Eighteenth Century

GOLD BOXES

of Europe

by

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With a Foreword by

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and an Appendix by

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Introduction

A work of art from the past brings with it through the years an indelible picture of its original environment and a faint but unmistakable scent of its surroundings.

Feelings of nostalgia in this instance do not necessarily presuppose the memory of any specific past experience. We have only to hear the strings of a Viennese orchestra playing music by Johann Strauss to be transported into another world and another age. We are somehow moved by the measure of the waltz, although we ourselves never danced at Schönbrunn, and we are similarly affected when we take up a brightly coloured Louix XV snuffbox, although we were never ourselves invited to the court at Versailles.

Two hundred years ago the gentleman who plunged his hand deep into a voluminous pocket and brought out his latest box, with an elaborate armoury of appropriate gestures and finger movements, did so secure in the easy assurance of his own superb and unerring connoisseurship, and could nonchalantly observe the splendid effect his performance of the snuffing ceremony was producing on his enraptured friends. The price paid for the box would be amply justified by the *frisson* of triumph, brief but quite delicious, experienced by the owner at this moment. After all, 'one had as good be out of the world, as out of the fashion.'

Henry d'Allemagne, in his compendious work *Les Accessoires du Costume et du Mobilier,* is careful to point out how a man's background and upbringing are laid bare by the apparently simple act of taking snuff. A countryman might thrust his thumb and forefinger, without ceremony, deep into the box, emerge with a generous pinch of snuff, spread it over the back of his left hand, and sniff up with noisy relish, more often than not smearing his nose in the process.

Persons of gentler birth, fragile shoots from more tenderly cosseted gardens, after a little preparatory tapping on the lid, fastidiously took up a few grains with the tips of their exquisitely manicured fingers, rounded the gesture off with a vague flourish, the better to display the diamond rings with which they were bedizened, and inhaled the powder in an ecstasy of appreciation. If a little should chance to fall on the lace jabot, a smart flick of the finger or of the coloured or patterned snuff handkerchief, specially designed to hide the unsightly brown stains, would at once remove the offending dust. *'L'exercise de la tabatière',* it will be seen, was no matter to be taken lightly. The box itself had probably taken many laborious weeks to complete, and involved the most deliberate planning and painstaking and skilful craftsmanship.

Boxes have always fascinated man. Natives of New Guinea, with barely a visible stitch of clothing are nevertheless believed to clutch their box containing betel-nut with a mixture of pride and fierce determination.

The desire to hide things away is one of the most deep-rooted and primeval human instincts and the invention of the box no doubt sprang from it; perhaps it is explicable psychologically as

a sublimated wish to scurry back to the security of the womb. In the eighteenth century especially, the most dazzling handiwork imaginable was lavished on the manufacture of gold boxes.

If the proper study of mankind is man then the proper study of civilised man is surely his comforts. By this, we do not seek a moral justification or apologia for luxury — it should not be necessary — but, on the contrary, a reminder of the importance attaching to the machinery of comfortable living.

From time to time, certain sour spirits have arisen to sermonise against anything that deliberately sets out to add pleasure and style to our life on earth. St. John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople at the end of the fourth century, delivered a series of thoroughly questionable Homilies at Antioch on the Gospel of St. Matthew. One of these (admittedly a welcome change from his habit of biting the hands of the Old Testament scribes that had fed him), was devoted to an unrelenting diatribe against women who, he maintained, delight in and are 'riveted' to gold ornaments and become thereby a 'common gazing stock' in the marketplace. 'What can be said', he demanded accusingly on another occasion, 'of these women, with their chamber pots of silver!'

He quotes Isaiah, who had also made his views in the matter abundantly plain when he railed against the princely daughters of Zion with their intoxicating scents and glittering stomachers, because 'they walked with a lofty neck, and with winkings of the eyes, and in their walking, trailing their garments, and mincing at the same time with their feet'.

St. Chrysostom declares: 'How much better to feed hungry souls than to bore through the lobes of thy ears, and to hang from them the food of countless poor for no purpose or profit.'

We now recognise that this argument is flawed. We have learned from bitter experience that even if one forgoes comforts and pleasures oneself, there is no guarantee, or even much chance, that the condition of those in need will improve one jot. The only sure result of such self-deprivation is a loss to the world of that much lustre and distinction and a general levelling, which in practice always means lowering, of standards of life. A flourishing tree produces blossom, and a healthy society must have its luxuries.

The desperate calls at times of national crisis in European history for patriotic citizens to hurl their family plate into the State melting-pot, have never been able to hold up for long the inevitable trend of events. They have merely brought about the shameful impoverishment of our art collections, and provided an ineffaceable reproach for succeeding generations to weep over.

Throughout its history the art of the goldsmith has been revered. In France these craftsmen were traditionally privileged as a class, immediately following the sheriffs in ceremonial procession and often actually chosen to carry the Royal Canopy of State. François-Thomas Germain, the great eighteenth century designer and silversmith, was in fact a sheriff of the city of Paris.

In Spain the Emperor Charles Quint gave goldsmiths the right to clothe themselves in pure silk, as a tangible sign that he regarded them not merely as artisans, but as artists.

