

SMALL WONDERS

AN INTRODUCTION TO FIVE EXQUISITE, EXOTIC, AND ENTHRALLING COLLECTING FIELDS by gregory cerio



Tiny treasures, clockwise from top left: a ca. 1800 miniature, \$3,500, from Eile Shushan, Philadelphia; a mid-1700s Chinese Imperial snuff bottle, estimated at \$200,000 by Christie's; an Empire gold etui, \$9,500, at A La Vieille Russie, NYC; a 19th-century netsuke, \$10,000, at Scholten Japanese Art, NYC.

MANY NEW ART COLLECTORS instinctively go for big, eye-catching paintings and lithographs that will stop visitors in their tracks. Yet some of the most beautiful and fascinating works of fine art and decorative objects are also the smallest. For centuries, the cabinet of curiosities was a staple of the connoisseur's home. A glass-fronted case would be filled with oddities of the natural world—fossils, seashells, a chunk of mineral such as lapis lazuli—as well as tiny, intricately crafted

artifacts from around the globe. A *Wunderkammer* (the German term for such a cabinet) is greater than the sum of its parts; it is a veritable mini-museum, full of items to be touched and examined. Here are five fields for those interested in this venerable method of collecting:

Chinese Snuff Bottles

For all its undoubted evils, tobacco has been a good thing in one sense: as a focus of design. Beyond cool ashtrays, pipes, lighters, cigar cutters, and more, Chinese snuff bottles may be the most delightful and attractive tobacco-related ephemera of all. Tobacco was introduced to China by Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century, and while smoking it was forbidden, inhaling snuff—finely powdered tobacco mixed with camphor, herbs, and other aromatics—was regarded as a medicinal cure for everything from headaches to upset stomachs. The practice gained favor among the nobility, and elegant, elaborate snuff bottles became standard accoutrements of the

emperor's court. "Snuff was expensive, and attention was lavished on the bottles," says Christie's vice president Michael Bass. "They were carved and decorated with auspicious symbols and imagery, and have a wonderful tactility. They are made to be held and contemplated."

The bottles, generally about two inches tall, were fashioned from every imaginable material: jade, porcelain, enameled metal, ivory, lacquer, overlaid glass, ceramics, and hard stones such as

> MINI MASTERS

From left: a piece of the sitter's hair in a locket holding a 1795 portrait, \$2,800; an 1853 portrait locket of a 9-month-old New York City boy, \$6,000; a ca. 1775 Boston miniature, \$2,000. All from dealer Elle Shushan.



▲ SMALL IN JAPAN

From top: an 18th-century ivory netsuke of a scholar, \$5,200; an 18th-century sparrow dancer netsuke, \$8,000; a late-18th-century Kyoto School tiger and cub, \$29,000. All from Scholten Japanese Art.

> FINE CHINA

Items in a forthcoming Christie's auction: from top, a faux-realgar glass snuff bottle, ca. the late 18th to early 19th century, estimated at \$5,000; a slip-decorated stoneware bottle from the early 1800s, estimated at \$8,000.

agate and limestone. Craftsmanship, rarity, and condition, experts say, are the chief criteria of value. In recent years, newly wealthy, royalty-crazed Chinese collectors have pushed up prices in the market, paying exorbitant sums for bottles made in Qing dynasty workshops. (A mid-1700s enameled porcelain bottle marked with the insignia of the emperor Qianlong was the top seller in a Christie's sale last March, fetching \$352,000.)

Still, simple, unadorned nineteenth-century glass or agate bottles are available for \$200 or \$300 in shops, and lovely and important older pieces sell at auction and at retail for \$2,000 to \$10,000. Experts say it is wiser to go for quality over quantity. Snuff bottle collecting, like snuff itself, is addictive. "Bottle collectors are passionate," says New York dealer Michael Hughes. "Once you're hooked, if you want a collection that will hold its value, it's better to buy one \$5,000 bottle than ten \$500 bottles."

Etui

Before the Swiss Army knife, there was the etui. The French word—pronounced *eh-twee*—means simply "case," but, says Christie's

specialist Jeanne Sloane, "think of them as the luxury personal hygiene and accoutrements kits of the eighteenth century." Older etuis are about four inches tall and an inch or so wide, sized to fit into a gentleman's waistcoat pocket, while ladies often clipped them to a brooch clasp called a *châtelaine*. Etuis held such items as toothpicks, tweezers, a nail file, a folding knife, or an ear pick. Women's models might contain scissors, thread, and other tools for needlework. Eighteenth-century gold etuis are the rarest and most sought after. A circa 1760 gold Rococo etui covered in flowing scrolls and florals brought \$7,500 in a Christie's sale in London in 2002. A gold-mounted neoclassical etui made circa 1740 sold for \$4,000 in the same auction.

