More Treasures Beyond Sanctum III
New Additions to the Denis Low Collection of Snuff Bottles

DENIS LOW

Photographs by Jeffrey Low and Denis Low

All heights/lengths shown are without stoppers unless specifically stated. Only those with integral/original stoppers will have additional dimensions.

IN THE events leading to, and during, the 46th Annual Convention of the International Chinese Snuff Bottle Society in Hong Kong in October 2014, the idea was mooted of showcasing another fifty new additions to my snuff bottle collection. The three books of my snuff bottle collection published thus far, usually referred to as Sanctum I, II and III respectively, catalogued a total of 938 bottles in three exhibitions held in 1999, 2002 and 2007 at the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore. After the publication of the third book and because of what I stated in my foreword, many in the snuff bottle fraternity thought that I would slow down, or even stop, adding to my collection. To dispel any impression that I would not be adding new bottles to my collection, a further fifty new additions were published in the January–February 2010 issue of Arts of Asia in an article entitled “Beyond Sanctum III”. Another fifty bottles are now featured in this article, with a brief description and, in most instances, the provenance provided for each item.
Since the previous article in 2010, collectors of Chinese snuff bottles have been accorded the opportunity to access a treasure trove of bottles at auction. The most important of these have been the ten sales of the Mary and George Bloch Collection in Hong Kong, with the first five sales handled by Bonhams and the remainder at Sotheby’s. The tenth and last sale will be held in May 2015. There was also the sale of the Joe Grimberg Collection at Sotheby’s New York, the Margaret Polak Collection at Bonhams New York and the Paul Braga Collection at Bonhams Hong Kong. Other less well known collections have also been put up for sale during this period.

As in the previous article, the fifty snuff bottles here are presented sequentially by type of material.

The first bottle is a magnificent enamel on glass example previously in the Mary and George Bloch Collection (1). I personally deem this to have been the single most important, and indeed most desirable, bottle in their collection. Produced in the Beijing Palace workshops, Qianlong mark and period, it is unusually large (although I do not consider it to be a table bottle) and the influence of the Jesuits is apparent in the superb figurative painting of the European ladies. This bottle has held the world record price for a Chinese snuff bottle at auction since November 2011 (Arts of Asia, March–April 2012 issue, p. 163).

This is followed by another very rare and important enamel on glass bottle (2), also from the Beijing Palace workshops that hails from the Paul Braga Collection. A similar bottle with four raised “bird and flower” panels on a gold ground can be found in Robert Hall, Chinese Snuff Bottles VII: The Art of an Imperial Addiction, London, 1995, pp. 42–51, no. 6.

A fine cylindrical milk-ground Yangzhou enamel on glass bottle is next (3), with an iron-red Qianlong nianzhi mark on its base and of the period. Provenance: Robert Hall.

From the collection of a dear friend, the late Margaret Polak, is a beautifully enamelled bottle with a two-character Qianlong mark in blue enamel on its base (4). This two-character mark is typically found in enamelled bottles made by Ye Bengqi.

A fine and rare European subject Guangzhou enamel and gilt bronze bottle with original stopper from the collection of my fellow Singaporean, Joe Grimberg, is next (5), Guangzhou imperial workshops with incised Qianlong nianzhi mark and of the period.
An enamelled copper bottle from the Guangzhou imperial workshops, the base inscribed with black enamelled Qianlong nianzhi mark (6), formerly in the Virginia Mead Collection, was acquired through the late Robert Kleiner.

A very rare European subject Guangzhou enamel and cinnabar lacquer snuff bottle (7) comes from the Grimberg Collection. An almost identical bottle can be found in Clare Lawrence (Clare Chu), *Miniature Masterpieces from the Middle Kingdom: The Monimar Collection of Chinese Snuff Bottles*, pp. 24–25, no. 6.
Purchased from Hugh Moss, a fine 19th century Guangzhou enamelled copper double-gourd bottle is decorated with five auspicious bats and formalised clouds, on a yellow ground (8).

My last important bottle from Robert Kleiner is this extremely rare, beautifully enamelled and elaborately decorated, gold European snuff bottle, brilliantly painted on each side with various fruits on a dark green background. The scenes are framed within scalloped borders decorated with minute pearls, with an integral stopper inset on top, with a watch beneath a domed crystal cover (9). This bottle is of Swiss origin. A similar bottle with a blue background can be found in *Snuff Bottles in the Collection of the National Palace Museum*, p. 88, nos 23 and 24 and back cover. Such bottles were presented by foreign dignitaries to the Chinese Imperial Court.