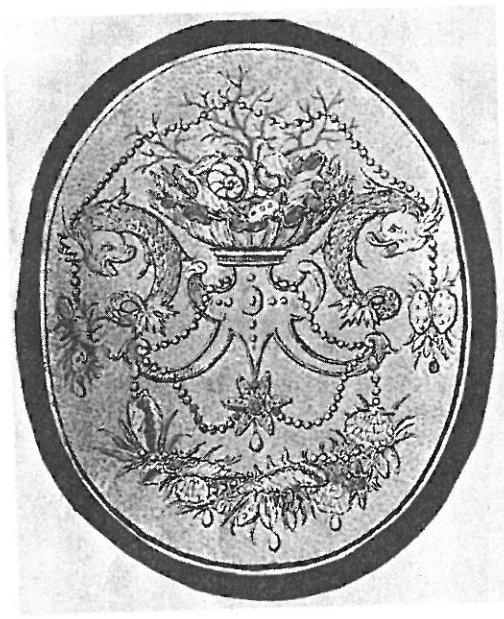
The honour accorded to the jewellers and workers in precious metals in Renaissance Italy is too well known to require rehearsal here — suffice it to say that the practice of 'the father of the arts' was regarded as a fundamental part of any serious artist's training. We know that Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, Donatello, Jacopo della Quercia, Pollaiuolo, Francia and Cellini, quite apart from their

better-known activities in other fields, were all proficient goldsmiths.

It seems that boxes themselves have played a part in the conduct of social affairs from a very early date. Before the letter box came into existence, the French had what they called *'boîtes-à-message'* or *'messager'* which were always in metal, sometimes precious, and were fitted with either a lock or padlock. In 1369 the *Inventaire des biens meublés d'Alix de Frolois, abbesse de Jouasse* specifies *'une boîte d'argent à Messaiger'*. Two, and only two, identical keys were made which could open the lock, one for each of the correspondents, so that complete secrecy was preserved as the precious container was carried from one to the other.

A history of gold boxes should properly begin with a reference to pomanders, scentballs, muskballs or *boîtes-de-senteurs* as they were variously described. By the seventeenth century, these objects were invariably found on every dressing table and in every pocket, they took the form of globular receptacles for perfume or aromatic disinfectants and were very often divided into hinged cells or *loculi*. They were an essential item of equipment when appearances in public were contemplated, in a world of unappetising crowds and exposed sewage.

In addition to the large silver or carved stone sweetmeat *coupes* or *nefs* which stood on tables, small boxes were designed to be carried about the person as early as the fourteenth century. They contained *suçades* or *dragées* (strange confections of all colours, formed as animals, birds and even



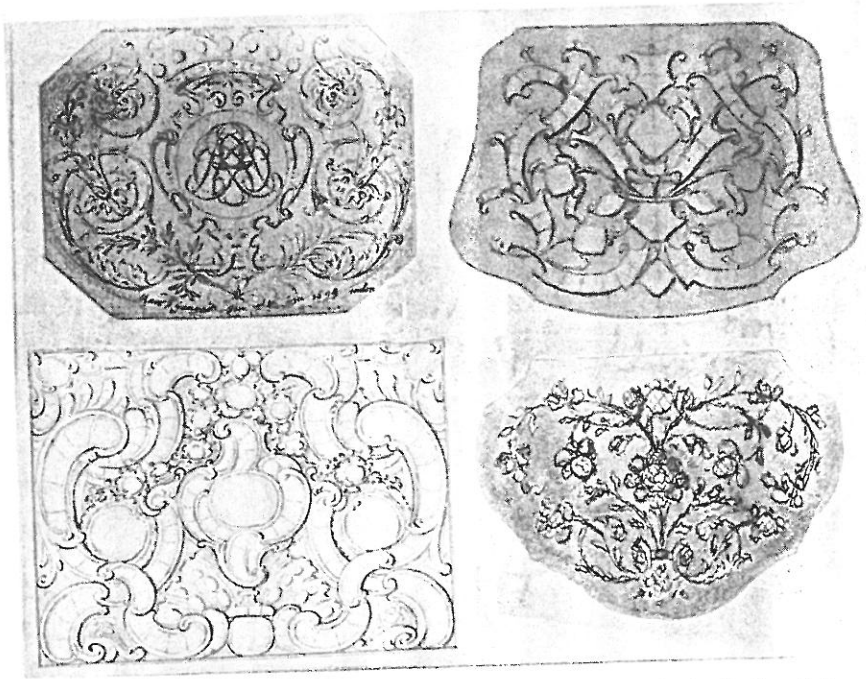
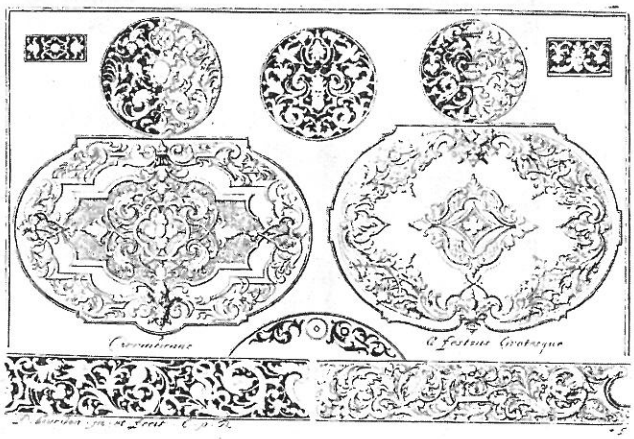


Plate 22 (left). Drawing for a portrait box with dolphins, mussels, cockles, coral and a central starfish, in Indian ink washed with yellow, green, red and gold, by Marcus Gunter, c.1685.

