

**A Unique Collection of Râpes a Tabac, Treen- Snuff Rasps.
To be exhibited for sale at the Olympia Fair, London,
June 2005 by J B Hawkins Antiques, Australia
and Hawkins & Hawkins, Edinburgh.**

Tobacco was introduced into Europe before 1500 as a result of the Spanish conquests in South America. The South American Indians, from around the Andes, used tobacco in various ways; it was sniffed, chewed, eaten, drunk, smeared over the body, used in eye drops and enemas and even smoked, being blown into a warriors face before battle. The main method of usage was as snuff, the tobacco being prepared prior to rasping by drying, toasting then pulverizing, a reed was then inserted into the nose and the resulting powder blown or sniffed up the nostrils. At this time the Spanish would have been in possession of graters for grinding nutmeg, then a popular flavouring for drinks. In 16th Century England during the ceremony of wassailing nutmeg was rasped or grated into the contents of a lignum wassail bowl, many of which had containers for nutmeg as attachments.

The first time snuff was manufactured in a factory would appear to be in the early 17th century as specialist snuff workshops are recorded from about 1670. These workshops occurred in the towns of Morlaix and Dieppe. Dieppe was one of the main centres for the importation of ivory into France and a close correlation maybe observed between the numbers of existing ivory rasps and the importing of tobacco for snuffing. Snuff was purified by washing it a number of times until it lost its natural odour. It was then scented with selected flower essences. There were snuffs for every part of the day; morning, midday and after dinner. Some were especially made for women, old people or youngsters.

This collection was formed over a period of fifty years, it was considered appropriate to include at least one example of each other substance, hence it contains rasps in ivory, silver, enamel, iron, copper, bronze, tortoiseshell, lacquer, steel, Verni Martin and straw work. The collection is mainly of wood as both generations considered the finest and rarest examples to be wooden, rather than ivory. Commenced in the early 1950's when the Hon. John Leslie asked his son, then starting his career in the city to go to the bar of the Ritz, take £1,500 in cash and meet a Frenchman, to pay for and collect a collection of fifteen snuff rasps, the property of a prominent French politician.

The elongated tobacco rasp, number 1, possibly made in the 1570's is of Walrus ivory and depicts a sword rather than gun carrying "conquistador" as such it is one of the earliest surviving objects relating to the use of tobacco in European culture. The shape indicates that the form was established early, the "carotte" of tobacco, then shaped like a cigar, being rolled tobacco leaves interspersed with spices to personal taste, was rasped on its end rather than its side requiring a long thin rasp. Attention is drawn to the rasp of Baron Schmiedel whose great trick was putting a carotte of tobacco in his pocket and producing it as a mouse. He being the subject of a rasp on which a carotte of tobacco was to be used. Early rasps are of a small size, however some examples had tripled in size by the 1740's, as evidenced by the group, numbered 96 to 101. This group of six must be considered as rasps for the table, as were others such as number 82, with wheels for passing rather than items to be carried or worn by the owner. Number 97, is dated 1737/38. Number 101, signed by the maker, Victor Martin, belonged to the Prince of Conde; this was purchased for the collection, for £3,200 in 1980. The largest rasp in the collection measures 46.3cm by 20.5cm.

Many of the 18th century wooden rasps are European, most undoubtedly French, some are Austrian or German, very few are English. Some are from the Far East, the timber coming from the then European Colonial possessions. The Dutch and the English preferred smoking to snuffing. James I attacked tobacco smoking in his “Counterblast to Tobacco” (1604) describing it as ‘a custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs and in the black stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless.’ A pipe case in the Victoria & Albert Museum, made in the 1630’s in Ceylon is illustrated and described in Amin Jaffer’s new book ‘Luxury Goods from India.’ He refers to pipes being made of clay from Gouda in Holland. By 1600 the Dutch Portuguese and Spanish had taken tobacco as snuff to Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines and their other Far Eastern Colonial possessions.

