

Collecting Small Antique Boxes

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Ever walk into an antique shop or through a flea market and wonder why so many small boxes? Ever say to yourself those are really neat and I wonder what they are? Well, boxes have always had their charm and small antique boxes with original artwork are widely sought after collectibles. N. Schiffer, who recently published the book *Antique Boxes, Tea Caddies & Society, 1700-1880*; in May 2003 writes, "The box represents great temptation. "Open me" it says, and humans cannot resist the invitation; its charm is overwhelming."

This article discusses collecting such treasures, the market conditions, prices, and the future of the hobby. The focus is on collecting small boxes with original decorations/artwork mostly from the 19th centuries. Such collectibles will always be an attractive hobby for millions of people all over the world and prices of small boxes will continue to rise.

Collecting small antique boxes is an endless field of enjoyment and pursuit. There are many types and varieties of boxes. One could collect by type of box (snuff box, match safe, nutmeg grater, vinaigrettes, pill boxes, etc.), collect according to decoration style (enamel, miniature paintings, engravings, repousse, etc.), or by type of material (ivory, wood, silver, gold, etc.). As a collectible, boxes range in price from a few dollars to several hundreds or thousands depending on age, artwork, maker, condition and material of construction. One cannot walk into an antique shop without seeing several small boxes of different varieties and invariably antique shows and auctions will have many boxes to offer.

Small antique boxes encompass all types of utilitarian boxes, which are made of various materials and are highly decorated. In many cases these boxes were a reflection of the status of its owner. They were made of expensive materials and hand decorated for the biggest impact. The earliest antique boxes currently available to the collector are from the late eighteenth century. Earlier boxes are hard to come by since they have either been destroyed, are in museums, or in private collections.

The earliest available boxes are **nutmeg graters**. These were made so that people of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century could carry nutmeg (worth their weight in gold in those times) in their pockets and grate it, when needed, into their drinks. These are normally made out of gold, silver, wood, or tin. Such boxes are highly collectible and range in price from less than a 100 dollars for a tin box, to several thousands for a silver one. These boxes normally have hinged lids and a steel grater inside. Box shaped silver nutmeg graters are usually priced between \$1,000 and \$1,500, while silver combination nutmeg grater corkscrew costs as high as \$10,000. These boxes have been increasing in price lately and are becoming harder to find. "Cash in your 401K and invest the money in nutmeg graters" said Ron Pook of Pook & Pook Auctions in Downingtown, Pennsylvania, recently, after auctioning a large collection of nutmeg graters and realizing much higher than expected prices for these small beauties.



English, 1878 nutmeg grater in the form of a seashell, made in Birmingham England by Hilliard & Thomaston retail value \$1,600.

Snuffboxes are the most collected small boxes. They were very common in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and were highly decorated. These were made from all types of materials including papier-mâché, silver, gold, pewter, enameled copper, tortoise shell, wood, and horn. These ranged in size from very small to be carried in a lady's purse, medium size to be carried in a gentleman's pocket, to the larger ones which are known as table snuffboxes. They have tight fitting lids, which could be hinged or of the lift-off variety. They range in price from \$30 for a plain oval papier-mâché box from the US civil war era, \$2,000 for a papier-mâché hand painted box made in the Stobwasser Works in Braunschweig Germany in the late 1700's or early 1800's, to over \$10,000 for an antique (late 1700s) gold French box with painted enamel decoration. Again, the value of such boxes is highly dependant on the age, material, artwork and of course condition.



Ivory snuffbox with a signed hand painted miniature of woman on ivory within a bezel and covered by glass, retail value \$350. Probably early 1800's.

The smallest collectible boxes are the **Vinaigrettes**. These normally measure about one and a half inches by one inch and less than half an inch in height. They usually have a hinged lid and a hinged grill inside to hold a sponge saturated with an aromatic liquid. A lady or a gentleman would keep these on their person and would be taken out and smelled when an objectionable odor was in the air or when the lady fainted. Silver vinaigrettes are sometimes collected based on the decoration of the grill. The most common are floral

decorations. Animal based decorations are scarce, while musical themes and human based decoration is the scarcest. The price of these beautiful collectible boxes is highly dependant on the condition, the type of grill decoration, and the external decoration. Enameled silver vinaigrettes cost about \$800-\$1,000, while a plain silver one from mid 1820 made in London, England by William Elliott with a floral grill will cost \$350-\$450, depending on its condition.