Plate 23A-D (right). Four designs for snuffboxes in crayon and ink, A: signed and dated 1699, Toulon. C and D: heightened with wash. Gunter, who worked and travelled all over Europe, is thought to have been English, spending his last years in London where in 1739 he was still making drawings at the age of about seventy-nine. From *Marc. Gunter's designs for jewellers, 1684 to 1733,* a book of drawings in the Röhsska Arts and Crafts Museum, Göteborg, Sweden.



Plates 24 and 25. Engraved title page and specimen designs for boxes made by Pierre Bourdon in Paris, 1703. British Museum, London.

human beings), spices, aromatics, dried figs or sugar plums *'pour avoir dans le jour de quoi se parfumer la bouche ou se fortifier l'estomac'*. The detailed description of such boxes to be found in the inventories of Charles V, le Sage: *'une boiste de cristal garnye d'argent aux armes D'Evreux';* of Anne de Bretagne: *'six bouëtes avec leurs couvercles, toutes vermeilles, dorées dedans et dohors, a mettre confitures';* and of Philippe-le-Beau and Marguerite d'Autriche, show clearly how highly they were valued. These boxes were made of carved wood, ivory, stone, iron, silver or gold and later examples often contained a small spoon of the same material. We are told in *L'Isle des Hermaphrodites* that Henry III, at his toilet, always insisted upon *'une boëte quarée ou il y avait de certains morceaux de sucre d'une composition à ce qu'on disait fort excellente pour donner quelque vigueur desquels, avec une cuillère d'argent, il se fit mettre quelque quantité dans une boëtelette d'argent doré fort mignonettement élabourée, qu'on lui avait apportée et dans laquelle il y avait une petite cuillère, de même étoffe, pour les pouvoir prendre plus aisément et fit mettre la dite boite dans la poche ou il avait mis son mouchoir.'*

By the eighteenth century, examples in gold or silver were often attractively enamelled. As a class, these boxes intended for the pocket were known as *drageoirs,* sweetmeat or comfit boxes.

The first 'snuffboxes' seem to have been in the form of pears (*poire-à-poudre*) with an opening in the top to allow a small mound of fine powder to be poured out on to the back of the hand before being sniffed up into each nostril. Vigneul-Marville in his *Mélanges d'Histoire et de Litérature* of 1700, says that the Marquis de Paulmy was the first to mention this type of 'snuffbox' in his reference to a seventeenth century engraving depicting a cavalier holding a sort of ball in his hand, fitted with a neck from which the snuff was allowed to escape on to the back of his left hand. A rare example in the Wallace Collection is shown on Plates 524 and 525.

Later in the seventeenth century, before the advent of the snuffbox proper, the tobacco rasp was in general use. In France this was known as a *grivoise* — a *grivois,* or jolly fellow, referring to soldiers

who used them during military campaigns in Strasbourg in 1690. With these one had to grate one's own tobacco. Soon after, it was found more convenient to buy tobacco in powder form, and the *tabatière* or *tabaquière* as it was originally called, came into its own. Everyone had *tout un jeu de tabatières* in gold, silver, ivory, shell, or mother-of-pearl, with portraits displayed on the lid, or hidden under it within the box itself. Molière called the snuffbox a *'petit grenier tabachique'*.

It was the Roi Soleil's dislike of snuff and snuffers that brought about the creation of a new type of *boîte-à-portrait* — or, more accurately, a *tabatière-à-portrait* — a snuffbox masquerading under a designedly ambiguous name, the painted likeness mounted on the lid serving as a passport into a court which frowned upon *'l'art de priser'*. The authentic *boîtes-à-portrait* were traditionally believed to have been flat in form, either oval or rectangular, and were in fact elaborate cases for the preservation of highly valued painted likenesses and they were often worn as pendants by means of a ring projecting from the top.

It has been suggested by Nocq and Dreyfus in their book on the Louvre boxes, that *boîte-à-portrait* did not signify a box at all, but rather a portrait miniature, set within a jewelled frame, and they illustrate an engraving of two examples by Mondon to support this view. Pendant portrait boxes containing paintings by François Clouet and Nicholas Hilliard are shown on Plates 157 to 160 and another later German example on Plates 602 to 604. The *boîte-à-portrait* in the mid-sixteenth century assumed a tremendous importance, frequently enamelled and set with jewels, the likeness seen through a piece of clear rock crystal; it almost played the part, in Colding's apt phrase, of a profane reliquary. Hilliard himself has left us in no doubt of his own high regard for the miniature painting contained within the box and of its relation to the craft of the goldsmith:

'It is a thing apart from all other painting or drawing, and tendeth not to comon mens vsse, either for furnishing of howsses or any patternes for tapistries, or building, or any other worke whatsoeuer, and yet it excelleth all other painting whatsoeuer in sondry points, in giuing the true lustur to pearle and precious stone, and worketh the metals gold or siluer with themselfes, which so enricheth and innobleth the worke that it seemeth to be the thinge itse[l]fe, euen the worke of God and not of man.'

Louis XIV favoured miniatures painted in enamel, and most of the best portraits of this period were carried out in this medium by Petitot and on a less sublime level by such artists as Perrault, Chatillon and Ferrand.

