

Chinese snuff bottles to be auctioned in Edinburgh

One of the largest collections of Chinese snuff bottles, valued at £40,000, are to be put on sale at Lyon & Turnbull on 4 June 2014, spanning three centuries the snuff bottles belong to Mrs Chris Bennett who lives in Perthshire. She started collecting in 1976 with a visit to a local auction, she said:- "I saw a small painted glass bottle. I bid for it and came away with the bottle in my pocket, having spent all of £3."

There are 157 bottles in the collection which are made from a wide variety of materials. Lee Young, Asian Specialist at Lyon & Turnbull said:- "Being so small, the artists often took the opportunity to express their playfulness and ingenuity. The stone would be carved, poked and prodded into a shape which was comfortable to hold in the palm of the hand, and at the same time, in beautiful or humorous shapes. For instance we have snuff boxes shaped like a fish, a three legged toad and chili peppers."

The Qianlong dynasty (1736-95) is considered to be the pinnacle of snuff bottle artistry. The glass bottles with two or sometimes three different colours, are dipped in various layers of coloured molten glass, and then carved back through the layers to show a scene of birds in a garden, or dragons chasing each others tails and the forever flaming pearl, across the small circumference of the bottle, often not more than 6cm tall.

Mrs Bennett said:- "Weekends were spent browsing Edinburgh antique shops in search for bottles, and I soon found that this was not going to be a quick or easy. I am sad to see them go, but I hope the bottles will form the base of new collections and find homes with budding new or discerning experienced collectors alike."

The collection has two interesting glass bottles with gold 'aventurine' splashes, one blue glass, and the other emerald green estimate, £500 each (lots 255 and 248). Young continued:- "The artist carver examined jade pebbles carefully so that their flaws and inclusions could be brought to their advantage. Flawed or plain, jade bottles offered many alternatives for the collector."

In the collection there is a wide range from a green white jadeite bottle estimate £700 (lot 264), an unusual yellow jade bottle estimate £2,000 (lot 244), a celadon melon shape £600 (lot 232), and a smooth white, which is highly prized. Other unusual bottles include a dark green glass melon bottle £800 (lot 217) and an amusing Duan stone chili £500 (lot 252). The ruby matrix bottle is also rare £300 (lot 254). Other materials include porcelain which was highly adaptable due to its mouldable qualities, glass or glass overlay, lapis lazuli, aventurine, rock crystal, cloisonné, or the inside painted bottles, which could take the artist months to complete, all through a tiny hole not wider than 5mm at times. There are also amber, shagreen, tortoiseshell, ivory, coral, mother of pearl and lacquer as examples of organic materials.

Snuff was introduced to the Chinese by the Portuguese in the 17th century. At first taking snuff was a hobby of the Emperor and literati Mandarins, then it spread across the country and by the 19th century, was found in almost every home.

Powdered tobacco was taken as a pinch on the top of the hand, from the thumb and forefinger, or from a small dish. One carried small bottles in the pocket, or kept a larger bottle in the home, with small dishes or saucers to offer to visiting guests. Lee Young said:- "Often, snuff is still found at the bottom of these small bottles, to remind us of their real use. But today, just as in the 18th and 19th centuries, snuff bottles are collected for their beauty and wit; being small, they can turn even the most space-challenged enthusiast into a collector."