



# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

## Snuff and Snuff Containers

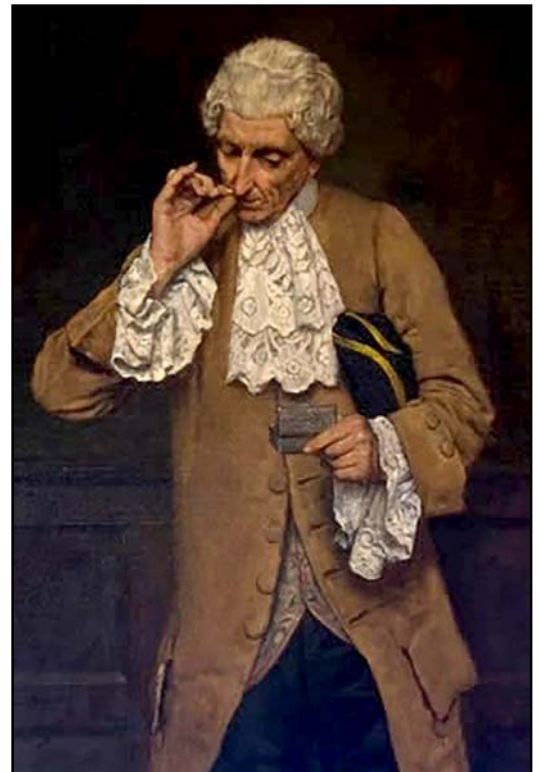
by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

*“Give me snuff and whiskey...and I’ll build a railroad to hell.”*

—James. J. Hill (1838–1916)  
founder, Great Northern Railway

Such was the exhilarating power of snuff described by users, but tobacco in any form had been unknown to Europeans and Americans before the sixteenth century. Once discovered in the New World, enterprising merchants brought the aromatic leaves back to Europe, and pipe smoking became widespread by the 1540s. Powdered tobacco, or “snuff,” took longer to find the noses of Europeans, but its use by indigenous Caribbean populations had been recorded by a Spanish friar as early as the 1490s.

From the Dutch *snuffen* (to sniff), snuff rapidly captivated European bluebloods, but spread as far as Qing Dynasty China by the 1650s. The French were particularly enthusiastic snuff users, and even the royals became hooked. Catherine de Medici (r. 1547–1559) claimed snuff cured her chronic migraines and bestowed the miracle plant with a Latin name: *Herba Regina* or “queen herb.” King Louis XIII (r. 1610–1643) was also an avid user, followed by Marie Antoinette (r. 1774–1792), Napoleon (r. 1804–1814), and others. Tobacco’s alleged curative properties and its use by nobility helped to popularize snuff. With the new popularity came objectors, such as Pope Urban VIII (r. 1623–1644) who banned snuff and threatened snuff users with ex-communication. Urban’s successors followed suit but Pope Benedict XIII (r. 1724–1730) lifted the lengthy ban and became addicted himself. Puritanical American colonists frowned upon tobacco, but snuff nonetheless became popular with the aristocracy, who kept in step with European vogues. Portuguese traders brought snuff to Beijing where Qing emperors (1644–1912) forbade smoking but permitted snuff because of its purported medicinal benefits.



Painting of a man taking snuff, 18<sup>th</sup> century  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snuff\\_\(tobacco\)#/media/File:Schnupfer\\_corrected.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snuff_(tobacco)#/media/File:Schnupfer_corrected.jpg)  
Photo credit: <http://www.sharrowmills.com>  
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Tobacco leaves were milled in Europe to produce snuff, and the Spanish were the first to construct commercial mills. Seville would boast the sprawling *Real Fábrica de Tabacos*, Europe's first industrial tobacco factory by 1750. The leaves eventually underwent oxidation and/or fermentation processes to enhance flavor and effectiveness. Scents and flavorings were also added, yielding floral, piquant, or menthol notes. Snuff was inhaled or "snuffed" into the nose, delivering a powerful nicotine rush, in addition to lingering flavor. Before inhalation, a pinch of snuff was placed on the back of the hand, or held between either the forefinger or the index finger. "Moist snuff," known colloquially today by brands such as Skoal, was taken orally and introduced in the 1820s.

In its heyday, snuff was a luxury product that distinguished upper classes from commoners, who smoked tobacco. As snuff use swiftly escalated, the need arose for small, portable containers, and luxury good makers seized upon the opportunity to use the finest materials as an enticement to the elite. Paris became a center of production for snuffboxes (*les tabatières*), and even famed jewelers, such as Cartier (est. 1847), got in on the act. Gold was among the most coveted materials for the best boxes, but it could be combined with other costly materials such as tortoise shell and gemstones. Silver snuffboxes were also made, with known examples from the American jeweler Tiffany (est. 1837). Some makers, such as Gabriel-Raoul Morel, had lucrative careers, but their names are largely unknown today. Morel became a celebrated goldsmith who created gold snuffboxes for the courts of Louis XVIII (r. 1815–1824) and Charles X (1824–1830). Less is known of Louis-Claude Porcher but he worked in a similar, neoclassical style. Both goldsmiths used classical motifs such as garland swags and acanthus *rincaux* (foliage). Their hinged boxes, such as the two examples in the Museum's collection, were also decorated with patterns produced by machine engraving known as "engine turning." *Chasing* (working the gold with tools



Gabriel-Raoul Morel (French, 1764–1832)

**Snuffbox**

French, 1809–1819, made in Paris

Gold

Gift of Miss Sarah Catherine France in honor of her brother Charles B. France (69.1046.1)



Louis-Claude Porcher (French, active 1762–1792)

**Snuffbox**

French, 1774–1775, made in Paris

Gold

Gift of Miss Sarah Catherine France in honor of her brother Charles B. France (69.1031)

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from the front) and *repoussé* (working the gold with tools from the back) enhanced details. Gold- and silversmiths were required by law to stamp their work with hallmarks, which provided date of manufacture, maker, and other information. But the maker's mark was not always included, and the Museum's snuffbox with painted panels is one such example. Composed of tortoise shell panels encased in gold fittings, the box is a masterpiece of miniature painting depicting pastoral scenes with pairs of lovers. The paintings were lacquered to render the surfaces lustrous and jewel-like, an effect that fascinated elite owners. The specific technique used on the paintings is known as *vernis Martin*,\* which required copal resin from trees native to Central and South America.

In China and other parts of the Far East, snuff was carried in bottles with tiny spoons attached to stoppers. Glass was most commonly used for the bottles, but other more luxurious materials, such as jade or rhinoceros horn, were not uncommon. One of the Museum's examples still has its stopper and ivory spoon attachment, and its exterior is illustrated with two painted narratives. One depicts a man and two women on a bridge, possibly a love story. The other shows two men and a woman in a restaurant. The inscription provides the location but also names the artist and the man (Lin Weihan) for whom the bottle was made. ■



Anonymous (French, 18<sup>th</sup> century)

## **Snuffbox with Pastoral Scenes**

Probably French, ca. 1780

Lacquer on painted tortoise shell with gold mounts

Gift of Miss Sarah Catherine France in honor of her brother Charles B. France (69.1044)

Published: M. F. Milanick, *Muse* 43 (2009) pp. 47-67



Ye Zhongsan (Chinese, 1863–1946)

## **Snuff Bottle with Stopper**

Chinese, probably 1927

Glass, pigment, cork, and ivory

Gift of Dr. William D. Curtis (66.105 A–B)

\*Developed by the Martin brothers (Guillaume, Etienne-Simon, Robert, and Julien) in Paris in the 1730s. By the 1740s, they ran at least three lacquer production factories.