At the next level are painted porcelain and enameled etuis. A Meissen porcelain etui with flower spray motifs and gold mountings sold (*en suite* with a Meissen tea canister) for \$3,600 at Sotheby's in New York this past May.

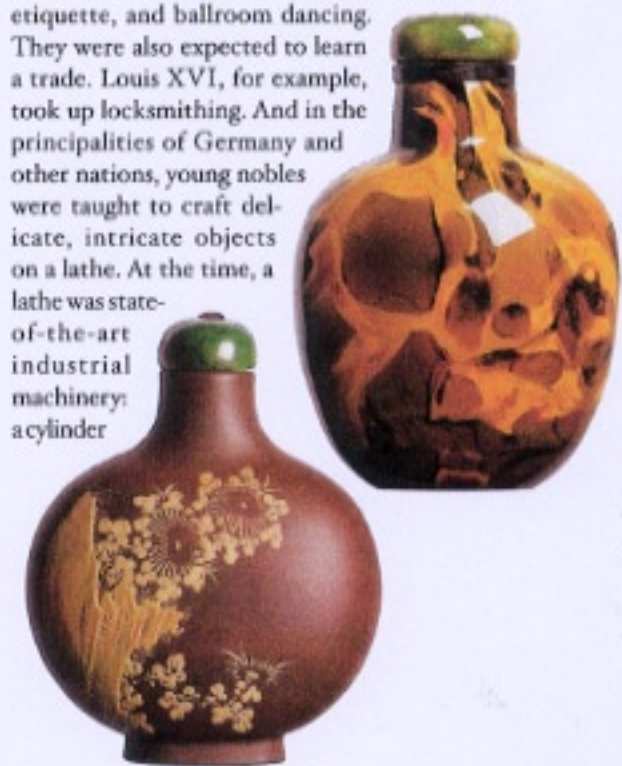


Simply ornamented etuis made of materials such as shagreen, tortoiseshell, or silver have recently sold at auction for \$300 to \$450. Because etuis are an almost unclassifiable collectible, they pop up at irregular intervals at auction.

Fine antiques shops are the best bet for the impatient. At Manhattan's A La Vieille Russie, prices range from \$850 for an English porcelain etui to \$9,500 for gold eighteenth-century examples. The store's owner, Peter Schaffer, says some collectors put etuis to odd new uses: "One client bought an etui for his wife to carry her chewing gum."

Turned Ivories

The education of princes in continental Europe's royal courts in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries extended beyond their studying Machiavelli, etiquette, and ballroom dancing. They were also expected to learn a trade. Louis XVI, for example, took up locksmithing. And in the principalities of Germany and other nations, young nobles were taught to craft delicate, intricate objects on a lathe. At the time, a lathe was state-of-the-art industrial machinery: a cylinder



of, say, wood would be attached at its ends to rotating spindles. As the wood turned, a pointed metal bit was moved along its length, carving out forms and designs. The princes worked not on wood but on ivory. "Turning ivory was supposed to teach planning, patience, and care," says Wolfram Koeppe, a curator at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Ivory is so delicate; you make one error and the piece is lost. It was meant to be analogous to running a state; if you are careless, your people suffer."

Today the finest specimens reside in museums such as the Pitti Palace in Florence and in Dresden's Green Vault, a legendary treasure house damaged in World War II and reopening this month. Munich antiques dealer Georg Laue, a specialist in turned ivory, says that top specimens only appear on the market two or three times a year. A group of well-wrought though not pristine ivories appeared in a Christie's sale in Paris last December, fetching prices ranging from \$29,000 to \$123,000. Peerless pieces recently exhibited by Laue—which sold out but are depicted in his informative catalog "Turned Treasures"—fetched anywhere from \$80,000 to \$200,000 for the largest, most intricate objects, and \$5,000 to

\$15,000 for small items such as hollowed spheres within spheres. Princely sums for princely art.

American Portrait Miniatures

Much as CDs did in the vinyl LP, photography killed the portrait miniature.

In America, the heyday of miniatures ran from about 1770 to 1850, petering out in popularity after the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839. Like their European counterparts, American artists often executed miniatures as copies of full-scale portraits. Most miniatures are of men. The pictures were mounted in locket, usually with a clipping of the sitter's hair, and worn by wives and sweethearts. Consequently, says Sotheby's vice president Nancy Druckman, the miniatures are

"much more intimate images—loving portraits, not made for public exposure to show off the sitter's social position." Colonial-era American masters such as Boston's John Singleton Copley and the members of Philadelphia's Peale family tried to achieve academic, European-style exactitude in their large and small portraits, but Americans began to paint miniatures in a looser, more Romantic style in the early 1800s, says Philadelphia dealer Elle Shushan, who is regarded as the top expert in the field. Many miniatures are painted in oil on vellum or copper, but the best are rendered in watercolor on ivory. "It's an entirely different look—ivory makes the skin glow," says Shushan. "It's so lifelike, it's scary."

