liked. Modig purchased the basket and later gave it to Hillwood as a gesture of his devotion to Post and her museum.

Music box

St. Petersburg, 1907

Firm of Fabergé

Henrik Immanuel Wigström, workmaster

Gold, enamel, diamonds, rubies

Everyday Luxury

By the mid-eighteenth century, Paris had become the most important center for the production of luxury gold containers and other such precious items in Europe. The variety of boxes displayed here speaks to the sheer diversity: *tabatières* (snuff boxes), *bonbonnières* (candy boxes), *boîtes à mouches* (beauty patch boxes). The precious materials and the sophisticated

design sometimes belie the practicality of their everyday function. These containers also offer a window onto social customs of the day, including writing, dressing, perfuming, and consuming tobacco from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. Despite the ever-increasing mass production and diversification of everyday containers, such firms as Aucoc and Cartier in Paris and Fabergé in Russia continued to produce exquisite works of art for European courts and elites the world over, as heirs to the designers, manufacturers, and retailers of elegant containers from the eighteenth century.

For Writing

Desk sets, considered essential to a well-appointed writing desk, included an inkwell, a pencil box or tray, and brush and sander for drying the ink. Writing sets often served as objects for conveying social status and cultural identity. They could be humble or luxurious works of art reflecting the latest fashions, as shown in the nearby painting depicting a luxury domestic interior of the early 1900s. An elegant woman sits at her desk ready to write a love letter. Next to her small, portable desk rests an exquisite enameled inkwell.

The precious Fabergé desk accessories here exemplify the most sophisticated of writing accoutrements created for the elite. In contrast, the Soviet porcelain figural inkstand's reveals the politics at the time of its manufacture and its original owner's political leanings more than his or her affluence.

The Love Letter

Florence, ca. 1900
Frédéric Soulacroix
Oil on canvas

Desk set

St. Petersburg, 1908–1917
Firm of Fabergé
Henrik Immanuel Wigström, workmaster
Birch, silver gilt, enamel

Envelope moistener

St. Petersburg, 1898–1904
Firm of Fabergé
Attributed to Anna Carlovna Ringe, workmaster
Porcelain and silver

Stamp box and roller

Moscow, 1898–1908
Firm of Fabergé
Silver, enamel, crystal

Inkstand

Leningrad, 1936–1938
Lomonosov State Porcelain Factory
Natal'ia Iakovlevna Dan'ko, designer
Hard-paste porcelain
Museum purchase, 1999

This inkstand features seven Uzbek men and women, young and old, discussing the Soviet constitution prior to its ratification in 1936. It is significant that the designer elected to portray Uzbeks, who before the communist revolution had the lowest literacy rate of any group in Russia but by 1934, as a result of Stalinist reforms, could boast of 50 percent literacy. What is difficult to see in this piece so laden with political propaganda are its two containers. The inkwells are concealed by the baskets of fruit sitting on the carpet.

On Beauty

Beauty has always played an important part in life and culture. Certain women in history have been celebrated for their beauty, determined by conventional wisdom as a combination of proportion, symmetry, and harmony in color of the face and body. Cosmetics have long been used as a way to enhance natural beauty. On display are various containers used to hold powders and make up as well as dressing tables and sets used in their application. Highlights in this section include an eighteenth-century dressing table by the leading cabinetmaker Jean-François Oeben, a Russian mirror made of ivory, and a silver gilt dressing table set made in Paris for the Russian imperial court.

Vanity case in the shape of a ladybug

Moscow, 1898–1908
Gold, diamonds, enamel

Powder box with a horn of plenty

Petrograd, Russia, 1917–1922
State Porcelain Factory
Sergei Vasiliev Chekhonin, painter
Porcelain
Museum purchase, 2000

Box, glass bottle, bell, tumbler, and hairbrush from a dressing table set

Paris, 1848–1851
Firm of Aucoc
Silver gilt and glass

This group of various objects was part of an elaborate dressing table set commissioned from the fashionable French firm of Aucoc. Part of Grand Duchess Ekaterina Mikhailovna's—daughter of Grand Duke Mikhail Pavlovich—collection, it was possibly made for her wedding to the Duke Georg-August of Mecklenburg-Strelitz in 1851.

Mirror from a dressing table set

Russia, 18th century

Ivory, mirror glass, wood

Glove box

Paris, ca. 1896

Max Symon, retailer

De Recy, decorator

Ivory and watercolor

Glove boxes were indispensable elements of a well-appointed dressing table even into the late nineteenth century. Gloves were perfumed with powders, so it was necessary to keep them in closed containers to preserve their fragrance. This box was decorated in Paris and presented in 1896 to the dowager empress Maria Fedorovna, who kept it in her favorite palace, Gatchina.

