



A particularly interesting large enamel portrait miniature of Admiral Lord Nelson by Henry Bone RA and dated 1812. Bearne's, Exeter. July 02. HP: £12,500. ABP: £14,703.



Four Bilsdon enamel patch boxes late 18th/early 19thC, variously printed with courting lovers, Cupid, and a landscape scene between inscriptions incl. 'Practise Love & you will know The Virtuous Love Is Life Below', and 'I love too well to Kiss and Tell', the bases coloured yellow, pink and blue, all with mirrored interiors, some faults, 4.5cm max. Woolley & Wallis, Salisbury. Apr 13. HP: £500. ABP: £590.



Six enamel patch boxes early 19thC, variously painted with birds in nests, and perched on flowers, fences or signs, titled with mottoes incl. 'If you love me don't Deceive me', 'Esteem the Giver' and 'A Trifle from Cambridge', five with mirrors to the interior, some restoration, 4.2cm max. (6) Woolley & Wallis, Salisbury. Apr 13. HP: £480. ABP: £566.



A Staffordshire oval enamel patch box, the lid decorated with 'The Glorious Victory of Earl Howe 1st June 1794' with a jeweled dog tooth border, and a further patch box decorated in black with 'Let us Agree and Wedded be'. Batemans, Stamford. Jun 13. HP: £450. ABP: £531.

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Excellence in Enamels

by Val Baynton

As the 300th anniversary of the start of the Georgian era approaches what better object to consider collecting than an enamel? Enamels were at the height of fashion between 1760 and 1830, and their small size makes them perfect for current lifestyles since an interesting display can be gathered together in a small cabinet or on a shelf without intruding into a living space. Val Baynton looks at the history of this ancient art and appraises collectability.

Enamels often look like they are made from porcelain but in fact their core is metal. Enamelling describes the technique of fusing a glass layer to metal, such as gold, copper and steel, and more recently, to aluminium. It is one of the world's oldest decorative arts being used by ancient Egyptians, early Cypriot and Mediterranean craftsmen in the Mycenaean period and by the Britons prior to the Roman conquest.

Of the five main types of enamelling cloisonné, champlevé, basse-taille and Plique-à-jour date from medieval times or earlier and are mainly used by goldsmiths and jewellery makers, whilst the fifth, painted enamels, evolved more recently. It was Flemish and Italian craftsmen who developed the technique in the early fifteenth century, but by 1500 the workshops in Limoges were considered the finest in Europe. From here the art spread to China, to Geneva, a centre for the enamelling of jewellery and watch cases from the seventeenth century, and then to England. By the mid eighteenth century enamel painters had established workshops in Battersea, London, and in Birmingham and south Staffordshire in towns such as Bilston. Transfer printing from copper engravings began to be used at this time as a decorative technique and enabled enamel production to expand partly because less skill was required by enamel decorators who could follow outlines rather than painting designs freehand.

Making an enamel

Enamel, essentially ground glass combined with other ingredients including metal oxides to give colour, is applied to a clean metal surface that is stripped of all oil and impurities and then heated in a very hot kiln so the enamel melts and fuses to the metal, producing a glass-like surface. The best result is achieved by the application of several thin layers of enamel, with a firing between each application, to create a very smooth surface. Copper has traditionally been used to form shapes. It's much cheaper than gold yet it withstands the rapid temperature changes involved in the repeated firings required in the enamel application and subsequent decorative process.

Enamel makers today have access to the purest glass powder from which all impurities have been removed, but it's worth remembering that this would not have been the case 300 years ago, when glass itself was less pure, and scraps of glass collected from the local glasshouses of the Black Country may well have been used. The availability of glass in the Midlands combined with the area's metal working skill and expertise, which exploited new techniques such as stamping out metal to create ever more interesting shapes, is one of the reasons why the region became so renowned for enamel making between the 1750s and the 1840s.

The earliest enamels were painted by hand from start to finish but even when transfer prints were used as an outline, decorating requires skill since the glassy base is smooth and very slippery, making application of colours difficult. Colours are painted in layers, with shades needing the highest firing temperatures applied first, gradually working down to the lowest temperature firings. Between colour applications the copper enamel piece is 'flash fired' (literally a few minutes in the kiln) to allow the colours to fuse into the enamel surface. Every firing, however, creates a stress to the piece, potentially damaging the item beyond repair.

What is there to collect?