We hear of another painter who became celebrated for the technique he had evolved of painting enamel portraits evidently in imitation of *bas-relief* — this was the Swede, Frederick Bruckmann.

The first artist to paint in miniature on ivory appears to have been Rosalba Carriera: the Galleria di St. Luca in Rome preserves an example of her work dated as early as 1705. The idea grew out of the Venetian speciality of decorating ivory snuffboxes in crude imitation of lacquer, but Rosalba's *fondelli,* as she called them, decorative paintings carried out on the bottoms of these boxes, far transcended in quality and scope anything that had gone before.

Painters in miniature, as opposed to enamel painters, were not generally employed for the decoration of boxes until 1715 or 1716 when Bourdin, Duvignon, Mlles Brison, Château and de la Boissière invaded this new and rewarding field.

Louvois, Louis XIV's War Minister is supposed to have owned a large snuffbox, the first of great opulence, employed in secret, or at any rate well away from the disapproving eye of His Majesty. It was of lacquer, richly mounted, very high and shaped as a heart. When the king died, Louvois' example was followed by those who had hitherto lacked the courage.

Patch-boxes — *boîtes-à-mouches* — were generally rectangular or sometimes oval and smaller and flatter than snuffboxes. Spongeboxes, often spherical, were similarly designed (*boîtes-à-éponges*), and there were even little boxes made to contain minute tablets of soap, *boîtes-à-savonnette.*

A favourite form of box contained both patches and rouge and was known as a *boîte-à-rouge et à mouches;* usually of a small, solid-looking rectangular form, the principal lid, lined with a piece of looking-glass, opens to reveal the cover or covers of either one or two inner compartments and a free space running the length of the box, designed to hold a small gold-handled brush.

The entire bottom of the box is often in effect a hinged lid covering another shallow compartment, very conveniently proportioned for accommodating patches, much more so, as a matter of fact, than the awkwardly deep and small lidded sections, one of which was traditionally believed to have been put to this use. It seems far more likely that these main chambers were used for rouge on one side and for some cream or salve on the other. Examples of this type of box are illustrated on Plates 352, 457 and 458; their precise function is well illustrated on Plate 937.

Patches of gummed taffeta which were applied to the faces of both men and women throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were far more varied and bizarre than is generally supposed. Patterns were by no means confined to a modest round spot (*assassin*), star or mere half-moon. Under Louis XV the most extravagant ideas were eagerly translated into terms of the patch, not excluding animals, insects and human figures — we hear of one design, particularly enterprising if a shade overstated, taking the form of a complete coach and horses which covered almost half the wearer's face. Ladybirds were also extremely popular as tiny symbols of good fortune.

Tremendous significance attached to the actual position chosen for the *mouche.* According to De Resbecq in his *Bibliothèque des dames* (Amsterdam, 1765), the passionate wore them at the corner of the eye, *la passionnée,* the stately almost in the centre of the forehead, *la majestueuse,* the sprightly on the edge of the dimple formed by the cheek when laughing, the quieter type of woman between the mouth and chin, *la silencieuse,* one using a patch to hide a pimple, *la receleuse,* or *la voleuse,* the gallant in the middle of the cheek for some obscure reason, one given to kissing and being kissed at the corner of the mouth, *la baiseuse,* the coquette, on the lips, and the brazen, if you please, on the nose, *l'effrontée.*

Dulac, Rue St. Honoré, was the most successful and famous merchant for all types of patches and the looking-glasses before which to apply them. There was, it will be seen, quite an elaborate language of patches similar to that of the flower in the hair or the fan. A couplet by Pope runs:

'Snuff or the fan supply each pause of chat,
With singing, laughing, ogling and all that.'

A particularly virulent sermon delivered by the preacher Massillon, who enquired sarcastically why these absurd pieces of stuff were confined to the face, resulted in society women applying them to their bosoms in order to accentuate the creamy purity of that region, a habit which had possibly

fallen into disuse, since we know of a charming poem of 1661 entitled *'La Faiseuse de Mouches'* which opens:

'Pour adoucir les yeux, pour parer le visage,
Pour mettre sur le front, pour placer sur le sein.'

According to *mémoires secrètes* of the period other less public sites were, on occasions, inevitably chosen for decoration.

Lazare Duvaux tells us in his invaluable *Livre Journal* that Madame de Pompadour had on her dressing table an elaborate patch-box naturalistically enamelled and formed as a swan.

The ancient Egyptians' liberal use of cosmetics is well known; the Greeks and the Romans also devoted much time and attention to this most subtle art. It is doubtful if any really civilized society has since abandoned the practice; the legislation in 'strength-through-joy' Germany forbidding its use merely emphasizes the point. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe, rouge and powder were freely applied by everyone who considered herself or himself to be *à la mode.*

Only the purest and most naturally appetizing dishes, after all, can be acceptably served without the benefit of some flavouring or dressing; for a woman to think otherwise of herself is often a particularly boring form of arrogance.

Marie-Thérèse of Spain, first wife of the Dauphin Louis (son of Louis XV and father of Louis XVI), was a case in point. She rebelled against the custom of painting the face, but when she arrived in France in 1745, her royal parents-in-law made it pretty clear to her that she would have to revise her ideas and do as others did.

