

Gold boxes in the Gilbert Collection at the V&A: A grand new home for small scale masterpieces

Heike Zech

The Victoria & Albert Museum in South Kensington, just a couple of steps from the venue of the Art Antique Fair, is one of the greatest museums of decorative arts and design in the world. Over the last ten years seventy percent of its public space has been transformed. Since June 2009 it is also the splendid permanent home of The Rosalinde & Arthur Gilbert Galleries. The Gilbert Collection was given to the Nation in 1996, first shown at Somerset House from 2000 and moved to the Victoria & Albert Museum in 2008 when it had become clear that the collection could not be maintained as an independent museum.

Sir Arthur Gilbert (1913-2001) and his first wife Rosalinde started collecting in the 1960s. Arthur Gilbert was born in London, the youngest son of a family of Jewish immigrants from Poland. He and Rosalinde Gilbert established a highly successful fashion business in London after the Second World War. In 1949 the young family moved to Los Angeles where Arthur Gilbert prospered as a commercial real estate developer. Supported by his specialist advisors, curators and dealers alike, they created one of the most magnificent private collections of decorative arts formed in the 20th century. Consisting of some 800 objects, it is pre-eminent in four fields: European gold and



Figure 1. Rosalinde & Arthur Gilbert Galleries at the Victoria & Albert Museum London
Gallery opening in June 2008

silver, Italian mosaics, enamel portrait miniatures and gold boxes. This group of around 220 boxes includes examples by some of the finest goldsmiths from all important centres of production.

Fascinating small scale masterpieces

Talking about gold boxes from the Gilbert Collection requires a short note on the use of these fascinating small scale masterpieces. Arguably more than any other type of object they stand for a bygone world of princely magnificence and courtly splendour. Inhaling snuff (powdered tobacco) spread across Europe during the 17th century. Snuff boxes as a distinct and luxurious item are a fashion that is closely connected to the sophisticated world of royal and princely courts of the 18th century. Taking snuff became a social ritual as much as a pleasure, which meant that using a snuff box required the same sort of gentility and social competence as taking tea or manipulating a fan. And it was by no means an exclusively male pastime, women were equally followers of the fashion. Gold boxes are silent, but often telling witnesses of their original owners' lives. One of the early boxes in the Gilbert Collection was made in Paris around 1714 (Fig. 2). The closed gold and tortoiseshell box shows the crowned and entwined letters *FE* on top and symbols of love – a quiver of arrows, a flaming heart, a pair of doves and burning torch – on the base. An enamel miniature on the inside of the lid reveals the identity of the donor of the box, one of the lovers eternalised in the initials on the lid. It depicts Philip V of Spain (1683-1746). The initials *FE* stand for Felipe, Philipp V of Spain, and Elisabetta Farnese (1692-1766) who were married in 1714. A picture of Maria Luisa of Parma (1751-1819) holding a portrait box with a miniature of her husband



Figure 2. Snuffbox with monogram *FE* for Philip V of Spain (1683-1746) and his wife Elisabetta Farnese (1692-1766) Gold, tortoiseshell, glazed miniature, Paris, ca. 1714 Loan:Gilbert.314-2008

Charles IV of Spain (1748-1819) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York is testimony to the continued use of gold boxes with portrait miniatures as tokens of love (Fig. 3).

Gold boxes are the quintessential expression of a social elite in search of perfection as much in terms of elegance and ingenuity as in terms of virtuosity. In spite of the diversity of forms, materials and decoration, gold is the element common to all of them. In the best possible sense they are an accessory of the utmost luxury: gold boxes were made to match the latest style, using the finest and most precious materials, with the constant ambition to create something new and singularly beautiful. They are made to be handled, to be opened and closed, to be passed around and to be talked about. The English art critic and writer Sir Sacheverell Sitwell (1897-1980) went so far as to state that eighteenth-century gold boxes are “some of the most fascinating and beautiful objects ever made by human

hands” (Snowman 1966).

French box makers were pre-eminent until the revolution. During the Napoleonic era luxury snuffboxes continued to be important as diplomatic gifts. Their wider use was challenged as the century progressed by an important change in culture: smoking replaced taking snuff.