I suggest that the production of rasps, equivalent to later English or American Scrimshaw work, was conducted by European sailors in the 18th Century, be they French, Belgian, German, Spanish Portuguese or Scandinavians, who preferred snuffing to smoking. Many are decorated with love tokens, be they hearts or love birds but in Mother of Pearl or bone (numbers 54-62) rather than the products of the whale. Collection number 62 is the most complex example of this form and it is conveniently dated 1730. If the timber can be proved to be Scandinavian or Baltic, this will be the source, rather than Scrimshanders work, if Colonial vice versa..

The number of surviving boxes correlates well with the known National users of snuff in the 17th & 18th centuries, a distinction should be drawn between a tobacco box and a snuff box. Tobacco boxes have no hinges as the lid was taken off the box so that the tobacco leaf could be utilized using both hands. Snuff boxes have an attached lid and contain the ground snuff. The box was opened and held in one hand, the snuff removed with the other. The hand holding the box used the thumb to close the lid it could then be turned over and the pinch of snuff placed on the back of that hand for inhaling. English tobacco boxes are of oval shape with detachable lids and are common in wood and silver between 1630 – 1720 as are their pipe stoppers. English snuff boxes are rare, indicating that in the 17th and 18th centuries smoking was the predominant English habit. Similarly long thin brass Dutch boxes for tobacco are more common than snuff boxes. Conversely surviving French 17th and 18th century boxes are predominantly for snuff, as are the German, confirming a correlation as to the national origin of existing rasps. It is of interest that the catalogue for Class 91 the l’Exposition universelle de 1900, held at the Musée de Cluny, states, that the patronage of snuff by the French Royal Family ensured that the aristocrats took up snuff while the man in the street smoked a pipe.

The first occasion that a large number of rasps were illustrated together was in the Paris Exhibition of 1901. Many are from the collection of Madame Renee Alaret. Also exhibited were rasps in bronze, steel and silver some of which were damascened from the Museum Collection Le Secq des Tournelles at Rouen. Her collection was exhibited at the Museum Galliera in 1937 and sold at the Hotel Drouot on 9th June 1939, a copy of the catalogue is included with the collection. Madame Alaret wrote an article for the Connoisseur in May 1909, in the article she illustrated fifteen examples in wood, of which, number 194 from her collection, is number 29 in this collection. Of these fifteen examples, two closely correlate with those exhibited here and can be assumed to be by the same hand or hands. Other Alaret Collection rasps illustrated in the Connoisseur, now in the collection are; the red lacquer example, number 74, the bronze, number 73 and the Limoge Enamel Rasp, number 79.

The only other major collection to be sold at auction in the 20th Century was catalogued by Sotheby's Zurich, 8th June 2000, it included nineteen ivory, one enamel and eleven wood. The collector purchased only one rasp for his collection, number 29. His collection now contains five rasps by this same hand, all of superb quality, numbered 25 to 29.

These rare items, relating to the usage of tobacco in European Society are of great interest, but to the discerning they are indicative of the skill and time lavished by specialists, in making an object which was not often displayed as were snuff boxes. These particularly in France and Germany were a status symbol, part of an order of dress, displayed by all strata's of European Society to confirm ones place in that Society. I expect a rich man to have many superb boxes but only one or possibly two rasps. The early rasps, such as numbers 4, 10 & 11 are slightly curved and either have no hole for the grated snuff to issue from or a stopper, this ensured the snuff would not escape into his pocket and stain the clothes and may be indicative that they were in fact worn by today's equivalent of a chain smoker. Rasp number 66 contains a brush and is seemingly unique, possibly commissioned by a sea captain coping with a rocking ship with a hook to keep it safe.

The collection contains eleven dated wooden rasps bearing dates between 1704 and 1752 numbers 7-1704, 16-1748, 17-1727, 18-1730, 22-1726, 37-1733, 46-1729, 62-1730, 65-1752, 87-1742, 97-1738. Two numbers 17 & 18 are signed by the maker Louis Routier, of those dated nine are French and two German. Tobacco was thought to have been brought from Spain to France by Jean Nicot de Villemain who presented a packet to Catherine de Medici as a cure for headaches and rasp number 90, is believed to depict the head of Nicot who gave his name to nicotine. The sale catalogue of the Alaret Collection contains six dated rasps all wood the earliest 1676 the others 1718,1719,1722,1729,1749. Dated rasps in the two collections total seventeen, all of wood. The earliest 1676 the latest 1752 with a concentration of seven made between 1726 and 1733, leading to 1730 as the date of maximum usage and production.