Then, as now, people in the cosmetic business could command very high prices since every self-respecting *mondaine* had her *boîte-à-rouge et à mouches.* During the reign of Louis XVI, Madame Josse was court purveyor of a vegetable rouge which was specially commended for being *'aussi beau et aussi agréable que les couleurs naturelles'.* Even more exclusive, however, was a certain Mlle Martin who sold her wares in small pots which the Royal Manufactory at Sèvres made to her own order.

Many round boxes without hinges were designed for powder, rouge and face creams; it is incorrect to describe these as snuffboxes, which were invariably hinged. Madame Palatine, Duchess of Orléans and sister-in-law of Louis XIV, has left us an informative little fragment in a letter dated 1714 *'. . . ci-joint une petite boîte avec de la pomade divine. On appelle ces boîtes-là des régences.'* The work lavished on these *régences* was often no less splendid than that on the *tabatières* which inevitably occupy most of our time in this essay. For example, the *boîte-à-rouge et à mouches* in the marriage coffer of Marie-Antoinette in 1770 cost 1,200 livres, and was in gold, enamelled translucent blue with an enamelled panel on the lid.

On the trade card of the late eighteenth century Paris merchant-jeweller Biennais *'Au Singe Violet'* in the Rue St. Honoré, the details of his stock in trade are copiously itemised in three columns headed respectively *Tableterie, Ebénisterie* and *Orfevrerie,* and it is under the first of these categories that shell and ivory snuffboxes lined in gold are to be found, while silver and gold snuffboxes are included in the third list. *Boîtes-à-rouge,* oddly enough, are included under *Ebénisterie,* entitling us, presumably, to regard these round hingeless boxes as part of the permanent equipment of the dressing table, never to be carried on the person.

The full significance of the snuffbox has not always been sufficiently appreciated. It was, in small, an elegant epitome of an age of elegance. What, after all, was there of value to give a man of taste without overstepping the mark? A particularly fine piece of furniture or a picture, besides being altogether too cumbersome a gift, would carry with it the impertinent suggestion that the wretched man had not the wit to furnish his home properly. The gift had to be something quite small. A jewel was not always suitable, however dearly the proposed recipient might have desired it, and apart from a gift of money or the deeds of some imposing property, both quite unthinkable, the choice was not wide.

But a snuffbox was a very different matter. A snuffbox, however elaborate and costly, was after all merely a container for snuff, and could be pressed into a man's hand and patted away with a vaguely murmured, 'Think nothing of it, my dear fellow!'

Politically, too, the *tabatière* had a very special importance, serving on countless occasions as a silent and graceful ambassador sent from one court to another. Having once established the principle that a gift might be acceptable, how much less risk in sending a lovely *objet-de-luxe* than a mere statesman who might, at a crucial moment, prejudice or even wreck his country's cause by inadvertently stammering out some blunder. Pacts between nations were often cemented, agreements made that much more secure, by a judiciously launched present. Heads of state often found it convenient, as the need arose, to reward members of their own entourage with presentation boxes, often bearing on the lid a portrait likeness or monogram of the giver. Sometimes, whatever the donor's intention, the results of his gift were not always predictable; the amber box presented by Louis XV to the mother of his bride Marie-Leczinska, valued at only 1,200 francs, was taken quite unequivocally as an insult.

To have some idea of the importance of the snuffbox as a diplomatic gift in eighteenth century France, it is only necessary to glance through the records in the national archives dealing with *Les Menus Plaisirs,* or the sixty volumes of *'Présents Diplomatiques'* in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The huge mass of documentary evidence alone suffices to demonstrate the seriousness attaching to this royal custom. The items are described in detail, not excluding the number and weight of stones, and their cost.

Probably the most extravagant was a box given in 1720 to the Marquis di Scotti at Parma for some special service he was able to render the king. This box bore the royal portrait by Jean-Baptiste Massé, one of the finest miniature portraitists of his time, and was decorated with diamonds — the cost was 129,852 livres, a golden handshake indeed!

A box once given under such circumstances was very often sold back to the supplier, a procedure made respectable by repeated performance. The jeweller Solle bought back the same snuffbox from the Comte de Viri, the Sardinian Ambassador to the French Court, no less than three times, on each occasion paying the same sum of 25,000 livres. The king had paid 29,340 livres in 1775 for this gift, a magnificent *boîte-à-portrait* heavy with brilliant diamonds, and was quite happy to allow the same amount to be spent with the same *fournisseur* for the same object to be given to the same diplomat, it would seem, *ad nauseam.* One can imagine with what enthusiasm the Chairmen of companies and retired warriors all over the world would today welcome some similar arrangement

sanctified by usage, whereby they might convert the inevitable solid silver presentation caskets, unbelievable ink stands or paralytic regimental groups into hard cash.

Many countries made boxes, but it was France above all that produced the most original and beautiful designs.

The list which appears as Appendix G makes no claim to be complete; it merely sets out a record of those mainly eighteenth century designers who are known to have published drawings for boxes. Artist-craftsmen have made hundreds of original designs for boxes, which were never published and for which no publisher was ever contemplated — working drawings which the goldsmith had by him at the bench, the majority of which have undoubtedly perished in the course of time.

Many shapes and amusing forms were adopted by imaginative goldsmiths. One of the prettiest little boxes in the Wallace Collection at Hertford House is an enamelled model of a *chaise percée,* a night-commode or close stool for travelling comfort (Plate 343) and there is an enchanting silver example in the Louvre designed as a carriage. Such little conceits, known as *fantaisies,* do not turn up very often, however, and the collector who finds some comparable treasure is to be congratulated.