The gift of choice

Gold boxes were often the gift of choice between rulers and ambassadors, and the quality and value of a box sent a clear message to the recipient. They were also a secret currency and a subtle but apparently common means of awarding financial benefits, as the well-known example of the Sardinian ambassador to Paris proves: he was given the same box twice, in 1770 and 1777, and both times returned the box to its maker in exchange for cash (Truman, 1991, 10).

The first collections of gold boxes were formed during the 18th century, not only as art collections in our modern sense, but primarily as repertoire of luxurious accessories: Graf Heinrich von Brühl (1700-1763), the powerful yet controversial Prime Minister of the Electorate of Saxony, is said to have owned more than 700 snuff boxes. The Thurn und Taxis Collection in Regensburg, now a branch of the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, has an impressive group of fifty-five boxes, which was superbly documented by a recent exhibition in Munich. The collection was formed primarily by Prince Carl Anselm von Thurn und Taxis (1733-1805) who commissioned and purchased boxes, often through his trusted *Kammerdiener* Adrian Morin. (Seelig 2007).

He also received gold boxes as gifts from other princes. The most magnificent example of a gold box that was not purchased by Carl Anselm but probably given to him is a diamond set table snuffbox associated with the collection of Frederick the Great of Prussia (Fig. 4). It was first mentioned in the *Prezioseninventar* of 1796 where it is described as “Boite de Prusse” without further information on the circumstances of its acquisition. It was recently suggested that the box was presented to Prince Carl Anselm by King Frederick William II of Prussia (1744-1797). The two houses were connected since Carl Anselm’s son Prince Karl Alexander married Princess Therese von Mecklenburg-Strelitz (1773-1839) in 1789. Her older sister was the famous Princess Louise (1776-1810), wife of the future King Frederick William III of Prussia and beautiful leader of



Figure 3. Portrait of Maria Luisa of Parma (1751-1819), later Queen of Spain. Laurent Pécheux (1729-1821), 1765, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. © Metropolitan Museum New York



Table snuffbox from the Collection of Frederick the Great Gold, bloodstone, diamonds, emeralds, glass and foils, Berlin, 1775-80, Based on a design by Jean Guillaume George Krüger Loan:Gilbert.414-2008

fashion in Empire Berlin. Prince Carl Anselm’s passion for gold boxes was known amongst his relatives in Prussia, so that it is indeed possible that it was a gift to him made shortly before the inventory was written in 1796 (Seelig, 2007, pp. 421-422). It remained part of the family collection until Arthur Gilbert acquired the box in 1992 at auction.

Following in the footsteps of eighteenth-century collectors

Like the Thurn und Taxis Collection, some of the most remarkable gold boxes remained in the royal and princely families who originally acquired them until well into the 20th century. Sir Arthur Gilbert followed in their footsteps and shared the passion of his eighteenth-century predecessors for the exquisite making and virtuosity essential for the creation of these objects. He considered himself a “maniacal collector” and described the development of his collecting interests as a process of “evolution”. The various fields are indeed related: silver and micromosaics led to gold boxes. It was the micromosaic of a dog set in a gold box that first attracted Arthur Gilbert to boxes.



Figure 5. Snuffbox with allegorical scenes celebrating Peace
Gold, mother-of-pearl, shells and ivory; Paris, Claude de Viller and Joseph Vallayer, 1747-8
Loan:Gilbert.411-2008



Figure 6. Snuffbox with Landscapes with Ruins
Multi-coloured gold, Jean Ducrollay, Paris, 1760-1
Loan:Gilbert.382-2008

Timothy Schroder, former Keeper of the Gilbert Collection, summarised Arthur Gilbert's philosophy of collecting and buying masterpieces as follows: "In forming his collection Arthur was definitely his own man. [...] Arthur did not buy only from dealers. He also enjoyed the thrill of the chase and was in his element when bidding on the telephone at a high-profile auction. As with many wealthy collectors, the deal was all about power. In the case of auctions, power was expressed by bidding higher and driving away the opposition. But when it came to buying from a dealer that same power was manifested by driving down the price and pushing the dealer to accept a lower offer. This was a game, an entertaining side issue to the more serious business of collecting, and no one played it better than Arthur Gilbert." (Schroder, 2009, 21-22)