The two great English collectors of treen Evan Thomas and Pinto, in their accompanying books illustrate various rasps, three of which Pinto acquired from Evan Thomas. Neither collection included any example stylistically not known in this collection, Edward Pinto considered snuff rasps to be the finest quality of treen in his collection.

John Hawkins
February 2005

Appendix A. **Translation**

An extract from the Preface to the Alaret Catalogue, 1939.

Tobacco was initially prescribed for medicinal purposes, and it was introduced to the Court of Catherine de Medici by the ambassador, Jean Nicot, the son of a Notary Public of Nimes. He, himself, had profited by having inside knowledge of plantation trials established near Angouleme, by the Carmelite monk Thevet, on his return from Portugal.

On the strong advice of Nicot, Charles IX was cured of chronic laryngitis by sniffing a mixture of tobacco, meadowsweet and herbs which was all the rage. Paris must have smelt so bad in those days! The fashion for snuff spread throughout Europe and Russia, extolled by some, condemned by others, especially in Turkey where the Sultan, Mourad IV personally walked around at night to oversee the enforcement of his bans, and the summary execution of every subject caught in the act of smoking. Tobacco had its martyrs, too!

Eventually, a much less draconian, more-even-handed approach was adopted everywhere. Consumers of tobacco whether smokers or snuff-takers were merely required to pay a tax. At the same time there was a burgeoning of related art objects: snuff boxes, tobacco tins, rasps and pipes. Poets wrote even more sonorous rhymes and contradictory couplets!

In 1626, Richelieu levied an import tax. The State was lacking funds and wanted its cut! Local tobacco cultivation took off rapidly in order to avoid this impost. As well, Louis XIV, in line with other countries, reserved the rights to the sale and distribution of tobacco throughout the realm. As was customary at the time, a bourgeois Paris merchant, Jean Breton, was appointed as the first official grower to produce 500,000 livres for each of the first two years and 600,000 livres for every remaining year.

As a result of the monopoly created by this action, people immediately and understandably engaged in fraud, theft, and smuggling. Fines and other penalties were imposed such as the lash, banishment, the galley, if needs be, for life, and for those smugglers caught carrying arms, it was the death sentence.

Consequently in order to be able to get away with sniffing or smoking, it became essential to be able to convert the leaves which were sold rolled and tied in bundles, to the form of a powder. This is how the tobacco rasp came into being, because the leaf tobacco could not be sold in that form to avoid the charge of fraud.

By 1768, “rapeurs-furees” were available directly to the consumer under license from the Ministry of Agriculture in exchange for a payment of course. This ceased after a few years when the Ministry decided to recoup their losses and deliver the tobacco ready for use to the consumer.

Thus these artful little ornaments which so often wittily depicted perfectly the different social class, the character or the possessions of their possessors became moribund after a relatively short life.

The gathering together of the specimens in this collection must have been a fascinating and entertaining task for Mr & Mrs Alaret whose perseverance and diligence is evident in the following catalogue.

Appendix B.

The Connoisseur, May 1909.

Tobacco Graters by M. Alaret.

In the number of The Connoisseur Magazine published in November, 1907, I read with pleasure an article by Mr. Guy Oswald Smith on silver nutmeg graters. Mr. Smith also mentions tobacco graters and reproduces a few examples from his collection. It is therefore, perhaps, of interest further to discuss the subject, and to illustrate my remarks with a number of rare specimens.

Tobacco was imported into Europe from America at the end of the sixteenth century, by the Spaniard Hernandez, of Toledo, and the first packet of tobacco introduced into France was presented to Queen Catherine de Medicis by the French Ambassador at the Portuguese Court, Monsieur Nicot de Villemain. Tobacco quickly became the fashion, under the name of poudre de la reine, and its use became general, notwithstanding the prohibitive edicts which were put into force. At the beginning of the seventeenth century tobacco was introduced into England and James I. was not slow in voicing his opinion against users of the consoling weed.