Ladies' writing and dressing table

Paris, ca. 1760

Attributed to Jean-François Oeben (1721-1763) Wood marquetry and gilt bronze

Small cosmetic jars

Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory, France, 1779

Box for patches and rouge

Paris, ca. 1767

Lacquer, gold, tortoise shell, miniature, mirror

Toothpick holder

England, late 18th century

Ivory, gold, enamel, diamonds, hair

Perfume

The story of perfume dates back to ancient Egypt. The word perfume, referring to scented mixtures, derives from the Latin *per fumus* (through smoke). In France, the love of perfume reached its apogee in the eighteenth century when Louis XV ascended the throne. His court was called *La cour parfumée* (the perfumed court). Louis had his rooms perfumed with a different scent each day. The two French Sèvres porcelain *pots-pourris* vases speak to this love of pleasant smells. English women likewise delighted in mixing various fragrances and used scent bottles, such as those displayed here, to apply the perfume. The porcelain bottle ornamented with vines and flowers is from Germany, and the one featuring fine red enamel is Russian.

Pair of pots-pourris "Pompadour"

Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory, 1757 and 1759

Soft paste porcelain

These magnificent covered *pots-pourris* were considered indispensable luxuries in an age of less stringent hygiene than today. The vases were filled with dried flowers and scented oils whose aromas escaped through the jars' many piercings. The vases here feature Sèvres famous turquoise blue ground, one of the most difficult and costly for the manufactory to create.

Scent bottle

St. Petersburg, 1908–1926
Gold, enamel, moonstone

Scent bottle

South Staffordshire, England, ca. 1765
Enamel and copper

Scent bottle

England, ca. 1760
Gold and glass

Scent bottle

Germany, 19th century
Porcelain

Tobacco

Tobacco has been enjoyed in many ways over the centuries: chewing or sniffing powdered tobacco, or snuff, and cigar, pipe, and cigarette smoking. Many of the containers here relate to “taking snuff,” a custom that originated in the Americas in the seventeenth century and quickly spread to Europe and other places, where it became all the rage among aristocrats because it was a costly substance. Snuff was typically kept in a special tight-lidded box and when consumed placed on the back of the hand or pinched between two fingers and inhaled. Its ingestion produced a rush of sensation. In China, snuff was believed to cure colds and headaches and like other medicines was carried in a small bottle and administered medicinally with a spoon that also served as a stopper. The elegant cigar and cigarette accessories on display date to the late nineteenth–early twentieth century, when smoking became the preferred manner of enjoying tobacco among the upper classes.

Snuffbox

Geneva, ca. 1840
Jean François Bautte & Cie
Gold, enamel, mosaic

Snuffbox

London, ca. 1750
Bloodstone, gold

Snuffbox

Velikii Ustiug, Russia, 1740–1750
Niello, silver gilt, turban snail shell

Snuff bottle

China, 19th century
Agate, glass, metal

Snuff bottle

China, 19th century
Amber and jade

Snuff bottle

China, 19th century
Ivory

Cigarette box

St. Petersburg, 1882–1896
Firm of Grachev Brothers
Silver gilt and enamel

Cigar box

New York, 1935
Firm of Cartier
Silver, jade, coral

Cigarette holder and set of ashtrays

New York, ca. 1930
Firm of Cartier
Jade, gold, enamel, sapphires

Tobacco in Russia

In 1697, Peter the Great overturned the 70-year ban on tobacco in Russia as a step toward adopting the “modern” customs practiced in the West. Subsequent generations embraced tobacco use, and the imperial family was no exception. Like his grandfather Alexander II, Nicholas II was an avid smoker and even introduced some of his children to smoking. At the same time, the invention of cigarette-making machines and the development of aggressive advertising by the growing tobacco industry encouraged others in Russia to take up the habit.

Match safe

St. Petersburg, 1898–1908
Anna Carlovna Ringe
Silver gilt, enamel

Cigarette holder

Russia, 1908–1917

Gold, enamel, amber

Cigarette case

St. Petersburg, 1908–1917

Firm of Fabergé

Anders Nevalainen, workmaster

Silver and ruby

Museum purchase, 1990

Courtship

Florence, last quarter of the 19th century

Oreste Costa (1851–1901)

Oil on canvas

Gift of General Foods, 1978

Containers of Vice

Precious containers, gold boxes, small *étuis*, and exquisite miniature works of art are generally described in auction catalogs as *objets de vertu* (objects of virtue). Although the origin of this expression remains unverifiable, the most current explanation links the term to the virtuosity necessary to produce such sophisticated and precious works of art. The moniker, although, might cause modern readers to assume an owner's virtue, *objets de vertu* are often associated with sin or vices related to pleasure and overindulgence, such as drinking, smoking, gambling, and lust. This section features a variety of containers associated with vices, many of them made by luxury firms such as Cartier in the twentieth century. Alongside them is a painting warning against the evils of engaging in corrupt activities, especially drinking and smoking in an age that prized healthy living—food, drink, tobacco in moderation.

