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Sex-scene Victorian snuff box set to fetch up to £40,000 at auction

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The saucy secrets of 19th century British aristocracy are set to be revealed this month by the sale of a seemingly innocent object.

A demure snuff box which, when opened, displays an erotic scene is due to go under the hammer at Bonhams, Knightsbridge on 20 November.

The box, which dates back to the 1830s, uncovers the world of extravagance and titillation which surrounded the British aristocracy in the late Georgian, early Victorian era.

From the outside the snuff box seems ordinary but on opening it the recipient would have discovered the painted enamel scene of two couples standing in a garden in explicit sexual poses. It even plays a tune.

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The box, which is gold with enamel highlights, is expected to fetch around £30,000-£40,000 when it goes to auction.

Laurence Fisher, head of the mechanical music department at Bonhams, said that this old-fashioned boy's toy was probably only one of 1,000 in the world and one of only 100 to have gone to auction.

He said: "This box is extremely rare. Although saucy images, for instance on postcards, have been around since the 20th century, this piece dates from the 1830s and is a lot more graphic."

Erotic snuff boxes appeared about the time when it became common practice for ladies to withdraw from the dining room after supper and leave the gentlemen to their cigars and brandy.

Snuff, a type of smokeless tobacco, was extremely fashionable at this time. A gentleman would pass his snuff box round to his male companions after dinner.

Mr Fisher said that the box, which would have been hidden away out of sight of the women, would have been an amusing piece for a man to show his cigar-smoking friends.

He said: "This snuff box was very important socially. The owner of such an item would have been well-to-do, in a position of responsibility and aristocratic.

"These people had to show off. If you were rich enough to commission something very obscene but very beautiful like this piece then you were obviously very wealthy.

"This was all about extravagance. The item had no real purpose - it was pure quality indulgence."

He added that the box also revealed some of the darker secrets of the early Victorians.

He said: "This level of society held many secrets and there were times when people got a bit carried away.

"In the late Georgian, early Victorian era, it was not uncommon for many of these people to have an opium problem.

"Then when France and Britain became friends again at around this time, the British became more open and began indulging in friskiness as well."

The inclusion of the snuff box in the sale seems particularly apt in the light of the current exhibition at the Barbican entitled Seduced: Art and Sex from Antiquity to Now.

The exhibition aims to explore the boundaries between art and sex and the way in which the two have been combined over the centuries.



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