



THE POWDER & THE GLORY

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A Brief History of Chinese Snuff Bottles

The snuff bottle epitomizes the highest qualities of Chinese fine art. Originating in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), snuff bottles became extremely popular during the Qianlong Reign of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) when glass blowing and carving techniques reached their zenith. Glass was widely used for making snuff bottles. For example, artisans used nontransparent, single-hued glass to simulate jade, crystal, jadeite, agate and ruby, etc. Overlay-glass snuff bottles could be monochrome or polychrome. Among all the glass snuff bottles, polychrome overlay examples are the most attractive with their various designs and sophisticated motifs. Jade snuff bottles revealed excellent carvings, and were often made of the finest stone. Exquisite designs accentuated the raw material to optimize the combination of image and material. Simplicity and antiquity are inextricably bound, and the best designs from the past are highly sought after.

Qianlong Reign (1736-1795)

During the Qianlong period, porcelain snuff bottles often resembled and imitated the designs of popular porcelain wares. Decorative motifs such as the lotus, interlaced flowers, scenery and human figures were delicate and detailed. The overall composition of a picture was in most case symmetrical. The porcelain body was full, with either shiny white glaze or underglaze blue designs. The underglaze blue, with its always brightly depicted motifs, often had a trace of black that was the most prominent character of porcelain snuff bottles from this period.

Many workshops specializing in overlay-glass snuff bottles appeared in the Yongzheng (1723-1735) and Qianlong Reigns, among which Gu Yue Xuan was one the most important ones.

Daoguang Reign (1821-1850)

During the Daoguang period, snuff bottles made of porcelain and agate were most popular. Imperial wares became scarce, and provincial wares gradually prevailed in the market. Jade snuff bottles were reduced in supply, and most glass snuff bottles were overlay designed. Materials and carving techniques had lost the refinement from previous periods. However, agate snuff bottles were plentiful and popular, offering buyers many shades to choose from,

while the quality of material varied. Agate snuff bottles in greatest demand were those with clever artificial coloring or with abundant natural grains.

These popular provincial styles included underglaze blue, underglaze red, underglaze blue and red, fencai, overglaze red, overglaze black, doucai, wucan and lujun glaze, etc. In addition, there were snuff bottles made of carved porcelain and painted zisha (purple-sand). Fencai snuff bottles were all provincial, with framed decorative designs such as scenery, people, floral grass, fish, insects, historical legend and lucky motifs. For example, the grasshopper typically shows up on snuff bottles in this period.

Guangxu Reign to the Republic (1875-1911)

During the period from Guangxu to the Republic snuff bottles copied Qianlong wares, with some of them even carrying Qianlong mark. Underglaze blue snuff bottles experienced changes in silhouette, altering from a flat shape to shapes such as flat square, block and hot pot. Motifs often came from legendary folk tales.

The inside-painted snuff bottle was a new style, and gradually evolved into one of the most important types of this refined art. With techniques such as light stroke, dark ink, light red and dark multicolor, etc, artisans used special tools to create inside-painted snuff bottles that either imitated traditional Chinese paintings or followed Western oil themes paintings. The technique is as extraordinary as if done by spirits. Although most of the designs were plain, the paintings were richly ornamented and show great vigor. In addition to in-paintings that incorporate traditional Chinese motifs, other examples took the form of portraits, folk paintings, calligraphies, and even photographs. Whether abstract or detailed, inside paintings were unique to snuff bottles. The most famous styles are Peking style, Shan Dong style, and Shanxi style. Ma Shaoxuan, Ye Zhongsan, Zhou Leyuan and Wu Changan represented the Peking style, Wang Fenhao exemplified the Shangdong style, and Wang Xisan was the superior artisan behind Shanxi style.

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