

Dossier #4: The History and Performance of Chinese Snuff Bottles

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Film 105: Dead Media Studio

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A Brief History: Kangxi's China

Beginning in the mid-16th century, the use of tobacco in China came from Europe, in which the Portuguese established a colony in Macao on the fringes of China (Perry 25). However, the earliest recorded social use of snuff — a smokeless form of tobacco that is snorted through the nose — dates later to around mid-17th century, during the time of Qing Emperor Kangxi's reign (1661-1722). A missionary had gifted the emperor snuff in a metal box known as a snuff box, and resulted in Kangxi's order to develop a means for the Chinese to carry such snuff (*China Today*, 1). The design resulted in the form of a bottle: This came as a result of the Oriental not having the pockets that could carry a box — thus arising in a design that could be carried in sleeves (Perry 26). The development of the snuff bottle was mainly a result of Kangxi's first 20 years of power.



Snuff Bottles. Bottle pictured on the far left is dated back to 1646 (Perry 27).

While smoking tobacco was outlawed at the advent of the Qing Dynasty, snuffing had a medicinal connotation to it that justified its use — snuff was known as a remedy, from treatment for headaches and colds, to intestinal disorders and other severe ailments (Margulis 1). Medicine at the time was also served in bottles.

However, the snuff bottle eventually took up forms that went beyond its medicinal association beginning. Kangxi, as a devoted patron of the arts, established 27 different imperial workshops in Peking, covering as many branches of the art industry, as well as a specific institution for the invention and creation of snuff bottles (Perry 29). Thus, in essence, Kangxi's reign provided the means for the snuff bottle to extend beyond its practical use into a socially-significant media form in a myriad of ways.



Emperor Kangxi.



Snuff bottle with painting of Kangxi.

A Communication of Culture: Snuff Bottle Design

The development of snuff bottles at the beginning of Kangxi's reign is also grounded in the general Westernization of China that was encouraged by Kangxi at the time. As such, these workshops also took in Jesuit missionaries — who brought with them the techniques of glass and enamel production, enamel coloring, etc. Such provided the grounds for the instilling of Western influence on Chinese artistic practices, that would come to define the artistic style throughout the Qing Dynasty (Zhang 452). This new artistic form — in tandem with strong, symbolic Chinese imagery that encapsulated traditional Chinese mythology, religious belief, and cultural values — created a new dimension to Chinese craftsmanship that goes beyond practical use.

It was during the later reign of Ch'ien Lung when craftsmen of snuff bottles became particularly motivated to create and expand the limits of the bottle design. These craftsmen began "manipulating with equal dexterity every kind of material, metals, stone, pottery, wood, [etc.]... the output of the myriads of looms, lathes... and

workshops were amazing in quantity endless in variety..." The immense amount of skill and artistic prowess needed to create such bottles made it a fashion to amass a collection (Perry 31). In this way, the creation of snuff bottles can be seen as mixed media form: one that is a fluid combination of both painting and sculpture — media forms that represent space, and take up space, respectively.



Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com

Snuff bottles in a variety of styles and media forms.

Thus, one can see how the snuff bottle became not just a container of snuff in a practical, literal sense: It was also a physical form that signified the cultural advent of a new historical moment enacted by the Qing Dynasty, as well as encapsulated Chinese culture through artistic craftsmanship. From this could the snuff bottle become a decorative art that could communicate its historical and cultural context.

A Form of Social Ritual: Performing Decoration

With this newfound appreciation for aesthetics and craftsmanship in their creation, snuff bottles encapsulated the definition of a “decorative art”: an object that had both aesthetic and functional dimensions. However, while the connotation associated with the term “decoration” in comparison to the fine arts is generally one that denotes a sense of inferiority, such masks the social impact that media as decorations have played in history.

Though snuff bottles acted as a figure that signified cultural and historical context in it of itself, it also acted as a mediator between persons of upper-class status. Soon after its rise, it didn’t take long for the use of snuff to become a, “social ritual of the upper classes. When two Chinese friends met there was at once an exchange of snuff... and the containers upon which much art and taste and money had been expended became conversation pieces between the two,” (Perry 27). A general fascination of snuff bottle design among the elite result in snuff bottles becoming, “more than just a container, but [serving] as the ideal object for displaying wealth and taste... the social function of the snuff bottle made it ideally suited to the task of delicately impressing friends and associates as it passes from hand to hand...” (Van Til 56). The snuff bottle became a form of social capital among Qing China’s elite.



Heshen, one of Emperor Ch'ien Lung's courtiers, had a collection of more than 2,000 snuff bottles.

Mediation of such also came in the form of gift-giving, in which the small, fashionable luxury of the snuff bottle became, “quickly recognized as an ideal gift... the exchange of bottles develop[ed] into a normal aspect of gift-giving in China,” (Van Til 57). Importantly, Kangxi himself practiced such gift-giving of snuff bottles to show admiration and affection — even endorsing such activity in court. This understanding among the political scene, then, led to a leveraging of snuff bottles as political currency: “as a means of introduction for those wishing to secure an audience with an official of higher rank... to secure favors or as a means of bribery...” (Van Til 58). Thus, in grounding the snuff bottle in its aesthetic qualities can one see how its form allowed it to be socially significant in a political context.



*Chinese and Mongolian
men greet each other and
admire each other's snuff
bottles*

One can draw a parallel to the social rituals of snuff bottles in history to theoretical understandings of decorations as media performance. In his piece “Adornment”, George Simmel highlights decoration use as a means, “to single the personality out, to emphasize it as outstanding in some sense... through the pleasure which is engendered in him... One adorns oneself for oneself, but can do so only by adornment for others.” In adorning oneself, Simmel describes the act as, “a synthesis of the individual's having and being; it thus transforms mere possession into the sensuous and emphatic perceptibility of the individual himself,” in essence

amplifying that individual's personality. The decoration, in this sense, can be seen almost as a medium of extension to a higher level of status.

In drawing this connection to snuff bottles, the possession of such by the Chinese elite, thus, is a performance of status: The ownership of specific snuff bottles decorates its user with an amplified version of social self. This done in a back-and-forth act among a variety of individuals creates this performance of elitism within the Chinese upper-class — a constant exertion of social status through the snuff bottle itself.

The decline of the snuff bottle came as a result of the new rise of the Emperor Chia Ch'ing, who despised the social and artistic dimensions of decoration, saying "decoration is merely a foolish squandering of funds," (Perry 32). He hated the act of gift-giving and notions of materiality, turning away those who tried to gift him objects that encapsulated the artistic forms of the time. This marked the end of the production of snuff bottles, and the end of a vibrant artistic movement.

Work Cited

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