His goal in collecting was showing the collection at a museum, as he very clearly stated in an interview conducted in the late 1990s: "I realised that [...] it really did not belong to us, it belonged to the public or to the world." He wanted to share his treasures with the general public. On his regular Sunday visits to the Los Angeles County Museum where objects from his collection were on display he followed visitors around with a magnifier, encouraging them to have a close look at the small scale miracles.

French boxes: Leading the way

As in many other fields of the arts, Paris led the way in gold box production both in design and in technical excellence. The earliest examples in the Gilbert Collection show Régence sym-

metry (ill. 2), which was completely replaced by the asymmetrical forms of the Rococo style, inspired by the designs of Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier (1695-1750). One of the most intricate examples from this period is an enamelled gold, ivory and shell box with allegorical scenes (Fig. 5), which bears the signature *VALLAYER AUX GOBELINS* and Paris marks for 1747-1748. The pictorial programme celebrates the benefits of peace. The goddess Minerva and Abundance shake hands on the lid of the box under the winged figure of Victory. The front side of the box depicts a pair of putti setting fire to the weapons of war, whilst the other sides show rococo allegories of commerce and the arts, both of which flourish during peace. The box appears to have been supplied by Vallayer to the French Royal household in 1749. The box became part of one of the most important private collections of French gold boxes, the Ortiz-Patiño Collection which was sold at auction in 1973 and 1974. It eventually entered the Gilbert Collection in 1995.

The first examples of Neoclassicism in box design appear around 1760. The boxes show a division of the decoration in clearly separate compartments, often with a central medallion bordered by garlands of multi-coloured gold or enamels. One of the earliest known boxes in this style was made by Jean Ducrollay (1710-1787) in 1761-1762 (Fig. 6). The box is part of the Gilbert Collection, and a rare example of a surviving box



Figure 7. Oval snuffbox with hunting scenes
Gold, pearls, gouache, box: Pierre-François Drais; gouaches: member of the van Blarenberghe family; Paris, 1777-9
Loan: Gilbert.361-2008



Figure 8. Bonbonnière with micromosaic of a dog
Carnelian, turquoise, jasper and lapis lazuli, gold and micromosaic; box: Johann Christian Neuber, Dresden; micromosaic Giacomo Raffaelli, Rome; circa 1780
Loan: Gilbert.349-2008

that can be matched to one of the many designs still in existence: the overall form and composition of the decoration of the box are very close to a design by Pierre-Philippe Choffard dated as early as 1759 which is in the V&A collection (E.897:30-1988). Hence design and box are united under the same roof after centuries of separation. Scenes from Roman history or mythology and allegories became fashionable subjects for the decoration of boxes during the following decades.

The delicate miniatures created specifically for gold boxes by members of the van Blarenberghe family are amongst the most intriguing examples of French box making. The van Blarenberghe family originated in Leyden but moved to Paris in 1751. At least five members of the family were painters of miniatures but as they rarely signed either their first name or initials, their work is difficult to differentiate. The scene on the lid of an extraordinarily refined box in the Gilbert Collection (Fig. 7) depicts an episode from a Royal hunt of Louis XV at the forest of Compiègne on the 13th July 1740. During

the hunt a stag was pursued onto the roof of a thatched cottage. Only after the roof was demolished from underneath by the Master of the Hunt, could the magnificent animal be shot. The remarkably fine miniature on the lid of the box shows the moment when the stag stands on the top of the roof with the pack of hounds underneath. More than a generation later the box and miniatures were created to commemorate this celebrated event. The box is reputed to have belonged to Louis XVI and to have been subsequently presented to André Huë in 1824 by Louis XVIII. The Huë family had a long tradition of royal service, principally as *greffiers de chasse*, record-keepers of the royal hunt at Fontainebleau.

