

OBJECT of the **month**

April 2022

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

Hi! My name is Janet, a Museum Guide at the Dayton Art Institute, and this month we're going to explore an object that doesn't appear particularly remarkable compared to the many others around it. It's not taller; most of these are pocket-sized—only 2 to 3 inches tall. It has no outstanding shape or color. Yet, in Dayton's collection, this is the only snuff bottle that is made with a technique you may know as cloisonné. Many of our snuff bottles from Qing dynasty China are either intricately carved or beautifully glazed. But cloisonné, called *Jīngtàilán* in China, is a very different process.

Perhaps we should begin with the question: what is snuff and why did it demand such exquisite bottles? Snuff was, then, a fine tobacco powder, pulverized from its dried leaves. Since the 1700s, snuff was considered around the world as medicinal. When inhaled in small doses, it would produce a sneeze—freeing the system of undesirable contaminants.

But when these bottles were created, tobacco was native only to the Americas. Europeans imported snuff from the “New World” at great expense and so kept it in sumptuous boxes. It then had to travel still further to get to China where the climate is more humid, and the pricey powder required tightly sealed bottles and where it was carried predominantly by wealthy men. Does this surprise you?

Each superbly crafted bottle was fitted with a tiny spoon attached to the stopper so the proud owner could place small amount on the back of their hand or fingertip for ease of use. An offer to share with a friend served as a way to display the extravagant bottle, in much the same way today one might offer the time from a Rolex®.

As to the cloisonné process, a highly-skilled artisan had to solder bits of thin wire onto a copper vessel, creating a sort of filigree on its surface. Then colored glass paste would be carefully added, each chosen color filling its tiny compartment. The bottle would then be fired and re-fired, each time at low temperature, refilling color as needed and polishing to achieve a perfect surface.

You may notice that this bottle has been decorated with a sky-blue background where we find soft-pink lotus blossoms. The lotus is a flower that carries auspicious symbolism within the Chinese and Buddhist



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cultures. Because lotus seeds sprout from the slime of a pond's floor, each stem rising through the murky water to emerge as a perfect flower at the surface, the lotus expresses the belief that each person has the potential to rise to perfection and light. Also, the word 'lotus', in the Chinese language, has the same pronunciation as its word for 'harmony' and so carries that meaning, too.

In addition to the symbolism of the lotus, the array of green foliage on this bottle represents hope and renewal. So, if this little treasure were given as a gift, as many such bottles were, it would bring with it a wide variety of good wishes.

If you like snuff bottles, please come to the Dayton Art Institute to enjoy their brilliant display in Gallery 112, in our Patterson-Kettering Wing of Asian Art. And, if you explore our Chinese galleries further, you may well find another—and much larger—example of cloisonné. Come and enjoy. Thank you.

END TRANSCRIPT

Click [here](#) to access the video presentation.

FEATURED ARTWORKS*

Jean-Baptiste Bertin (French, 1720–1792), Christian Friedrich Zincke (German, 1683–1767), *Box*, 1749–1750, chased gold with miniature. Victoria & Albert Museum, HH.460-1948 ©Victoria & Albert Museum, London
Jean Ducrollay (French, 1709–1787), *Double Snuffbox*, 1749-1750, gold, enamel, vellum, gouache, and glass. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 1976, 1976.155.21
Artist unidentified (China, Qing Dynasty, 1644–1912), *Snuff Bottle*, 19th century, ivory. Gift of the Honorable Jefferson Patterson, 1952.53
Artist unidentified (China, Qing Dynasty, 1644–1912), *Snuff Bottle with Stopper*, 18th century, porcelain with design in overglaze enamels. Gift of Mrs. Virginia W. Kettering, 1991.64
Artist unidentified (China, Qing Dynasty, 1644–1912), *Snuff Bottle*, 19th century, coral. Gift of Mrs. Virginia W. Kettering, 1976.225

Artist unidentified (Chinese), *Snuff Bottle with Stopper*, date unknown, malachite. Gift of the Honorable Jefferson Patterson, 1951.147
Artist unidentified (China, Qing Dynasty, 1644–1912), *Snuff Bottle*, 19th century, glass and jade. Gift of Mrs. Virginia W. Kettering, 1996.85
Artist unidentified (China, Qing Dynasty, 1644–1912), *Snuff Bottle with Stopper and Chinese Scene*, 19th century, brass, mother-of-pearl, lacquer, coral, soapstone, malachite, and gilded chips. Gift of Mrs. Virginia W. Kettering, 1986.204
Artist unidentified (Chinese), *Snuff Bottle with Stopper*, date unknown, agate, gilt metal, and jade. Gift of Mrs. Virginia W. Kettering, 1991.59
After Louis Boilly (French, 1761–1845), *The Snuff Takers*, 1825, stipple print. Wellcome Collection, London. 24985i "Making of Cloisonné." YouTube, uploaded by SinoVision, June 14, 2018, <https://youtu.be/4nx3BuP4uwM>

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