

A Jeweler Picks Up Where Nature Left Off



THOMAS HENNOQUE, PRIVATE COLLECTION

Most intoxicating vices involve some kind of paraphernalia, designed for convenience, traveling light and, often, showing off. These run the gamut from engraved silver liquor flasks, Art Deco cigarette cases and Moroccan leather hashish pouches to the so-called beer hats of today. While few such objects distill thought, skill and materials into that thing called art, there are exceptions. Outstanding among these are the gemstone snuffboxes created by the German goldsmith Johann Christian Neuber (1736-1808), working in Dresden, the cosmopolitan capital of Saxony. Nearly 30 of these boxes, generally no larger than the palm of a hand, dominate "Gold, Jasper and Carnelian: Johann Christian Neuber at the Saxon Court," on view at the Frick Collection.

ROBERTA SMITH

ART REVIEW

Gold, Jasper and Carnelian A box of gold and semiprecious stones by Johann Christian Neuber, from around 1770-75, is in this show at the Frick Collection.

Enconced in the museum's Oval Room, the show's 43 small, impeccably wrought wonders also include gemstone buttons, a cane handle, several bonbonnières (candy boxes) and one astounding piece of furniture. It was commissioned from Neuber by his chief patron, Friedrich Augustus III (1750-1827), Elector of Saxony, in 1778, as a gift to the French diplomat Baron de Breteuil. Still owned by the baron's family, it has never before crossed the Atlantic.

All these multimedial pieces bristle with consummately controlled decorative and pictorial effects; pay homage to nature's mineralogical bounty, and exude palpable cachet. Few things say status, generation after generation, like bits of polished, opulently hued, strikingly patterned stone set in gold. This sumptuous array is the sleeper of the summer season.

It is also the first exhibition ever devoted to Neuber, Continued on Page 25

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who was renowned in his time as Friedrich Augustus III's court jeweler but is hardly a familiar name now. Some new attributions to the artist were made during the show's assembly, among them a snuffbox the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired 95 years ago in the sprawling J. Pierpont Morgan bequests, and an elaborately gilded and gemstone-garnished base for a Meissen white porcelain figurative tableau — part of an extensive table service — that the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore had previously classified as 19th-century Russian or Scandinavian.

The show was jointly organized by the Grünes Gewölbe (Green Vault) museum in Dresden (where it was seen earlier this year), the Frick and Galerie J. Kugel in Paris (its third and final stop). It is accompanied by a lavish publication that includes essays by several scholars and a catalogue raisonné. The Frick's presentation has been overseen by Ian Wardropper, the museum's director, and Charlotte Vignon, its associate curator of decorative arts.

The objects bespeak a talented artist in the right place at the right time. The use of snuff — the dry, granular form of tobacco snorted through the nostrils — was so popular among Europe's ruling classes in the late 1700s that snuffboxes became an especially favored gift, diplomatic and otherwise.

In addition, Saxony's geology was rich with gemstones that had been ex-

ploited by Dresden court jewelers since the late 16th century. Besides jasper and carnelian, the region's mountains yielded garnet, amethyst, smoky quartz, citrine, bloodstone, rock crystal, and mind-boggling varieties of agate, as well as petrified wood — virtually everything Neuber needed, except lapis lazuli, which came from Afghanistan.

Furthermore, in keeping with the Enlightenment drive to understand and order the natural world in all its manifestations, mineralogy was enduringly popular; gemstones were studied by scientists who devised systems of categorization, and were also assiduously collected by nature-oriented connoisseurs. So it is understandable that by Neuber's time, snuffboxes and other gemstone-studded objects had become a perfect way to broadcast not just their owners' place in society, but also Saxony's natural riches, cultural sophistication and scientific erudition.

The exhibition is arrayed in vitrines that function a bit like individual galleries, both in the amount of close looking they sustain and in the way they outline Neuber's development and stylistic approaches. One of the first contains boxes from the late 1760s and early 1770s, in which the thinly cut gemstones form tiny, mosaiclike images that can resemble cloisonné. Pastoral scenes showing shepherdesses, sheep and ancient ruins reminiscent of the work of Claude Lorraine appear on the top of one oval container and form a continuous frieze around its sides.

Nearby, another, quite different oval container — the Met's — isolates elliptical views of relatively stylized Italian gardens against interlocking patterns of red carnelian and brown-striped agate, a tactic that greatly enhances the deep

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perspectives of the gardens' clipped hedges and blocky buildings. In a third vitrine, of later works, carved gemstone bas-relief flowers take over the lid's medallions; elsewhere, cameo and porcelain portraits dominate.

The competing mediums can sometimes jar modern tastes, nowhere more than in the show's centerpiece, the Breteuil table, whose top is something of a pitched battle among sizable Meissen porcelain plaques of mythological scenes, circles of imitation pearls (made of rock crystal and silver dust), and rather bulky swags and wreaths of bas-relief gemstones. As if that were not enough, the legs are decorated with a combination of petrified wood, amethyst, cabochon carnelian and diamond-cut rock crystal, gilt and more imitation pearls.

The winner is the field of battle itself, a radiating surface tiled with 128 postage-stamp-size squares: Each is a sample of a different gemstone or petrified wood, numbered according to an identification list in a small booklet that came with the table (and can be perused on a nearby touch screen). The same encyclopedic approach prevails in several examples of a kind of snuffbox that is especially associated with Neuber: the Steinkabinettabatiere, or stone cabinet snuffbox, which presents the samples, also numbered, under less distracting circumstances.

Neuber's passion for the natural beauty of his materials carries this show. Amid all the pyrotechnics, don't miss his special genius for agate stones. It comes across one way or another in nearly every object, most consistently when he contrasts pieces of agate finely striped in red or brown. The resulting patterns, with their suggestions of brush strokes, lattice or basket weaves, marquetry floors and brick walls, constantly make sly, almost subliminal asides to more monumental endeavors.

Sometimes Neuber lets nature take center stage, as with an extraordinary snuffbox whose top and side medallions are simply loamy ovals of gleaming petrified wood. Sometimes he seems almost to shame human craftsmanship, as when he rings a frothy enamel medallion of vestal virgins with 11 ovals of moss agate, here a pale, glasslike stone containing plantlike mineral formations. These isolated fissures can suggest sprigs of laurel — that vaunted Classical motif — as if in idealized, real form. Perhaps Neuber appreciated the difference.



MICHAEL BODYCOMB/THE FRICK COLLECTION

Pieces by Johann Christian Neuber, clockwise from left: a box inlaid with semiprecious stones; the Breteuil table; and the bottom of a box decorated with a Meissen porcelain plaque and polished stones, all from the late 1700s.



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