Napoleon Bonaparte continued the custom of presenting boxes as diplomatic gifts and commissioned boxes set with his portrait. In a first wave of rococo revival makers also drew inspiration from the previous century. Earlier styles were adopted and works from earlier periods were re-used. A box commissioned by Prince Anatole Demidoff, Prince of San Donato (1812-1870), and now in the Gilbert Collection, is a rare example of a mid nineteenth-century gold box created as lavish setting for a celebrated 17th century enamel portrait miniature (Loan: Gilbert.459-2008).

Frederick the Great's boxes – Amongst the finest creations Prussia and Saxony with their important royal courts and patrons were the eminent centres of production in the Holy Roman Empire. In both, a distinct style and tradition of box making was established. Dresden box makers could exploit Saxony's rich resources of minerals from the mines of Bohemia and Silesia and used hardstones. The stones were often set in

a mosaic between strips of metal, the so-called *Zellenmosaik* (ill. Loan: Gilbert.349-2008). This technique is typical for Dresden boxes and objects of virtue, and is a local invention often attributed to either Heinrich Taddel (1715-circa 1794) or his son-in-law and successor as director of the Green Vaults, Johann Christian Neuber (1735-1808). Several boxes in the Gilbert Collection came from this workshop (Fig. 8).

With Meissen, Dresden was also centre of the production of porcelain snuff boxes. The manufactory produced boxes from its earliest days and manufactured vast quantities between circa 1735 to 1765. A pricelist from 1765 mentions 11 varieties. A particularly charming group of Meissen boxes imitates the shape of sealed letters. The Gilbert Collection comprises three examples, one of which reveals a view of London on the inside of the lid (Fig. 9). The French inscription "A la plus Fidelle/ Partout où Elle se trouve" on the cover dedicates this box "To the most faithful/ wherever she may be". The inside of the lid shows a panorama of London with St. Olaf's Church in the foreground, Old London Bridge and the Tower. It is possible that this box was commissioned by an English customer.

The boxes associated with Frederick the Great of Prussia (1712-1786, King of Prussia from 1740) are amongst the finest creations of the German Courts. Shortly after succeeding to the throne he banned the import of luxury goods to Prussia. This decision did indeed aid the Berlin industry of luxury items though many of the craftsmen working in Berlin were in fact trained in Paris or were of French Huguenot origin. Frederick was an admirer of the arts, an interest promoted by his mother Queen Sophie Dorothea in Prussia (1687-1857) who was also a collector of snuff boxes. Frederick's passion for gold boxes resulted in a legendary collection which probably comprised between 300 and 400 boxes. Frederick summoned box makers to his palace in Potsdam to discuss their work and his own designs for boxes. It is known that he corrected prepara-



Figure 9. Letter-shaped snuffbox with a panorama of London
Hard-paste porcelain and gold, Meissen, circa 1755
Loan:Gilbert.501-2008



Figure 10. Table snuffbox from the Collection of Frederick the Great
Gold, agate, diamonds, hardstones and foil, Berlin, circa 1765
Loan:Gilbert.423-2008

tory sketches and regularly commissioned boxes from Berlin makers with advance payment (Baer 1993).

The boxes were supplied by various makers, and most of them cannot be attributed to any particular artist from the group. After the collection at Schloss Charlottenburg in Berlin, the boxes in the Gilbert Collection are the largest single group of surviving boxes associated with Frederick the Great. They are rather distinct in form and construction with carved panels of hardstones set with dazzling gems, artfully cut stones or even painted glass. Coloured foil was used to enhance the brilliance and manipulate the colour of the stones.

One of the group (Fig. 10) is remarkable for its inscription which confirms the provenance directly from the collection of Frederick the Great: "Friedrich der Grosse besaß mich. Friedrich Wilhelm III. übergab mich/ seinem Sohne Albrecht zum Fideikommiss in seiner Familie." – „Frederick the Great owned me. Frederick William III gave me to his son Albrecht as inalienable property of his family." The base is decorated with a finely carved scene in coloured hardstones based on a painting by Jean-Baptiste Oudry, first exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1740. Where the original painting shows a white swan, the box is decorated with a colourful carved hardstone mallard. This box was owned by the Royal family of Prussia and became part of the collection of King Farouk of Egypt in the early 20th century. Arthur Gilbert loved sharing the story of this purchase: "The way I acquired this box goes to prove that I was quite a chaser – of boxes that is." He approached the dealer who owned the box by that time but was informed that a sale could only be considered if he was known as a customer, and Gilbert complied: "So I ended up buying a set of diamonds, yellow diamonds, which unfortunately I eventually got rid of at a large loss. But I finished up [with] the box though."