The quest for novelty and the exotic was without end. Peter Fuhring quotes a fascinating letter from Carl Frederik Schefer, the representative in Paris of the Swedish court, to Carl Gustaf Tessin, dated November 6th, 1744.[1]

'La boete que jai l'honneur de vous envoyer cy jointe a été choisie par M. le Duc de Nevers, l'homme de France qui passe pour avoir le plus de gout, et il l'a choisie parmi toutes les boetes de Paris. La nouveauté et la singularité du travail l'ont determiné autant que la beauté; tout ce qui'il y a la dedans de verd sont des plumes et paons naturelles enduites d'un verni qui les fait ressembler a de l'email. C'est certainement la premiére boete de cette espece qui ait jamais été faite, mais comme elle a bien reussi, il y aura sans doute des copies en quantité pour le tems des etrennes. Le prix est de 1400 livres.'

It will be seen that a man of fashion was far more concerned about the harmonious colouring and graceful proportions of his new snuffbox than he was about its success as a receptacle for snuff. His concern also was with the precious moment of happy, tactile voluptuousness when his fingers sought out his snuffbox and deliberately and positively enjoyed its contours and surfaces before it was even brought into the light of day: in the case of the most beautiful early examples, the designer would have had this tactile quality in mind at all stages of the box's manufacture. By the time the first half of the eighteenth century had passed, however, most boxes were made to be admired principally with the eyes. It is generally true to say that when they have to serve as ceremonial counters or memorials for distinguished men they lose their special private delightfulness; the Wellington and Napoleon presentation boxes are usually very well made, but are also on the whole rather glum objects.

Women in society — as well as men — were great snuffers; we find the indefatigably critical Princesse des Ursins writing in distinctly caustic vein from Madrid in 1713 to Maréchal de Tessé about the Duchesse d'Olonne, the notorious court beauty. She referred to that lady's excessive painting of her cheeks giving the impression of either drunkenness or fury, and concluding tartly that no possible harm would be done if she could possibly make arrangements for her nose not

1. Foreword by Peter Fuhring to the catalogue of an Exhibition of Ornamental Drawings, 1550-1900, held in New York in October 1987 by Armin B. Allen and Niall Hobhouse.

Plate 67. A Meissen group modelled by J.J. Kaendler, showing a girl helping herself from her gallant's snuffbox, c.1740. Height 5¼in. (13.3cm).

to be forever bespattered with snuff.

Furetière complains in his great dictionary of 1727 that 'there is a craze to keep cramming one's nose with snuff, under the pretext of clearing the brain. The habit has become so prevalent that everybody partakes of it almost continually, even women and young girls. There is something disgusting in seeing a woman or young girl whose nose is all besmeared with snuff.'

As if to sum up the warm feelings engendered by female snuffing, Boileau wrote with the undisguised ferocity of bitter personal experience:

'T'ai-je fait voir de joie une belle animée
Qui souvent d'un repas sortant tout enfumée,
Fait même à ses amants, trop faibles d'estomac,
Redouter ses baisers pleins d'ail et de tabac.'

Nocq records in his *Poinçon de Paris* that in 1782 the famous gold box maker Nicolas-Jean-Baptiste Choconain-Delaunay was disturbed when out dining with a neighbour, by the announcement that his workshop had been broken into and that eighteen gold snuffboxes had been stolen

'as many for women as for men'.

Even the colleges were not immune from the habit, and the following poem, composed by the young Voltaire, was written at the bidding of, and as a supplication to, his teacher in rhetoric, the indulgent Père Porée, in order to regain possession of the snuffbox with which he had been playing in class, and which, as a result, had been confiscated.

'Adieu, ma pauvre tabatière,
Adieu, je ne te verrai plus;
Ni soins, ni larmes, ni prières,
Ne te rendront à moi; mes efforts sont perdus!
Adieu, ma pauvre tabatière,
Adieu, doux fruit de mes écus;
S'il faut à prix d'argent te racheter encore,
J'irai plutôt vider les trésors de Plutus,
Mais ce n'est pas ce dieu que l'on veut que j'implore.
Pour te revoir, hélas! il faut prier Phébus. . .
Qu'on oppose entre nous une forte barrière.
Me demander des vers, hélas! je n'en puis plus.
Adieu, ma pauvre tabatière,
Adieu, je ne te verrai plus.

An elaborate exposition of the social history of snuff and snuff taking is not called for in this context, but an outline, however nebulous, may serve to explain the great number and wide variety of snuffboxes which have come down to us. Columbus landed at San Salvador on October 12th, 1492 in quest of gold. There is a legend that he was formally presented on his arrival with several golden leaves of tobacco by the Indians, and that, not knowing that their value was above gold, he threw them away; in fact, of course, they were the most precious gift with which he could have been welcomed. Whether or not this took place, it does seem that Romano Pane, a Franciscan friar who was also in the party, was especially intrigued by the customs of the natives and above all by their evident enjoyment of tobacco in two different ways: by burning the leaf and inhaling — smoking, and by grinding it into a fine powder or dust and sniffing it up — snuffing.