Jade and jadeite examples form the next category, and the first is an extremely fine white bottle sourced from Michael Hughes. It is carved in low relief with coiled sinewy qilong on both sides (10). The next three bottles, from Robert Hall, comprise a wonderful pebble bottle with russet patches on one side and lovely grey reverse carved with dragons interlocking amidst swirling clouds (11). From its narrow side, one can see that the bottle is two-tone—white
and grey—running like a seam down the side. On the base of this bottle, carved in light relief are the four characters “zhì bái shòu huī”, a Daoist adage of knowing how to differentiate between right and wrong while knowing that there are many “grey” areas. This is followed by a flattened white bottle (12), Beijing Palace workshops, with raised calligraphic inscriptions on one side and sunflowers on the reverse, all in low relief. Following these is a black and white Suzhou jade bottle intricately carved in high relief, with Liu Hai holding a string of cash and his three-legged toad at his feet on one side. On the reverse is a scholar with an open book, looking askance at a temple in the mountains (13).

A pale celadon jade snuff bottle carved in varying relief, with three monkeys plucking peaches from a tree (14) is next. Provenance: Robert Hall, Christie’s Paris. The last of this jade group is a fine white jade fish bottle from Michael Hughes, beautifully carved as a carp, with a smaller carp alongside on the reverse (15).

The first of the jadeite bottles is an absolutely stunning emerald green example from the Bloch Collection (16), which was perceived by many collectors to be the finest jadeite bottle in that collection. This is a view that I wholeheartedly share, and I am thus very proud to add this gem to my group of jadeite bottles. This is followed by a rare jadeite bìxì, or “dragon-tortoise”, bottle in apple green (17) from the Polak Collection. Most bìxì examples are in jade and it is rare to find one in jadeite.

The glass category begins with a red glass overlay bottle, attributed to the Beijing Palace workshops, that is finely carved with a scaly dragon with five-pronged tail above its mate rising from crested waves (18). Also attributed to the Beijing Palace workshops is a beautiful yellow glass bottle carved with a pair of confronted chīlong on each side (19). Both these bottles were acquired from Robert Kleiner.
Next is a rare variegated green “cabbage” bottle (20), carved from a single block of glass, from the Bloch Collection. Most examples of “cabbage” bottles are found in pink and white glass. The following two bottles come from the Polak Collection. The first is another “cabbage” bottle, albeit in blue glass overlay (21). The blue layer is finely carved through to reveal a formal collar of cabbage leaves below the shoulders of the milky white glass. The effect is exquisite. The next bottle is a transparent light blue ground example overlaid with the carving of white gentian flowers (22). From Dick Wang comes a very similar larger bottle in a transparent darker blue ground (23). The final example in the glass category is a pebble-form white glass bottle imitating jade (24) from Michael Hughes. It even has a russet patch added to one side for realistic effect.

The first of the porcelain bottles is an exciting enamelled octagonal shaped imperial example, made in the Jingdezhen kilns, with iron-red Qianlong nianzhi seal mark and of the period (25). One main side depicts flora and fauna while a calligraphic inscription is on the reverse. It is one of my favourite acquisitions from the Grimberg Collection. This is followed by another imperial bottle (with original
stopper) made in the Jingdezhen kilns, Qianlong mark and period, featuring the Eight Immortals shown with their individual attributes (four on each side), all on formalised clouds (26). Provenance: Michael Hughes.

The third bottle, also made in the Jingdezhen imperial kilns, with Jiaqing mark and of the period, was acquired from Dick Wang. It has the same calligraphic inscription as the previous Grimberg bottle and also has a panel featuring flora and fauna on the other side (27). The next bottle is one of a recorded set of eight superb Jiaqing mark and period bottles with original stopper (28). Like this extant example, they represent the best workmanship of the Jingdezhen imperial kilns. This bottle was one of a pair previously in the Bloch Collection. This is followed by an interesting bottle (29) acquired from Hugh Moss that is one of a group he named “curly-whiskers”. Manufactured in Jingdezhen at the beginning of the 19th century, the base is inscribed “Mouchun yazhi”, or “Elegantly made by Mouchun”, in iron-red enamel.

The next two examples are moulded and carved porcelain bottles. The first is an extremely fine and intricately carved bottle with original stopper from the Polak Collec-
30  Height 6.2 cm. With integral/original stopper height 7 cm

31  Height 6.8 cm

32  Height 4.5 cm

33  Height 4.8 cm

34  Height 5.1 cm

35  Height 4.7 cm

36  Height 6 cm

The chalcedony group begins with this imperial “mei-jing” shaped bottle from the renowned Edward T. Chow Collection. It has all the attributes of the Beijing Palace workshops (32). Provenance: Franklin Chow, Robert Kleiner. The second of the chalcedony bottles is from the Polak Collection, with the face of the Chan monk, Bodhidharma. It is exquisitely carved with minute detailing to his face and with the brilliant use of a pale red patch in the stone to form the monk’s head (33).