The Dangerous Servants: Evils of Coffee, Tobacco and Alcohol

United States, ca. 1913

George Peters

Oil on canvas

Gift of General Foods, 1978

Round snuff box

Wolfenbüttel, Germany, ca. 1820

Papier mâché and lacquer

Tankard

Augsburg, Germany, ca. 1650

Philip Jacob Drentwett, silversmith

Silver gilt and ivory

Tankards were often decorated with motifs from classical mythology showing the evils of drinking. This tankard's cover is topped with a figure of Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and

intoxication, as a child. He crushes a vat of grapes in which four putti are swimming. The carved body of the tankard features scenes of harvesting and staggering, vomiting figures, a scene of debauchery freely taken from compositions by Peter Paul Rubens.

Pocket flask with monogram of Marjorie Post Davies

New York, 1935–1955

Firm of Cartier

Gold

“MPD” were Marjorie’s initials while married to Ambassador Joseph E. Davies.

Vodka set

Diatkovo, Russia, 1897

Mal’tsov Glassworks

Elizaveta Merkurevna Bëm (Boehm), designer

Glass with enamel

Museum purchase, 1997

Decanter decorated with playing cards

St. Petersburg, 1840–1850

Terebenev & Company

Glass, enamel, gilt

Pair of vodka cups in a helmet shape

Russia, 1908–1917

Silver and enamel

Poker chip box

New York, early 20th century

Gilt metal, wood, mother-of-pearl

Backgammon board

Paris, 20th century

Firm of Cartier

Wood, leather, cardboard, plastic, metal

Less Container More Art

Artists and designers have found many ways to express them-selves by experimenting with the form and decoration of containers. The modern artist Joseph Cornell’s many boxes, assemblages of found objects reflecting his many interests, stand as a primary example of this type of expression. In *Reentry from Space*, the artist takes on the 1950s-1960s’ fascination with space exploration and competition. In doing so, he poetically confines the infinity of space to a box.

The contemporary photographer Cindy Sherman adopts an elegant, eighteenth-century Sèvres porcelain-inspired covered tureen as the vehicle for one of her conceptual self-portraits. Sherman has decorated the tureen with images of herself dressed as the marquise de Pompadour, aka, Madame de Pompadour, King Louis XV's official mistress. Pompadour's maiden name was Poisson, French for "fish," hence the silver fish against a pink ground and still-life image of fishes and pearls embellishing the interior bottom of the tureen. Sherman's tureen illustrates how containers continue to surprise and delight viewers through their design and decoration, curiosity about what they might hold, and intriguing messages.

Reentry from Space

United States, late 1950s

Joseph Cornell

Wood, glass, paint, gesso, cork ball, clay pipe, metal rods, plastic toy figure, collage of photomechanical reproductions, paper, colored sand

Smithsonian Institution, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

Madame de Pompadour (née Poisson) tureen and platter

Limoges, France, 1990

Cindy Sherman

Ancienne Manufacture Royale Limoges, manufacturer

Artes Magnus, publisher

Porcelain

Museum purchase, 2006

Pavilion

Palekh Boxes

The two lacquered boxes displayed on the lower shelf were produced in Palekh, Russia. This small place has a very long history in Russian iconography. Since the Soviet period, Palekh is known primarily for its miniature painted on *papier-mâché* boxes. When Marjorie Post and Ambassador Joseph E. Davies were posted to Soviet Russia in the late 1930s, they received various presents. The large box by Sergei Solonin, dated 1936, was offered in 1937 by Mrs. Molotova, wife of the prime minister and later foreign minister. The cover of the box is painted with three scenes from Aleksandr Pushkin's *The Stone Guest*, a version of the story of *Don Juan*. The decoration of this kind of boxes, a Soviet adaptation of the Imperial presentation boxes, were often inspired by Russian literature or fairy tales as showed by the second box dated 1935. This one, by Ivan Myznikov, features most likely a scene from one of Pushkin's fairy tales such as *Tale of Tsar Saltan*.

French Drawing Room

Jewel cabinet (coffret à bijoux de voyage)

Cubed marquetry creating a trompe l'oeil effect covers the exterior of this fantastic eighteenth-century French jewel coffer. The chest can be opened by dropping the front and lifting the top. Its interior is veneered in purplewood, and its hinges are silvered. Jewel boxes from Fabergé, Cartier, and similar firms fill the cabinet.