Figure 11. Snuffbox commemorating a tontine
Gold and enamel: Jasper Cunst and George Michael Moser, London, 1764-5
Loan:Gilbert.389-2008

London - Immigrant craftsmen

The London art world owed much to immigrant craftsmen. George Michael Moser (1706-1783), a chaser and enameller, arrived in London from Switzerland in 1726. His speciality was the chasing (modelling metal with a hammer and tools) and enamelling of figure scenes on watchcases and boxes. In 1783 Sir Joshua Reynolds, first President of the Royal Academy, described Moser as "the FATHER of the present race of Artists" because of his importance as a teacher of drawing for 50 years. He was a major organizing force in the St Martin's Lane Academy, and was elected first Keeper of the Royal Academy in 1768. His work is represented in the Gilbert Collection with three pieces, including a large enamel plaque (Fig. 11). It is part of a box that commemorates a so-called tontine, an early form of investment club in which the interest was distributed amongst the members. Named after the Italian banker Lorenzo de Tonti the tontine combines elements of a yearly interest payment and a lottery with the yearly payments being divided amongst all surviving members. Sir Charles Price (1708-1772) was the last survivor of the tontine commemorated with this box which must have run over more than 30 years. The inner side of its lid lists the names and dates of death of the fellow participants: "Tho Rose Esq" was the first member to pass away in 1724, Janet Price, the last name on the plaque, died on the 7th December 1758. The fine enamel panel by Moser is a remarkable example of the transition style of the mid 1760s with Neoclassical allegorical figures leaning against a headstone that still shows baroque scrolls and rocaille forms. Jasper Cunst, presumably of Dutch origin, and possibly related to the contemporary Amsterdam goldsmith Willem Cunst, made the gold box itself.

The Gilbert Collection also comprises a rather charming and rare Chelsea porcelain box in the shape of a girl's head with diamond-set eyes (Fig. 12). In England, few porcelain and pottery snuffboxes were made. The Chelsea porcelain factory produced small decorative objects, particularly between 1758 and 1769. Many of the creations of this factory were in the style of the important continental hard-paste porcelain factories, especially Meissen. The function and direct model of the girl's head box cannot be determined with certainty. The golden inscription on the rim of the box alludes to the world of eighteenth-century carnival and masquerade balls: "JE TE CONNAIS BEAU MASQUE" – "I know you beautiful mask". Lord Chesterfield sent a Chelsea box to his Parisian correspondent Lady Hervey with the following note: "Don't imagine I mean it as a present. To make you easy upon that score I declare that this box cost me but two guineas, and I send it to you merely to let you see how well we imitate the Dresden china, and for less than a quarter of the price." (Quoted after Esdaile 1925).

A special category of gold boxes in Britain and Ireland was the 'Freedom box', in which prominent figures were presented with a scroll granting them the freedom of the City, comparable to the tradition of awarding a golden key. A magnificent example in the Gilbert Collection (Loan:Gilbert.387-2008) is by James Morisset and was awarded to Admiral Earl Howe in 1794.

By the mid 19th century the collecting of gold boxes in a modern sense, as masterpieces of virtuosity and ingenuity, started. Beyond their obvious material value and the often



brehtaking beauty of their making, gold boxes are extremely complex witnesses of the past, and speak to us as much about historical facts as about stories and ideals. But then again, it is not that difficult and complex after all. When asked about the crucial criterion driving his collecting, Arthur Gilbert gave a very honest and straight-forward answer: "I like beautiful things. [...] I've chosen things that I personally like the look of." In these few words he celebrated the timeless passion of collecting.