Catherine de Medici is traditionally believed to have been the first European snuffer of note, having received tobacco leaves and seeds in 1559 from Jean Nicot, one-time citizen of Nîmes and at this date French Ambassador to the court of Portugal. How this enterprising diplomat acquired the precious weed is not known with any certainty. Some accounts claim that Damian de Goes, a man dedicated to botanical research among other scientific pursuits, had healthy tobacco plants growing in his Lisbon garden; other writers report that Nicot obtained the leaves from a Dutch sailor. The truth may well be found in a combination of both explanations. Seamen returning from the New World would undoubtedly have seen with what pleasure the Indians enjoyed tobacco.

The fact that Nicot was able to send home full instructions on preparing and indulging in the leaf suggests that either he or de Goes had received first hand and specific advice from someone

who had been on the spot and witnessed the ceremony for himself. It is to Nicot in any case that legend has awarded the palm, as evidenced by the term *Nicotiana tabacum.*

Tobacco itself was not always popular or even accepted. James I of England, its passionate and articulate enemy, himself wrote and published his famous *Counterblast to Tobacco* in 1604 in which he referred to the custom he detested as 'this filthie noveltie, a great vanitie and uncleanness, a sinful and shameful lust, this uncivil trick. . .loathesome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the braine, dangerous to the lungs, and in the black stinking fume thereof nearest resembling the horrible Stigian smoke of the Pit that is bottomlesse'.

In 1634 the Tsar Michael of Russia issued a decree to the effect that second-offence snuff takers should have their noses amputated. Louis XIV, who also abhorred the practice, was somewhat less Asiatic in his own treatment of the problem, which he felt was getting out of hand. He is traditionally believed to have ordered his Royal Physician, Fagon, to deliver a public address setting out in detail the evils of snuff so that the habit, which was rapidly gaining ground at Court, might be stamped out once and for all. Much of the effect of the worthy doctor's undoubted eloquence was lost on his audience, however, owing to his absent-minded but recurring dips into his snuffbox.

When it became obvious that nothing could be done to stop this pleasurable occupation, the State and the Church, true to form, both turned it to their advantage by charging revenues and imposing fines respectively. But whatever the fortunes of snuff taking, the popularity of the snuffbox itself never waned.

There are occasions when it is not easy or even possible to express in words everything one wants to say. Madame de Pompadour, when she received her recently appointed Contrôleur-Général M. de Laverdy at her death-bed, found an effective and charming way of saying what she sincerely felt. Presenting him with a snuffbox decorated with a portrait of Sully, Henry IV's wise minister, she said, indicating the miniature: 'Here in truth is *your* portrait.' The Contrôleur bowed, opened the box and found within the following lines composed by the Marquise herself:

'De l'habile et sage Sully
Il ne nous reste que l'image
Aujourd'hui ce grand personnage
Va revivre dans Laverdy.'

The important role of the snuffbox was vividly demonstrated in Imperial Russia, when at a formal court banquet given by Catherine the Great she is supposed mischievously to have delivered herself of certain unconventional ideas. One of her secretaries, Teploff, irritated that an unworthy impression be given to the distinguished assembly, was overheard whispering to his neighbour. The Empress asked him to repeat aloud these criticisms, which were then heard up and down the entire length of the stunned table with a spine-chilling clarity. Catherine, scarlet and discountenanced, abruptly changed the conversation. It was generally concluded that the wretched man's career at court was at an end, especially when, a little later, he was summoned by a chamberlain to the Tsarina's private apartments.

He was ushered into the boudoir where the Great Catherine, in a state of *semi-déshabillé,* was at her toilet; she continued studying her looking glass for a few moments before turning round to acknowledge her unhappy visitor with a dazzling smile.

'While I realize,' she said, 'that you are at all times prompted only by the most profound and high-minded allegiance and veneration for Our Imperial dignity, I feel I must ask your indulgent sympathy. Being a woman, albeit an Empress, I am constantly heir to those *faiblesses* which are the inevitable characteristics of my sex. 'If — and she gravely picked up a superb gold and diamond snuffbox from her table — 'you hear me about to embark upon some questionable or ill-advised observation in the future, please oblige your Empress and warn me by doing as I am now doing, and thus spare me in public. I shall understand.'

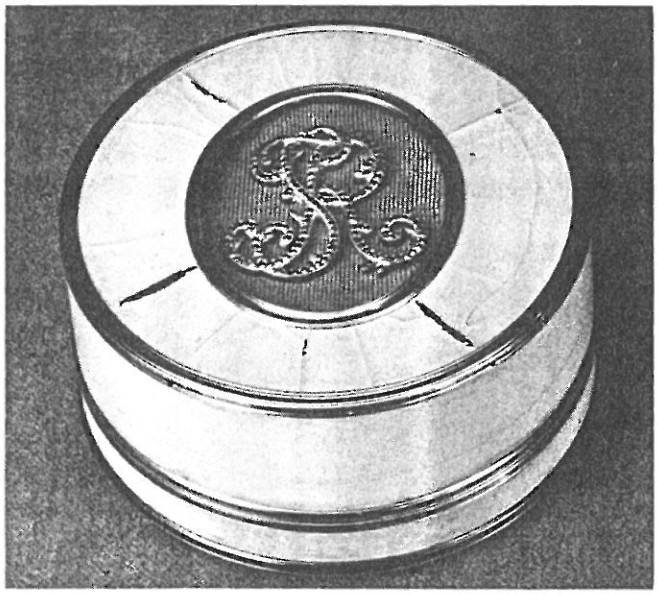
In silence the Empress of All the Russias gravely opened the lid of the box and deliberately and firmly closed it again before giving it into his hands.