The next two bottles feature Suzhou agate examples. The first, formerly in the Dr Mary Kaufman Collection, features a very rare and beautiful tricolour bottle with layered relief, depicting Huang Chenyan in his search for
prunus in the snow (34). Provenance: Robert Kleiner. This is followed by another Suzhou agate bottle acquired from Christie’s Paris. It is cleverly carved to depict Buddhist lion-dogs by using the darker inclusions in the stone (35). The last chalcedony bottle is from Bob Lee of Jin Hing & Co., and features a pebble bottle with its pale inclusions masterfully carved to depict lotus leaves and pods (36). This same bottle is illustrated in Hugh Moss, Snuff Bottles of the Silica or Quartz Group, p. 60, no. 156.

The organic group starts with a rare ivory snuff double-bottle in the shape of a miniature double gourd, made in the Beijing Palace workshops, with integral and original threaded stopper. The upper bulb of elegant elongated form is detachable from the lower bulb (37). An almost identical bottle is illustrated in The Complete Collection of Treasures of the Palace Museum, Vol. 47, p. 247, no. 379. Provenance: Mike Kaynes, Robert Kleiner. By sheer coincidence (and luck), I managed to obtain an incredibly similar miniature rhinoceros horn double-bottle, also in double gourd form (38), that was also made in the Beijing Palace workshops. As with the previous bottle, the upper and lower halves are detachable. Provenance: Richard Law, Robert Kleiner. The third example in this group is an amber “basket-weave” snuff bottle from the Edward T. Chow Collection (39). It is smaller than most such known examples in amber.

A rare Fuzhou lacquer snuff bottle from the Grimberg Collection is the next example in this organic group (40). It is complete with an original lacquer stopper and spoon. This is followed by a large slender ovoid-shaped bottle, the body formed from a complete coconut, with ivory foot, neck and integral stopper. It is carved with archaic inscriptions and seals on one side and Shou Lao grasping a gnarled cane beneath a pine tree on the other side (41).

The hardstone group features two lapis lazuli bottles previously in the Nancy McCarthy Collection that were obtained through Robert Kleiner. The first is a rare flat...
42 Height 5.7 cm. With integral/original stopper height 6.7 cm

43 Height 7 cm

44 Height 6 cm. With integral/original stopper height 6.8 cm

45 Length 6.8 cm. With integral/original stopper length 8 cm

46 Height 6.3 cm

A flattened shield shape bottle with flared neck, carved around the centre with a tasselled bow (42). It comes with an integral stopper and was probably made in the Beijing Palace workshops. The second is of slender baluster shape, with flared neck (43). The shoulders are decorated with well-carved lion-mask suspending rings. It too was possibly made in the Beijing Palace workshops.

For the metal group, the first example comprises a rare flattened shield-shaped cloisonné enamel bottle with original stopper from Robert Kleiner. It has a complex millefleurs pattern on both sides (44) and is similar to a bottle with identical decoration in the Bloch Collection, illustrated in Treasury 6, no. 1118. It too is probably attributable to the Beijing Palace workshops. This is followed by a most
intriguing silver bottle (45) from Michael Hughes. It is fashioned in the shape of a curled-up lotus leaf, revealing its underside with netted veins. The integral threaded stopper is in the shape of a lotus pod almost concealed by lotus petals.

The last grouping, inside-painted bottles, begins with a most interesting glass example. Obviously painted by Ding Erzhong, it is signed “Zhou Leyuan” and dated to 1893 (46). Hugh Moss was shown this very bottle by Edward Chow in the 1960s, and he refers to it in Treasury 4, p. 271, no. 538, asserting that Ding and Zhou knew each other well. Provenance: Edward T. Chow, Franklin Chow, Robert Kleiner. From the Bloch Collection comes the next beautifully painted glass bottle by Zhou Leyuan (47). It is dated to the seventh month of 1890 and was formerly in the collection of Paula Hallet.

An inside-painted glass bottle from the Grimberg Collection, circa 1900 and attributed to Ma Shaoxuan, is superbly painted with a full-length portrait of Tan Xinpei (48) portraying the role of Qin Qiang in the Chinese opera Maima (“Selling the Horse”). It is illustrated in Vanessa F. Holden, “The Joe Grimberg Collection of Chinese Snuff Bottles”, Oriental Art, 2002, Vol. 48, no. 4, pp. 65–72, figs 38 and 39. Another inside-painted glass bottle by Ma Shaoxuan is illustrated next (49). It is inscribed on both sides with excerpts from Wang Xizhi’s Luoting Preface, followed by two seals in red, Shao and Xuan. Provenance: Virginia Mead, Robert Kleiner.

The last bottle that I am showcasing is an extraordinary inside-painted flawless crystal bottle by Liu Shouben (50), commissioned by Michael Kaynes in 1978 and obtained through Robert Kleiner. Beautifully painted on the front with an opera singer from the famous Beijing opera The Drunken Concubine, the reverse is filled with sixteen signatures of inside-painting artists of the modern school.

Thus, my collecting continues, with the realisation that the pace of acquisition is slower than the first thirty years, not just because I have grown more discerning, but also because good bottles are hard to come by; and when they do reach the market, the prices are at multiples of those of just a few years ago.