

The Queen of Snuff Jars?

*Written by Ralph Finch,
Janet's assistant*

Janet Finch picked up her first snuff jar a year ago, and it quickly became an addiction. At the moment, she has 26 of them, thanks to several U.S. dealers. She calls them her “virus collection.”

And Janet has become an international buyer. It sure wasn't an easy purchase, but on March 13 a nice item just arrived on our porch, so I can now finish the story.

Many months ago, at Wilkinson's auctioneers in Doncaster, England, we found this (edited) listing for 208 items “from the collection of Graham Cutts.” It included some rare and very interesting pieces, like snuff boxes, miniature weighing scales, Welsh love spoons, etc.



Our new snuff, with its ... stopper? Was this originally on the jar 200 years ago? And a downer: The jar turned out to have been coated with un-described ... shellac? That wouldn't have happened at an American glass auction site.

Snuff boxes, indeed. In more shapes than most people could imagine. One of our favorites was Lot 9: “An unusual 18th/early 19th-century carved fruitwood Mating Frogs snuff box. The pair in ‘intimate’ pose embellished with punch-work and inset with bone eyes. The base lid on brass shaped hinge engraved with initials, 3” (7.5 cm) in length.” It (they?) sold for £2,500 (\$3,480).

Lot 15: A rare 19th-century boxwood snuff box carved as “Martha Gunn” depicted wearing a bonnet, she sat on a barrel with a goblet in one hand and flagon in the other. The figure mounted on a hinged silver hallmarked base forming the lid, 4 inches.

For us, the key item was Lot 151: “An 18th-century dark green, hand-blown glass shop jar with original lead-covered cork bung. The square body with painted label ‘Snuff’ to one side, 5¾ inches high.”

In this modern world, getting things from “across the pond” is doable. But, it's no longer just a hop, skip and a jump.

Here is the challenge. So, last Feb. 27, on Invaluable, which lists hundreds of auction sites, we set our alarm for 3:45 a.m. so that we could get on our computer to bid on our favorite items.

Mistake No. 1: We miscalculated the time in England, and arrived at the auction an hour before it opened. More coffee, more



Three great Taddy items, found on the internet.

toast, and more chatting about what we hoped the snuff would go for.

Mistake No. 2: Who knew there were so many wooden snuff collectors.

With toast on our fingers, and bait on our breath, the auction began. Even though there were a few hundred lots in the auction, at about one a minute, we had to pay attention, as the auction roared along like peas in a mush! (Sorry, bad mushy peas reference.)

And a bonus. Along with unusual snuffs, we discovered other strange things that people collected, which were certainly unusable (to us), such as:

A “Mangle Board gouge,” a German springerle, a Scottish oval ash kneeler, an 18th century French vine worker’s knife, a combined snuff grater/snuff box, a spinning wheel distaff, a goosewing knitting sheath (actually, there were many knitting sheaths!), and many stay busks(?), many 18th-century fancy hand-carved apple corers, several 19th-century seam rubbers, and oak quai ch, a toasting fork, an 18th-century “willow lamhog with integral handle,” a combined spice box and nutmeg grater, a

large 17th-century mortar. The list went on and on.

I could have looked up what some of these odd things are, but I want you to feel as ignorant as I am.

Other favorites of ours included:

Lot 16: “A 19th century Scottish carved treen table snuff purported to have been carved by The Blind Man of Ayrshire.” (If you have to ask, it’s out-of-sight for you, price-wise.)

Lot 50: A Welsh panel inscribed “1614 Am Hynnu Gwylia.” The Welch language is ... challenging. My Welsh grandmother spoke it, but my mother only learned a few naughty words.

Lot 96: A wood snuff whale marked “F.J.L.” and “Nantucket, 1851,” with bone eyes and teeth, a bit over four inches long. We wanted that, but it went for a whale of a price — £3,100 (\$4,316 U.S. plus commission) and the Finches got blown out of the water.

Lot 134 was a pretty rat that cut the cheese for another £3,100. (“It was a gorgeous rat,” Janet mooned. (And she says that I am strange.)

We liked a wooden snuff (Lot 53) in the shape of a book, dated “1791,” but the book slammed shut on us for £480.

And Lot 151? Estimated at £80-£120 (U.S. 110-167), with an opening bid of £50. The closing price to Janet? £850 plus 27 percent buyer’s commission, plus shipping. That’s \$1,478. Sigh.

England’s John Ault responded to our new snuff. “What a lovely piece, so full of character. Got to be a rare thing, hope it didn’t drain your coffers too much! I’ve only one snuff in my collection, but it’s a late Victorian miniature salesman’s sample from *Taddy & Co.; no glass examples.”

And I replied: “I have a teddy (bear) I hugged 77-plus years ago. Still have it, although, like me, it is missing some hair.”

FYI: Wikipedia adds: “Taddy & Co was established in 1740 in London by James Taddy as a seller of tobacco, snuff and tea. By the end of the 19th century the business had grown to become one of the most important tobacco companies in Britain. During the 1890s Taddy & Co. became well known for the excellence of their cigarette cards.”