With a huge range of shapes, sizes, subject matter and prices to consider, collecting enamels has broad appeal. The smallest enamel boxes are called patch boxes because they were used by Georgian women to hold little patches or 'beauty spots' that could be applied to the face to disguise spots or scars. Interesting shapes include bonbonnières, these feature a modelled animal, fruit or head on a thin box traditionally used to hold hard candies to sweeten breath. The flat bottom of the box was usually decorated with a scene relating to the modelled character. Étuis or nécessaires, containers holding a variety of small tools useful to a lady such as a paper knife, scissors, tweezers, toothpick, bodkin, pencil and ivory note tablet, are not rare but understandably complete ones command a premium in the saleroom. Collections can be created from wine labels, usually called bottle tickets, cloak or curtain pegs, perfume bottles, snuff boxes as well as household items from baskets, bowls, and plates to candlesticks and tea caddies.

Subject matter is just as varied, from fruit, flowers and landscapes to mottoes, royal commemoratives and portraits. Romantic messages abound, for example, 'I love you,' while others were

designed as souvenirs from towns with inscriptions such as 'A present from Harrogate'. Political and historical events often inspired designs and many enamels have beautiful paintings of pastoral scenes. Unusual enamels include the double lidded box, the first cover having an innocent painting of a rural scene or a beautiful maiden, and the second a rather more erotic painting! These enamels are highly sought after and sell for several thousands of pounds.

Prices

As the sale of the Mort and Moira Lesser Collection of Fine English Enamels (Bonhams October 2011) showed there is a wide price range for enamels depending on subject, quality, shape and condition. Subject matter is important even for a patch box; in the sale an anti-slavery design sold for £1,875 and another showing a man riding a velocipede for £2,125, whereas two more ordinary patch boxes, one decorated with a black print of George III and the other with a Turk, realised £500. All showed cracks. At the same sale an erotic double covered box made £16,250 whilst amongst the cheaper enamels was a snuff box with a naïve painting of a lion, which sold for £437. Bonbonnières, including birds, dogs, rabbits and cats, ranged from under £1,000 to £8,500 for an ornate composition of parrot atop fruit, meanwhile bottle tickets were around £4,000 plus. Despite these high prices if your budget was £1,500 you would have had quite a few choices at this sale - whether buying just one item or two or three for your money. (NB all prices quoted include premium).

Enamels post 1850

By 1850 the number of enamel makers in Britain had rapidly declined. Many reasons have been suggested including lack of demand caused by the Napoleonic Wars and the increasing availability of small ceramic items. In the late nineteenth century the Paris company Samson, copied earlier British examples and other twentieth century forgeries exist too, so care needs to be taken when forming a collection. The usual advice applies; handle as many examples as you can, use a magnifying glass to assess the quality of the painting checking details such as trees and faces to appraise skill, and buy from a reputable source. Many British enamels are unsigned so positive attribution to Battersea or Bilston is often impossible.

The art of enamelling revived in the mid twentieth century and enamel makers today include Elliot Hall Enamels, Halycon Days and Staffordshire Enamels. These enamels are clearly marked so there will be no confusion with older pieces. Generally enamel makers still decorate pieces using a printed outline combined with hand painting, however, Worcestershire based Elliot Hall Enamels is the exception as every enamel is totally painted freehand.

Find out more

Visit museum collections at the V&A London and Bilston Craft Gallery, Wolverhampton.

English Enamel Boxes by Susan Benjamin.



18thC English white enamel snuff box painted with a panel of a chinoiserie lady, 2.5in. (restored) Gorringes, Bexhill. Mar 02. HP: £420. ABP: £494.



George III Bilston enamel finch bonbonniere, circa 1770, 6cm high. Halls, Shrewsbury. Jul 12. HP: £320. ABP: £378.



18thC enamel plaque of Horace Walpole. Stroud Auctions, Stroud. Oct 13. HP: £420. ABP: £503.



Early 19thC enamel etui case, decorated with a portrait of a lady in a Chinese hat and flowers, 4.25in, a.f. Gorringes, Lewes. Feb 11. HP: £250. ABP: £295.



18thC Political theme enamel patch box, the top decorated with the motto 'Liberty and free election', inside named 'Shelley', 2in. Gorringes, Lewes. Dec 09. HP: £370. ABP: £434.



Bilston enamel snuff box, late 18thC, gilt metal mounts, cover painted with a couple walking in a rural scene, side panels depicting various country pursuits, each framed by pale green background, painted gilded scrolls and flower sprays, underside enamelled white with gilded flower spray to centre, white interior, 9cm wide. Bellmans, Wisborough Green. Dec 09. HP: £240. ABP: £281.



A late 18thC English enamel snuff box decorated with a pastoral scene, 3.25in. (restored) Gorringes, Bexhill. Mar 02. HP: £320. ABP: £376.



An enamel patch box late 18thC, painted in black with a landscape scene and titled 'The Gift of a Friend' on a pale blue ground, the interior fitted with a mirror, cracks to the enamel, 3.7cm. Woolley & Wallis, Salisbury. Apr 13. HP: £100. ABP: £118.