In Europe tobacco soon obtained a reputation for curing all ailments, and its use quickly spread, people both smoking it and raking it in the form of snuff.

At first, snuff was not sold in its powdered form, but in the form of carottes, that is to say, in long rolls somewhat like a carrot in appearance. The snuff-taker ground the carottes, using a long iron grater, not unlike the grater used in a kitchen for grating cheese. This metal grater was encased in a mounting of boxwood, ivory, or some other material according to the station of the owner, snuff-graters being in the possession of the highest and the lowest in the land.

There were manufacturers of these graters all over Europe, in Austria, Germany and Russia, but the craftsman of France were the chief makers.

The term "tobacco grater" which at first only designated the iron grater, soon came to be used to designate the grater and the case or mounting in which it was contained. These mountings were made in boxwood, ivory, silver, enamel, gold, iron, copper, bronze, jade, tortoiseshell and some even in straw and faïence, but the most common were made in boxwood and ivory. They are nearly all of the same shape and the examples which are reproduced from my collection give a better idea of this form than any description. Apart from this general form, some indicate the profession or taste of the owner, that is to say, examples will be found in the form of a guitar, a violin, a sabot, a fish, a boat etc., but such examples are rare.

The mounting of these scrapers were embellished in various manners, and that explains why they are to be found in many collections in nearly all the museums, their artistic character gives them right of place. In England, at the Victoria and Albert Museum there is a very beautiful series of these scrapers in boxwood and ivory, and there are three in the Wallace Collection, two in ivory and one in boxwood, which are veritable masterpieces of sculpture on a small scale.

Certain scrapers, and above all, those in wood, are decorated either with monograms or the coats of arms of their proprietors. Other graters, destined, no doubt for the use of the clergy, represent religious scenes, but the majority bring before our eyes mythical or allegorical scenes, fables of La Fontaine, drinking or smoking scenes, scenes from the Italian opera, lovers meetings, etc. Some are decorated with hearts and love devices, these generally being marriage gifts given by a girl to her future husband.

With the sale of tobacco ready grated, which began about 1720, the tobacco scraper fell into disuse. Only the most fastidious continue to have their tobacco freshly ground and at the end of the 18th century the use of tobacco graters completely disappeared. In these days snuff rasps are only to be found in collectors' cabinets, being in our eyes, souvenirs of a past age.

I read with interest your essay on Snuff Rasps and contribute the following:

Rasp number 5 & 5a, silver mounted Cowrie Shell dated by you circa 1665.

This is an extremely rare example with only four or five recorded. One, in the Gilbert Collection is catalogued as a nutmeg grater and “nutmeg graters are similar to tobacco rasps, but they can be distinguished by the fact that their design incorporates a box of some sort in which nutmeg was Kept.... operated in such a way that the grated nutmeg falls into the shell and is dispensed through a small hole....”

I suggest this is a precise description of the working of a snuff rasp, many of which incorporate the “box of some sort” described in the Gilbert Catalogue.

A much more likely differentiation would be between the grater of hard nutmeg, which requires a steel grater and the soft tobacco leaves which can be rasped on a silver grater without harm, or, of course, steel .

Accepting these facts we are then forced to appraise “nutmeg graters.” No problem here because they virtually all have steel graters. The exceptions are the 17th century tubular ones which are entirely made of silver. How can we be certain that they were used for nutmeg and not snuff?

We know that tobacco was extremely expensive in the 17th century, so that as a consequence tobacco pipe bowls were tiny. Early continental snuff rasps were also very small, so in logic the carotte would also have been similarly small. I suggest that these early English so called nutmeg graters of cylinder design, usually around seven or eight centimeters long, just perfect to hold a small carotte were in fact used for snuff.

Eric Delieb, in his book “Silver Boxes” wrote “Nutmeg graters originated circa 1690 where they were made as silver mounted Cowrie shells or tubular containers with silver graters.”

It would seem that we are expected to believe that all through those early decades, while suitable hard steel was readily available, unsuitable soft silver was used for nutmegs, then suddenly after 30 years the world woke up and changed to steel.

I am not convinced.

AP Leslie, Scotland. 12 April 2005