Look inside - Visiting the Rosalinde & Arthur Gilbert Galleries at the V&A

The Rosalinde & Arthur Gilbert Galleries can be visited during the regular opening hours of the Victoria & Albert Museum. The new galleries are situated on the first floor of the museum and in close vicinity to the V&A galleries for silver, jewellery and gold boxes. The redisplay includes the entire collection of gold boxes. It is arranged by region and follows a chronological order which allows visitors to study of the development of style



Figure 12. Box in the shape of a girl's head
Gold, enameled soft-paste porcelain, agate and diamonds; box:
London (Chelsea); Mounts: possibly Birmingham, circa 1760
Loan: Gilbert.497-2008

and form in direct comparison. Some of the boxes are displayed in drawers inscribed "Look inside". When opened, the drawers reveal more masterpieces, comparable to the surprises some boxes hold inside. The additional space made it possible for the first time to show boxes with light-sensitive materials permanently. In addition some of the original eighteenth-century leather cases are displayed alongside the gold boxes they were made for. Magnifiers are also available in the galleries as a tribute to Arthur Gilbert's passion and an essential tool for the appreciation of these small scale treasures.

All areas of the Gilbert Collection – from the gold boxes to the micromosaics and *pietre dure* – have seen an increased interest as collecting areas and research subjects. The carefully prepared catalogues of the Gilbert Collection, such as the two volumes on gold boxes by Charles Truman, certainly contributed to the increased general appreciation of these categories of decorative arts. The arrival of the collection at the V&A is the beginning of a new chapter for the Gilbert Collection.

Illustrations

All illustrations unless otherwise stated:
The Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Collection on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Future events of the Gilbert Collection at the V&A

The Gilbert Collection at the V&A is dedicated to promoting research in all fields of collecting pursued by Arthur and Rosalinde Gilbert. In November 2011 it will hold a two-day international conference on gold boxes in co-operation with The Wallace Collection, London. Speakers will include experts from various backgrounds, academics, curators and auction house specialists who share their passion for the small but complex treasures. The event is one of a series of study days and international conferences organized by the Gilbert Collection at the V&A, some of them in cooperation with other institutions.

17 June 2010 1pm
Gallery Talk *The Art of Enamelling* with Gilbert Curator Heike Zech

24 June 2010 1pm
Gallery Talk *Conservation and Gold Boxes on Display in the Rosalinde & Arthur Gilbert Galleries* with Metals Conservator Gates Sofer

26 to 28 November 2010
International Symposium *Going for Gold: Craftsmanship and Collecting of Gold Boxes*
In co-operation with The Wallace Collection, London
With demonstrations of box making techniques on Sunday, 28 November 2010

The Gilbert Collection at the V&A, edited by former Keeper of The Gilbert Collection Timothy Schroder, is available at the V&A bookshop and online.

For further details on these events please visit the V&A website or email The Gilbert Collection on loan to the V&A:
www.vam.ac.uk
gilbertcollection@vam.ac.uk

Related literature

- Baer, Winfried. *Prunk-Tabatière Friedrichs des Großen*. Munich: Hirmer Verlag 1993.
- Esdaille, Arundell. Some Eighteenth Century Literary Allusions to Chelsea China. *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*. Vol. 46. No. 262. Jan 1925, pp. 4-20.
- Seelig, Lorenz. *Golddosen des 18. Jahrhunderts aus dem Besitz der Fürsten von Thurn und Taxis*. Exhibition catalogue. Munich. Bayerisches Nationalmuseum 2007.
- Schroder, Timothy, ed., *The Gilbert Collection at the V&A*. London 2009 (chapter on gold boxes written by Rachel Church).
- Snowman, A. Kenneth. *Eighteenth Century Gold Boxes of Europe*. Woodbridge 1990.
- Truman, Charles. *The Gilbert Collection of Gold Boxes*. Los Angeles 1991.
- Ibd. *The Gilbert Collection of Gold Boxes*. Vol. 2. London 1999.

In addition all objects from the Gilbert Collection can be viewed on the recently launched V&A online catalogue *Search the Collections*:
www.vam.ac.uk.