Taxing as painting miniatures was, the works are surprisingly affordable. The sitter's fame is the most important criterion of value. Christie's holds the world-record auction price: \$1,216,000 for a miniature that George Washington commissioned for Martha. The fame of the painter is the second consideration. Prized by folk art collectors for their naiveté, portraits by Mrs. Moses B. Russell, who worked in Boston in the 1820s, can fetch up to \$50,000. That is the very top end. "The median price for a signed work is less than \$3,000," says Shushan. (Cont. on page 225)

NOBLE HOBBY

A ca. 1630 German spindle-shaped turned ivory, \$30,000, left, and a ca. 1620 covered cup, \$120,000, both from *Kunstammer Georg Laue, Munich*.

CULTURED KITS

A 19th-century English etui of a swaddled child, \$2,500; an 18th-century gold-mounted agate etui, \$7,200; a ca. 1770 enamel Staffordshire etui, \$850; a ca. 1780 gold French etui, \$3,500. All from *A La Vieille Russie*. See Shopping, last pages.



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ON THE BLOCK

(Cont. from page 114) "You can get decent miniatures for \$250 to \$300." Not much for a 200-year-old love token.

Netsuke

Art dealer Katherine Martin likes to joke that, as a friend of hers said, "Japan was once a land without pockets." Until the Meiji dynasty began a modernization program in the 1860s and mandated the wearing of Western attire, Japanese men and women wore kimonos. Women's robes had voluminous sleeves in which to hold necessities; men's did not. Men wore money pouches and lacquer boxes, called inro, suspended on cords from waist sashes. The carved toggles that held the cords in place, called netsuke (pronounced *net-skee*), are the most charming clothes buckles ever devised.

Two qualities attract collectors to netsuke. The first is tactility. Carved from materials such as ivory, horn, and wood, netsuke "feel wonderful in the hand," says Martin, director of New York's Scholten Gallery. "Oils in the hand add to the patina and help keep the material from drying out." A second attraction is the carving. "In Japanese art there is a sense of humor, which shows up particularly in netsuke," says Christie's specialist Jeffrey Olson. Netsuke are carved in the form of animals and mythological creatures (which had symbolic values) as human figures, and frequently as tokens of sexual potency. Carving is also a key indicator of the age of netsuke. The most intricately carved tend to be the most recently made.

The most desirable netsuke—the cream coming from the Kyoto School of the 1700s—can bring \$75,000 at auction. But the field is quite easy to enter. Modern and late-nineteenth-century pieces can be found at such auction houses as the I. M. Chait Gallery in Beverly Hills for \$200 to \$400, and older, very simply carved netsuke sell for not much more. Christie's will bundle 10 to 15 netsuke into one lot that will fetch \$2,000 to \$3,000. Martin says many collectors start at the lower end and then visit her gallery—where superior antique netsuke go for \$5,000 to \$15,000—after they have gained more knowledge and an eye for fine carving. After all, netsuke not only hold purse strings taut, but loosen them, too. □

MY HOUSE

(Cont. from page 124) to the city. The area around the airstrip is one of the undisturbed parts of the island. It's full of cattails and thickets of briar and bittersweet. Marshes and beach vistas. In general, it's considered too severe to be any good for anyone who's not walking a dog or surf-casting.

This is one of my favorite places in spring and fall. I run down along South Beach, as the region is called, every day or two, and I often go on afternoon walks with my wife here, too. One off-season, during a meteor shower, I came out at four in the morning, unfolded my trusty beach towel, and lay on the rocks watching the dazzling display in the night sky, not a human to be heard anywhere around me. Some months after, there was pretty good viewing on South Beach for a rare (in this part of the world) screening of the aurora borealis. Meanwhile, wind and sea salt and the action of the waves grind up the rocks, and the thorns grow up through the boulders, and they retreat when frigid and uncomfortable marine winter comes around from December to March, and that's about all that happens in this particular redoubt, which is just how I like it, before you all arrive.

As you're reading this, I'll be just beginning to harvest the tomatoes (hopefully). I'll be slicing them right from the vine and adding some fresh basil from my herb garden. (I didn't even get around to talking about the excellence of an herb garden! Be careful with mint, though, it'll run you off your property!) And I'll be thinking that even though it's great to see everyone and I'll be sad to see you head off to your myriad responsibilities—another school year, another year on the job—there's so much still to be done, like repainting the table in the guest room, which I keep swearing I'll do, and taking apart the deck furniture and putting it in the basement, or planting some bulbs for next spring. Maybe I'll replace that azalea, which is obviously not getting enough sun on the back side of the house. In fact, I think I'm going to do so right now, before anyone even notices. There may even be time enough, here in the off-season, for some writing. □