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(Top & below)
A German jewelled enamelled gold snuff-box struck with two french Post-1838 restricted warranty marks for gold. Courtesy, Christie's;
A german enamelled gold snuff-box dated 1820 attributed to Johann Daniel Bernéaud. Courtesy, Christie's

GOLD ACCENTS

Enameled boxes played a key role in the conduct of social affairs since the medieval era. Evolving over the period until the 19th century, English and continental gold boxes and objects of vertu are the century's most sought-after accessories and a perfect addition to the collector's shelf

Among the many delicate luxuries of 18th century Europe, gold boxes were an essential item, personal or for home décor, irrespective of the gender. Today, you might be taken aback by the sheer variety of embellishments, shapes and materials used on these antique objects made of gold but at the time it was common to have a pretty gold box – small one for you to take around and perhaps a larger one for the table at home. Decorated with precious stones, porcelain, enamel, mother of pearl, or other fancy trimmings, these boxes were of prime importance in the conduct of social affairs. Back then, they were extensively produced all over Europe, including Germany, Switzerland, Russia, France, Italy, Austria, England and even in Denmark and Sweden.

THE DESIGN TRANSITION

Before these boxes took shape from gold, they were originally carved out of wood and ivory, or even made of iron. It was only later, in the 18th century, when the box steadily became an object of exquisiteness, each one aiming to be a masterpiece in its own. Since then, the humble boxes were being beautifully enamelled, and embellished with semi-precious hardstones for an exquisite look and feel.

Eventually becoming the century's most sought-after accessory, the boxes came in various shapes and design, like pomanders, an apple-shaped container, or vinaigrettes, boxes made of silver, which were primarily used by the ladies.



A Swiss enamelled musical gold scent-bottle by Piguet & Capt, dated 1805. Courtesy, Christie's



SNUFF BOXES

It was in the 17th century, in France primarily, that the popularity of snuff led to the extensive use of a snuff-box, also known as the *tabatière*. With the rising trend, a *tabatière* was nothing less than a collectible, worthy enough to be a part of any aesthete collector's shelf.

The exquisite design and the material value of these boxes were not just fashionable but were also objects showcasing sophisticated imagery alluding to historical events and fiction. With time, these boxes were not just for men – something similar was produced for the ladies, in sizes meant for the table or the pocket.

VARIETY IN VERTU

Gold boxes evolved over a period of time and started coming in varied forms. The *boîte-à-mouches* were boxes that were meant for small mouches, or patches, in various shapes and sizes. The patches could be of various types – ones that were meant to hide smallpox scars, or ones that were used for decoration. Another form, the *boîte-à-rouge et à mouches* contained rouge and patches. Fitted with a mirror, the box also had a small brush, enabling the ladies to apply rouge.

The sealing wax cases typically were cylindrical gold containers. They came with a detachable cover and were used to hold, yes, sealing wax. The bases of some of these boxes were engraved with the owner's trademark, often used to seal a letter.

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(Left & right) An Austrian enamelled gold snuff-box dating back to 1880. Courtesy, Christie's; A continental jewelled hardstone and enamel gold snuff-box. Courtesy, Christie's



An interesting type was the freedom box – boxes that were presented to individuals for their position or achievements!

GOD IN THE DETAILS

Each box was a creation par excellence; and most were customised, not limited to a specified shape or size. One such work of art is a George II gold-mounted hardstone sealing wax case that was designed between 1750 AD and 1760 AD. Cylindrical in shape, it has a tapering burnt-orange *agate étui* with an independent convex top and base. The cover and base of this masterpiece is overlaid with pierced gold cagework and is stamped, engraved and chased with c-scrolls, foliate swags and interspersed by reeded gold rims.

One of the most important things that modern collectors should pay attention to is the detailing of every box. Demanding a mention here is the German-enamelled varicoloured gold snuff box with an enamel plaque by Les Frères Souchay. This box has an engraving, which reads 'Presented/to Rear Admiral Rodd, / by his wife, / in grateful remembrance of / kind and unremitting attentions/to her beloved and lamented father, 1830'. (A word of warning: Beware of fakes! French boxes are always marked, standing

true to their worth and exquisiteness.) It is said that King Louis XIV loved boxes but did not like the idea of snuff. However, his love for these objects led to the introduction of the *boîte-à-portrait* in France, which featured a portrait miniature. These boxes became one of the many latter versions of the *tabatière*.

A TIP TO COLLECTORS

David McLachlan, Head of the Gold Boxes & Objects of Vertu Department at Christie's in London, states that the rarest examples of gold boxes today are by French goldsmiths like Jean Ducrollay, Jean Formey, Daniel Gouers, Gabriel Gallois, Barnabé Sageret and Jean-Marie Tiron. While each and every box is a work of art, the enamelled boxes produced between 1712 and 1786 AD are highly prized among modern-day collectors. According to Christie's in London, Frederick the Great of Prussia owned no less than 1,500 gold boxes! He was also the one who started an industry in Berlin and actively took charge of the construction and design of such boxes.

Today, each antique gold box is a treasure of the past, bringing with it the stories of the past into the present. Now a collector's dream, the gold boxes are a testimony to a time gone by; of a rich culture and tradition.