

A Pinch of Snuffbox Glory

BEFORE ROLEX or Rolls-Royce, there was “Neuber à Dresde”—Johann Christian Neuber, whose snuffboxes were a symbol of luxury for the crème de la crème as the French Revolution approached.

Neuber (1736-1808) spent most of his life in Dresden, Germany, where he was court jeweler to the Elector of Saxony. Now a new exhibition at Dresden’s Green Vault, featuring some 30 rare boxes, promises to introduce him to a wider public. After a stop at New York’s [Frick Collection](#) from May 29 to Aug. 19, it’s on to Galerie J. Kugel in Paris.

There’s no sneezing at the prices rare snuffboxes fetch. Neuber boxes, of which about 200 survive, have been especially strong at auction. Last November, Christie’s London sold one for over \$500,000, and in July 2010, Sotheby’s London sold an elaborate box for \$1.3 million, more than double its high estimate. That stands as one of the highest prices ever paid for a snuffbox.

Many boxes in the exhibition are made from gold and unusual hardstone inlays. The exhibition also includes the gilded and inlaid “Taschen Table,” made by Neuber in 1779 and presented by Saxon Elector Friedrich August III (later Saxony’s first king) to French diplomat Louis-Auguste, Baron de Breteuil.

Snuffboxes—or “gold boxes,” as aficionados sometimes call them—attract a special breed of collector, says exhibition organizer Alexis Kugel, co-owner of Galerie J. Kugel, one of Paris’s most prestigious antique dealers. “They’re passionate, and they’re very secretive,” he says. “Most of the gold-box collectors I know keep their collections hidden in cupboards or

drawers in a special piece of furniture.” The Neuber show is chiefly made up loans from private collectors, who insist on anonymity.

Notable snuffbox fans have included Frederick the Great, J.P. Morgan and art collectors Charles and Jayne Wrightsman, whose donations are a linchpin of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Julia Clarke, Sotheby’s London-based senior specialist for gold boxes and objects of vertu, says the most prized Neuber boxes feature a “Steinkabinett,” or stone cabinet, design. Besides being fancy presents,

these boxes were tiny trade shows, meant to promote the use of Saxon hardstones like agate and jasper.

Mr. Kugel has thought about the “psychology” of small boxes with big price tags. “In this time of economic uncertainty,” he says, “the gold box represents the most potential value in the smallest size, which—if you would have to run away somewhere—you could take in your pocket.” He adds, “My grandparents escaped the Nazis with gold boxes in their pockets.”

“Johann Christian ‘Neuber à Dresde’: Neoclassical Treasury Art for the Aristocracy of Europe” runs through May 2. —J.S. Marcus



A SNUFFBOX made by Johann Christian Neuber between 1785 and 1790, on view in Dresden, Germany, and soon in New York.