In the image of a costumed Marjorie Post, close looking reveals that she sits next to another jewel coffer, this one decorated with elaborate wood inlays and Sèvres porcelain inserts. Marjorie gave this piece, made by leading French cabinetmaker Martin Carlin, to her daughter Eleanor Barzin, who in turn gave it to Versailles, where it is now held. Post bought the coffer on display in 1957, perhaps as a replacement for the earlier one. Regardless, the two purchases certainly speak to her enduring appetite for elegant and elaborate containers.

This circa 1928 photograph shows Marjorie Post dressed as Marie Antoinette at Mar-A-Lago, her winter residence in Palm Beach, Florida. Post dressed as the French queen on a number of occasions, most often for the elaborate costume balls popular in her day. Her selection of costume underscores her fascination with all things eighteenth-century French. Hillwood Archives.

Roll-top desk

While this magnificent desk's elaborate marquetry is perhaps what first attracts admirers' attention, the forty-some secret compartments and delicious details it contains further distinguish it as a tour de force of cabinet design and certainly the most complex container in the Hillwood collection. To appreciate this piece's multi-functional features and mechanical wizardry for yourself, please enjoy the short video...

Collectors of Gold Boxes

Gold boxes were valued for their preciousness and artistic design. As collectable objects among Europe's royal courts, they became a must-have for decorative arts lovers such as the Rothschilds in England and Demidovs in Russia. Important collections of boxes can be found in the Louvre in Paris, the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, and the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Smaller museums, such as the Wallace Collection in London and the Cognacq-Jay and Jacquemart-André in Paris, also house notable collections.

Marjorie Post began collecting precious containers in the 1920s. She first sought French eighteenth-century boxes, but later bought other European pieces, including from Russia. The way in which they are displayed recalls the description of 1900 Russian interiors by Prince Felix Iusupov in his *Mémoires*: "The real center of the house was my mother's suite of rooms. . . . The most lovely knickknacks were scattered on the tables or displayed in cabinets: gold and enameled snuff-boxes, ashtrays of amethyst, topaz and jade with gem-encrusted gold settings. My mother usually sat in this room, which was always filled with flowers."

Icon Room

Precious Boxes

Among the precious objects displayed in the table vitrines are boxes crafted in gold, silver, hard stone or rock crystal and decorated with enamel, pearls, diamonds or miniatures. Most of them are snuffboxes, some of which were given as awards or tokens of affection. The earliest presentation objects with rulers' images date back to antiquity. In eighteenth-century France, precious boxes with a portrait of the sovereign became one of the most coveted official presents. In Russia, the practice was introduced by Peter the Great, and his successors carried it

into the twentieth century, even when jeweled boxes were no longer presented in large numbers by European monarchs. Most of the presentation boxes displayed here bear portraits of Russian rulers, including Empresses Elisabeth and Catherine II and Emperors Alexander I, Nicholas I, Alexander II and Nicholas II.

Easter Eggs

Easter is the most important celebration in the Russian Orthodox Church. Its status ranks with Christmas in the West. The centuries-old tradition of bringing hand-dyed eggs to church to be blessed during the Easter midnight service and then giving them to family and friends evolved over the centuries in the exchange of valuable Easter presents among St. Petersburg's elite.

First Floor Library

Russian Niello Snuff and Cigarette Boxes

Although today Russia has become today the third highest per capita smoking country in the world, it is hard to believe that it was banned in Russia until the reign of Peter the Great. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tobacco was enjoyed as snuff and then later as cigarettes. These engraved and inlaid silver snuff and cigarette cases attest to the hold this substance had on Russia.

Snuff Mulls

Snuff mulls were a specialty of Scotland and were designed for powdered tobacco or snuff. The word *mull* refers to the mills where the tobacco was ground. The mulls are fashioned from polished rams' horns and fitted with silver caps. These examples date to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Cartier Containers

Elegant, stylish and sophisticated, this selection of luxury goods by the renowned firm Cartier were created for Marjorie Post, one of its most devoted American clients. Amongst the array of objets d'art here are a number of stunning little containers—from frames for family portraits to art deco-style vanity cases designed to hold cosmetics and other personal effects to a handsome ink stand for the well-appointed desk to various tobacco accoutrements including a cigarette box and striking, translucent ashtrays

Dining & Breakfast Rooms

Dining Splendor

This table is inspired by the exhibition *Splendor & Surprise: Elegant Containers, Antique to Modern*. It evokes the splendor of a Russian imperial table with its variety of accoutrements.