1848 vinaigrette, sterling silver, Birmingham, England, by Hilliard & Thomason with foliate design grill, retail value \$350.

Matches in the old days were notorious for self-igniting. Not to worry, the **match safe** or **vesta** took care of this problem by putting the matches in a solid metal box with a striker on the bottom to light the matches. These small boxes come into many varieties and are usually very well decorated. These are normally flat and have a hinged lid. Additionally there are many figural match safes, which are very desirable by the collector. They vary in price from about \$70-\$100 for a base metal late 1800's with a photo on celluloid decoration, about \$350 for a figural elephant's head match safe, to \$1,000- \$2,000 for a sterling silver vesta made in Birmingham, England by the famous silversmith Nathaniel Mills with a repousse castle which is known or identified (so called castle top).



Late 19th century Nickel plated match safe in the form of an elephant's head, retail value \$350.

The **pillbox** is another very small collectible box. These highly useful boxes are still being made and used today. Pillboxes were made from silver, gold, copper, and celluloid.

Italian micro-mosaic decorated copper boxes are some of the more desirable. These boxes normally have tight fitting lids, which are either hinged or lift-off. Silver and gold boxes decorated by either enameling or repousse are the most expensive. These can range in price from \$200 to \$400 for a late 1700s French sterling silver box with repousse decoration to about \$50-\$70 for an early 1900s micro-mosaic decorated Italian pillbox.



Late 18th century French sterling silver pillbox with repousse decoration, retail value \$350.

As you can see the field of small box collecting is endless and would require several volumes to effectively cover it. The most exciting aspect of being a collector of small antique boxes is the fact that there will always be new finds or one-of-a-kind specimen never seen before. Such finds are what makes collecting these small beauties so popular. Several photos are presented with this article to illustrate some of the points made here.

1. Definitions:

- **Celluloid** (French, Trade Mark), tough flammable plastic composed mostly of cellulose nitrate and camphor.
- **Enamel**, made by fusing a paste of powdered glass to a metal surface (can be gold, silver, copper, or bronze).
- **Micro-Mosaic**, a design accomplished by using small cut pieces of glass and attaching them to a metal surface in artful arrangements, usually floral design (some times referred to as Millefiori).
- **Painted enamel**, a picture or design is hand-painted onto an enamel background.
- **Papier-Mâché** (French Word meaning chewed paper), normally a material made from rag or combination rag and linen pulp pressed together then painted and lacquered.
- **Repousse** (French word meaning pushed), a decoration in relief on metal done by hammering the reverse side.
- **Vinaigrette** (French word meaning small vinegar), a small box containing aromatic smelling liquids on a sponge.

- **2. Suggested Reading:**

1. Marian Klamkin, *The Collector's Book of Boxes*, Dod, Mead & Company, NY 1970
2. Brian Cole, *Collecting for Tomorrow "Boxes"*, BPC Publishers, Ltd. UK 1976
3. John Bedford, *All Kinds of Small Boxes*, Walker and Company, NY 1964
4. Susan Benjamin, *English Enamel Boxes- From the 18th to the 20th Century*, Macdonald & Co. Publishers, Ltd. London, UK 1978
5. C. Bernard Hughes, *English Snuff-Boxes*, Mac Gibbon & Kee, London, UK 1971
6. Detlev Richter, *Lacquered Boxes*, Schiffer Publishing Co., West Chester, PA 1989
7. Eric Delieb, *Silver Boxes*, Exeter Books, NY 1979
8. David Armstrong, *Russian Lacquer Boxes*, Forkis Publishers, Moscow, Russia 1992
9. Henry and Sidney Berry-Hill, *Antique Gold Boxes, Their Lore and Their Lure*, Abelard Press, NY 1953
10. Clare le Corbeiller, *European and American Snuff Boxes "1720-1830*, The Viking Press, NY 1966.