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Small wonders  
A trio of  
Chinese  
snuff bottles



ON SHOW

## Up to Snuff

THERE'S NO GENIE IN A CHINESE SNUFF bottle, but it's easy to see why these exquisite little phials—the height of fashion in 18th century Beijing—cast a spell on collectors today. Handcrafted from every material known to the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), including copper, glass, porcelain, jade, ivory and amber, each one is a miniature masterpiece of the applied arts. Rich in symbolism—achieved through decorative techniques such as enameling, stippling and relief carving—they served as courtly gifts and good-luck charms. And their social significance wasn't to be sneezed at.

Denis S.K. Low, a retired realtor and Singapore native, has been amassing them for 28 years. His collection now stretches

to 1,300 items—355 of which feature in his latest book, *Chinese Snuff Bottles*. A selection can also be seen in an exhibition at Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum until Nov. 7. In his text, Low describes the look and significance of every 2-in. to 3-in. (5-7 cm) piece. The interplay of fauna and flora—from quails to monkeys and lotus flowers to peonies—reflects the world of deference and ambition that centered on the Emperor, who is often represented by a dragon.

Tobacco reached China in the late 16th century. Its powdered form grew in popularity, however, when smoking was outlawed. Snuff was thought to be "medicinal," particularly as a remedy for colds, headaches and upset stomachs, and so escaped the ban. By 1800, taking snuff, and hoarding the ornate bottles it was dispensed from, was a national craze. Given current attitudes toward smoking, perhaps the time is ripe for a snuff revival? Maybe not, but its magical merchandising sure beats an old pack of cigarettes. 1 Empress Place; [www.acm.org.sg](http://www.acm.org.sg) —BY RICHARD CLAYTON