

Chinese snuff bottles

Chinese snuff bottles, designed to contain powdered tobacco or snuff, were invented at the court of Kang Hsi (1661-1722), the second Emperor of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Tobacco had been introduced to the Imperial Court as early as the late Ming period but it wasn't until the succeeding Qing Dynasty that the habit or, better yet, the addiction to tobacco became ubiquitous at court.

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Because tobacco was so very expensive, it was limited to the Imperial family, high officials and the influential minority of China for at least the first 100 years of its use.

Snuff had been presented to the Emperors from Western emissaries in snuff boxes, elegant enamelled and jewelled containers that were popular in Europe. However, the boxes could not be sealed to make them air tight and the high humidity in Peking resulted in caking of the snuff. The bottle form, one that had a long history in China as a container for medicine, was more practical, both because it protected the snuff from moisture and because it could be more easily carried in sleeves and pouches, since Chinese garments did not have pockets.

The first bottles made specifically for snuff were glass. They were fabricated in the glassworks established by Kang Hsi and supervised by a Bavarian Jesuit Priest, Kilian Stumpf, who introduced western glass-making techniques. Glass bottles of this period are highly prized by collectors.

Though glass continued to be one of the most popular materials for snuff bottles, it soon became evident that they were not suitable for use in Peking's winter season, because of their proclivity for shattering in the extreme cold. This led to the fabrication of bottles made of stone, jade, chalcedony, quartz and even semi-precious materials such as lapis lazuli and tourmaline.

The bottles were highly prized by China's emperors, and fabricated by the very best craftsmen. Early in the evolution of snuff bottles, came enamelled bottles with designs on metal and later on glass. Many of these enamelled bottles were designed by the Jesuits at court who introduced Western enamelling techniques, although the execution was done by Chinese craftsmen. They were highly valued when made and continue to be sought after by collectors today.

In the 19th century, when tobacco became more affordable, the habit of taking snuff diffused to the population at large. A profusion of blue and white porcelain bottles were fabricated. Likewise the technique of inside painted bottles was developed and remains an important snuff bottle art today.

Some of the finest decorative art of the Qing Dynasty is exemplified in snuff bottles. Though they may never have been considered high art per se, they were treasured as personal items of virtue, much in the way that expensive Swiss watches are today.

Snuff bottles often display designs with specific meanings; wishes for long life, for many children, for success in the civil service examinations, for a happy marriage, for wealth and status etc. This, along with the enormous diversity of material from which they are made, and the refined and exquisite craftsmanship of their execution, guarantees their continued appeal to collectors today.

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Fig. 1
Gourd and ivory snuff bottle. Moulded in four main sections, two on each main side, each with a different auspicious motif: a flying bat, a spray of cherries, a fan and a be-ribboned, hanging musical chime, c. 18th century. Bloch collection.



Fig. 2
Palace Petals. Translucent white and ruby-pink glass. Mother-of-pearl stopper. The ruby-pink glass ground to powder and sandwiched between layers of translucent white glass. Carved as a vessel contained within overlapping, formalised lotus petals. Palace workshops, Beijing, 1730-1800. Height: 4.4cm. Marakovic Collection.



Fig. 3
Transparent ruby-red, and bubble- and white-fleck suffused glass. Carved as a single overlay of ruby-red on a colourless ground with a continuous design made up of archaic depictions of a flying bat, a deer holding a *lingzhi* in its mouth, and a *chi* dragon holding a leafy branch bearing three peaches in its mouth. The bodies of the two larger beasts, and the extended wings of the bats carved to resemble the bodies of *kui* dragons. Imperial Palace workshops, Beijing, 1700-1770.



Fig. 4
Green inkstone bottle. 1750-1795. 'By Imperial Command' mark on the back and a poem. Marakovic Collection.

Fig. 5
Lotus cloisonné snuff bottle. Originally from the Monimar collection. Now belongs to the Marakovic collection. No mark. 1760-1820.