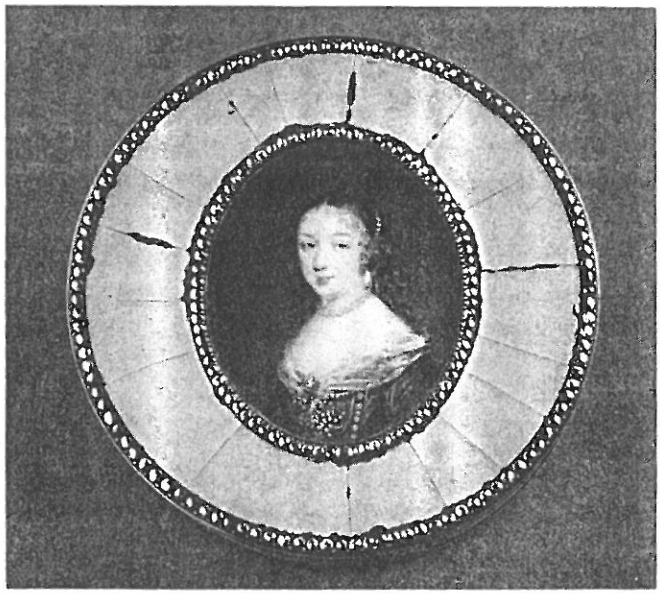
Without question one man at least had understood *'le message de la tabatière'* as, thankfully clutching his new box, he left this magnanimous lady's presence.

One of the most fascinating cases of the language of snuffboxes being misunderstood with quite devastating consequences, concerns Horace Walpole. Returning from Strawberry Hill to his house in Arlington Street in June 1766, he found to his surprise, a round, white-lacquered gold box on his writing table, with a miniature portrait of Madame de Sévigné, one of his special heroines, mounted in the lid and the monogram of Rabutin and Sévigné on the bottom.

Inside the box he found a letter addressed to himself, almost on fire with the amorous burden of its message, which purported to have been penned by none other than the celebrated personage depicted on the lid of the box - a lady who, it should be noted, had breathed her last just seventy years earlier.

How the box appeared in this way, and who actually wrote the letter contained within it, were mysteries not to be unravelled by the most strenuous inquiries. At this time, Walpole was carrying





Plates 117 and 118. Red gold box lacquered ivory and lined with tortoiseshell. The detachable lid decorated with two rings of cut steel (marcasite) and a miniature painting after Petitot of Madame de Sévigné whose cypher, 'R' and 'S' (Rabutin and Sévigné), entwined in marcasite appears on the bottom of the box against a blue silk background. This box was sent, with a letter inside, to Horace Walpole on June 17, 1766 (see above). By Joeph Gibert. Paris 1765-66. Diameter 2¾in. (7cm). Height 1 5/16 in. (3.4cm). The Countess Waldegrave.

on his voluminous correspondence with the blind and demanding Madame du Deffand, twenty years his senior. He wrote at once to her, confiding his own private opinion that the box, with its delicious contents, might in fact have been sent to him by the beautiful, influential and much-toasted Duchesse de Choiseul whom he had met in Paris. Walpole was extravagant in his expressions of joy at receiving such an ardent message from so unexpected a quarter — he confessed in his letter that he dropped to his knees, crossed himself, cried for help, and believed himself bewitched. What would her husband think? and so on.

One letter was not enough; another followed post-haste discussing at length the nature and quality of the gift he should prepare for this sweet creature. It turned out, of course, that Madame du Deffand, *'la grande pécheresse'*, had herself sent both the box and the letter, and that a gaffe of monstrous proportions had been committed by the wretched Walpole. Both London and Paris, not excluding Madame de Choiseul herself, were enchanted with the story for many weeks.

The box, in the collection of Lady Waldegrave, is illustrated on the previous page.

The gold boxes made in Paris in the eighteenth century have never been surpassed in quality or variety by those from any other country in the world — *vieux Paris* has in fact become a term indicative of irreproachable style combined with supreme quality of craftsmanship; the gold boxes were the accessories of a highly cultivated society. If there were anywhere today a single workshop capable of producing an enamelled box of this order, could it produce anything more chic or 'sophisticated' than the examples shown on Plates 246 and 252.

The ambition to show oneself a step ahead of one's neighbour in matters of fashion has rarely been more conscientiously stimulated and satisfied than it was in this epoch. It is easy to understand why it has become known as the *Siècle de la Tabatière.* It was not only the wish to impress, however, that prompted the manufacture of fine boxes, but a lively, sympathetic and informed appreciation of beautiful objects by an interested and critical aristocracy. There was a unique relationship between patron and craftsman, who were bound together by a common desire to make something good.

As much care went into the manufacture of the little boxes and needle-cases which a certain Sister Chervain was making in 1759 in the rue Ticquetonne out of coloured straw, as was lavished on those richer examples in precious metals. The broad humanity of those golden, though undemocratic, days seems very remote from our own spiritual winter with its expressionless mass standardisation, often hideous materials and hectoring public voice, daily droning mediocrity through newspapers and television sets. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that those examples of fine craftsmanship that have survived the two and a half centuries should today be sought out and treasured by the discerning.