The porcelain plates, baskets, dishes, ice cups and flatware belong to the St. Vladimir order service, commissioned in 1783 by Empress Catherine the Great. The Francis Gardner Factory outside Moscow decorated each piece with the order's ribbon and star. The Empress hosted the knights of each order at a banquet in the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. This service along

with three other services—St. George, St. Andrew and St. Alexander Nevsky—were used once a year. The two large candelabra are late additions to the St. George service made in 1856 at the Imperial Porcelain Factory. The table is also set with the so-called “Country” service glassware made at the Imperial Glass Factory in 1820-30s; the decanters were part of a service commissioned in late 1829 or early 1830 for the neo-gothic cottage at the imperial estate of Peterhof.

Dining Surprises

Keeping to the theme of the exhibition *Splendor & Surprise: Elegant Containers, Antique to Modern*, this yellow-and-bird Sèvres porcelain service bristles with surprises. It would astonish anyone to learn that it was produced in the course of 1793 and 1794 at the height of the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. It will also surprise that Sèvres, the French royal porcelain factory par excellence, was deemed worth preserving and kept running throughout the Revolution.

Not surprising though is the new Republican spirit infused in the service, evident in the austerity in the design and absence of gold decoration. A new interest in science is reflected in the birds featured, all specific specimens deriving from the Count of Buffon’s encyclopedic publication *Natural History of Birds*. On the back of each piece every bird is carefully identified. Also revealing is how these pieces were marked not with the royal cipher but with the initials “RF” for *République Française* reflecting the new regime.

In a surprising turn of events, the two elegant “Etruscan” cups surfaced a few years ago in the art market and were acquired by the museum to match the saucers that had been in the collection since Marjorie Post acquired them. Belgian glass and American silverware complete this surprising table setting.

Staff Dining Room

The exhibition *Splendor & Surprise: Elegant Containers, Antique to Modern* displays precious objects of virtue. One virtuous object that cannot be excluded is the container for Postum. It was Postum—a hot beverage saving drinkers from the evils of caffeine—that began the Post family business in 1895...

Plates: drawings of the full-dress uniforms, banners, and flags of the Imperial Russian Army
(translated from Russian)

St. Petersburg, 1851

Paper, leather, ink, gold-gilt

Gift of Prince Sergei Belosselskii-Belozerskii, 1968

With its layers of elaborate and surprising enclosures, this collection of hand-painted etchings and engravings is displayed in conjunction with the exhibition *Splendor & Surprise: Elegant Containers, Antique to Modern*. The set illustrates the history of the insignia for each Imperial Russian Army regiment. Mounted on linen trimmed in green silk, the plates fold into their own

enclosure, which is housed in its own box, which in turn is housed in a larger box. There are seven master boxes. The entire set is bound in green leather with gilt imperial bindings. One other such set is known to be located in The State Hermitage Museum Library in St. Petersburg, Russia.

MP's Bedroom Suite

Bloodstone Containers

The dark green bloodstone derives its name from its flecks of red inclusions of iron oxide or red jasper, which resemble drops of blood. Bloodstone, also known as heliotrope, is a form of the semiprecious stone chalcedony. Marjorie Post fondly collected this fascinating variety of objects at least in part because each was made of bloodstone, which was her birthstone.

Pieces from two dressing table sets

Paris, 1920-1935

Firm of Gustave Keller

Silver, silver gilt, crystal

These pieces come from two different sets bearing the Hutton coat of arms and consisting of a variety of containers for beauty creams, powders, brushes and accessories. Marjorie acquired both of these elegant silver and glass sets during her marriage to Edward F. Hutton. Dressing table sets, traditionally gathered in a leather or wood coffer, were one of the most traditional gifts and were often presented for engagement or weddings.

In the jewelry case, under jewelry display:

Day and Evening Purses

1950-1960

Marjorie carried the evening purse (left) to formal events. Covered with multicolored rhinestones on pale silk, the purse has a wide clasp, with beadwork and five oval enamel medallions depicting couples in eighteenth-century costumes. The cream embroidered purse (center) with one fabric handle was used only during the day. The lustrous evening purse (right) is made of a folded piece of gold cloth. Leaves, flowers, and fruit, embroidered with silver thread in high relief, decorate it. Red and green semi-precious stones complement the extraordinary design of the embroidery.

In the "Lace Case":

Fans and Fan Boxes

The objects in this chest of drawers take inspiration from the container theme of the exhibition *Splendor & Surprise: Elegant Containers, Antique to Modern*. Marjorie Post collected these ornate fans and stored them in the accompanying Asian lacquer boxes.