

Georgian fluted ivory TEA CADDY, £6,500, Hampton Antiques. Twin compartment tortoiseshell TEA CADDY with pagoda top, c1825, £5,600, Hygra. Armenian TEAPOT, £69, Plumo. 'Johanna' TABLE MAT (under teapot), £15.99, Zara Home. Pair of lustre CUPS AND SAUCERS, £120, Green & Stone. V&A 'Far East' WALLPAPER MURAL (throughout), from £93.31, Surface View. TEAS, from a selection at Bellocq

# Steeped IN HISTORY

With their exquisite craftsmanship, tea caddies recall an age in which cost was immaterial, and elegance and etiquette were everything, says **Janet Gleeson**

STYLING KIERA BUCKLEY-JONES PHOTOGRAPHS SEAN MYERS





‘Tea smuggling was rife and legitimate merchants complained that half the tea in England was illicit’

Above Dome-top inlaid satinwood TEA CADDY, £1,300, Hygra. Georgian ivory CADDY SPOON, c1800, £185, Vine Antiques. Mandarin BOOKCASE, £1,290, Orchid Furniture. Right Octagonal harewood veneered TEA CADDY, c1790-1800, £1,600, Hygra. CUP AND SAUCER, as before. ‘Oro Viejo’ mocha SPOON, £3.99, Zara Home. TEA STRAINER, £8, Bellocq



Picture the scene. It's 1785 and a decadent Georgian lunch party is drawing to a close. While the men linger at the table drinking port until mid-afternoon, the ladies move to the drawing room or parlour, to take tea and gossip. A servant brings a silver kettle of boiling water to the lady of the house, who unlocks her gleaming caddy and puts a few precious leaves of tea, that highly fashionable delicacy, in the pot, which is then filled with water. Because of its cost, she serves the tea very weak, in tiny bowls or cups, perhaps sweetened with sugar.

Making the tea was part of the ceremony of drinking it and the caddies (from *catty* or *kati*, a measure of weight roughly equal to a pound used in China and the Far East) were a supporting act in the story of the beverage that began as the most exclusive of drinks, yet transformed drinking habits at every level of society. Now, unlike in those early days, it is the caddies, more than their contents, that buyers crave. ‘They are virtuoso masterpieces of their craftsmen’s art and one of the most fascinating examples of social history,’ says specialist dealer and collector Antigone Clarke. ‘They’re beautiful yet, at the same time, tell stories of other ways of life, other times.’

#### All the tea from China

Shipments of tea from China – where it had been drunk for nearly five millennia – first reached London in the mid 17th century. After the Restoration, King Charles II’s wife, Catherine of Braganza, boosted the vogue among elegant aristocratic English ladies, having developed a taste for the drink during her youth in Portugal.

In those days, tea was priced well beyond the reach of ordinary people. Costing between £6-£10 per pound (thanks to a hefty tax of five shillings per pound), only the well-to-do could afford such luxury – although servants often dried and re-used the tea their employers had bought, and you could even buy second-hand leaves from inns. But the price didn’t stop people wanting it. Tea smuggling was rife and legitimate merchants complained that half the tea being drunk in England was illicit.

In the 18th century, the British thirst for tea was so unquenchable that consumption was



Top shelf, from left BOOKS, from £35 each, Maison Artefact. Chinese export lacquer TEA CHEST, c1835, £1,200, Hygra. Admiral Lord Nelson TEA CADDY, £2,350, Hampton Antiques. Armenian TEAPOT, £69, Plumo. Bottom shelf, from left BOOKS, as before. Chinese export lacquer TEA CHEST, c1840, £2,850, Hygra. Lustre BOWL, £28, Green & Stone. TEA STRAINER, £8, Focus on the Past. Edwardian chemist BOTTLE, c1910, £7, Pimpernel & Partners. Coloured penwork TEA CADDY, £1,395, Hampton Antiques. BOOKCASE, as before



Above **Apple TEA CADDY**, £3,650; **fruitwood pear TEA CADDY**, £3,850; **melon TEA CADDY**, £7,750, all Hampton Antiques. **Circular DINING TABLE**, £1,395, Orchid Furniture. **BOOKS**, as before Facing page **Early 19th-century Tunbridge ware TEA CADDY**, c1825, £5,500, Hygra. **Red CABINET**, ref ZH14-1B, £790, Orchid Furniture. **Large lustre BOWL**, £36; **small lustre BOWL**, £28, both Green & Stone. **'Dorado' bread PLATE** (under large bowl), £7.99, Zara Home. **TEA**, as before

### FRUIT CADDIES

The simplicity and quirkiness of caddies in the form of fruit, dating from the late 18th to mid 19th centuries, has strong appeal to collectors today and demand is growing. 'Apple and pear caddies are most common; melons and squashes are much rarer and prices correspondingly higher,' says Hampton Antiques' Mark Goodger. Shape and colour are all-important. Fruits that have a good patina of age and are well rounded at top and bottom are the most desirable.

Made from fruitwood, caddies had wooden stalks and were coloured with sponge paint effects, which have normally worn away. Traces of original paint are extremely rare and can double a caddy's value. Insides were lined with lead foil, most of which is usually missing – this doesn't matter as it's a good sign of authenticity. All had hinges, escutcheons and locks made from iron or steel. Locks were mortised or set in the wall of the fruit. 'So unless the wood is very worn, they should not be visible inside,' says Mark. Prices start at around £1,500 but rarities can fetch £15,000–£20,000. Their popularity means that fakes abound, so buy from a reputable dealer.

already the largest in Europe with annual (legal) imports in 1726 totalling around 700,000 pounds. Two decades later, they had reached 4m pounds. Dr Johnson claimed to drink 40 cups a day, describing himself as, 'A hardened and shameless tea drinker, who with tea amuses the evening, with tea solaces the midnight, and with tea welcomes the morning.'

As the craze for tea grew, so too did the demand for boxes (called tea chests, rather than caddies, to begin with) to keep it in. 'All early caddies were fitted with a lock and key to keep the tea safe from pilfering servants,' says Petworth-based antiques dealer Richard Gardner. Caddies were often divided into compartments for the different teas used: Bohea (the early name for a variety of black tea, which Queen Anne liked to drink cold with a nip of gin) and green or Hyson tea. Some also contained bowls to mix the teas or hold sugar.

### A sense of occasion

But their designs weren't only about function. Taking tea was a social occasion, associated with femininity and style – qualities that were mirrored in caddies. Luxury materials such as silver, porcelain, ivory and mother-of-pearl were all used to make caddies, although countless inventive (and now highly collectable) designs were also produced using less costly materials such as straw-work, rolled paper and native woods.

The exorbitant price of tea meant that the earliest caddies tended to be smaller than later ones. Apart from those made in silver, which were marked by their makers, they are nearly always anonymous, so style and decoration provide the keys to dating. In keeping with the early Georgian taste for simplicity, plain rectangular caddies adorned the most stylish tea tables of the 1730s. A decade later, tea drinkers clamoured for caddies sporting chinoiserie motifs – Chippendale included caddies of this type in his third pattern book. Inventive styles continued to appear in the late 18th century, with classical urn shapes followed by exquisite oval caddies, often adorned with engraved or inlaid decoration.

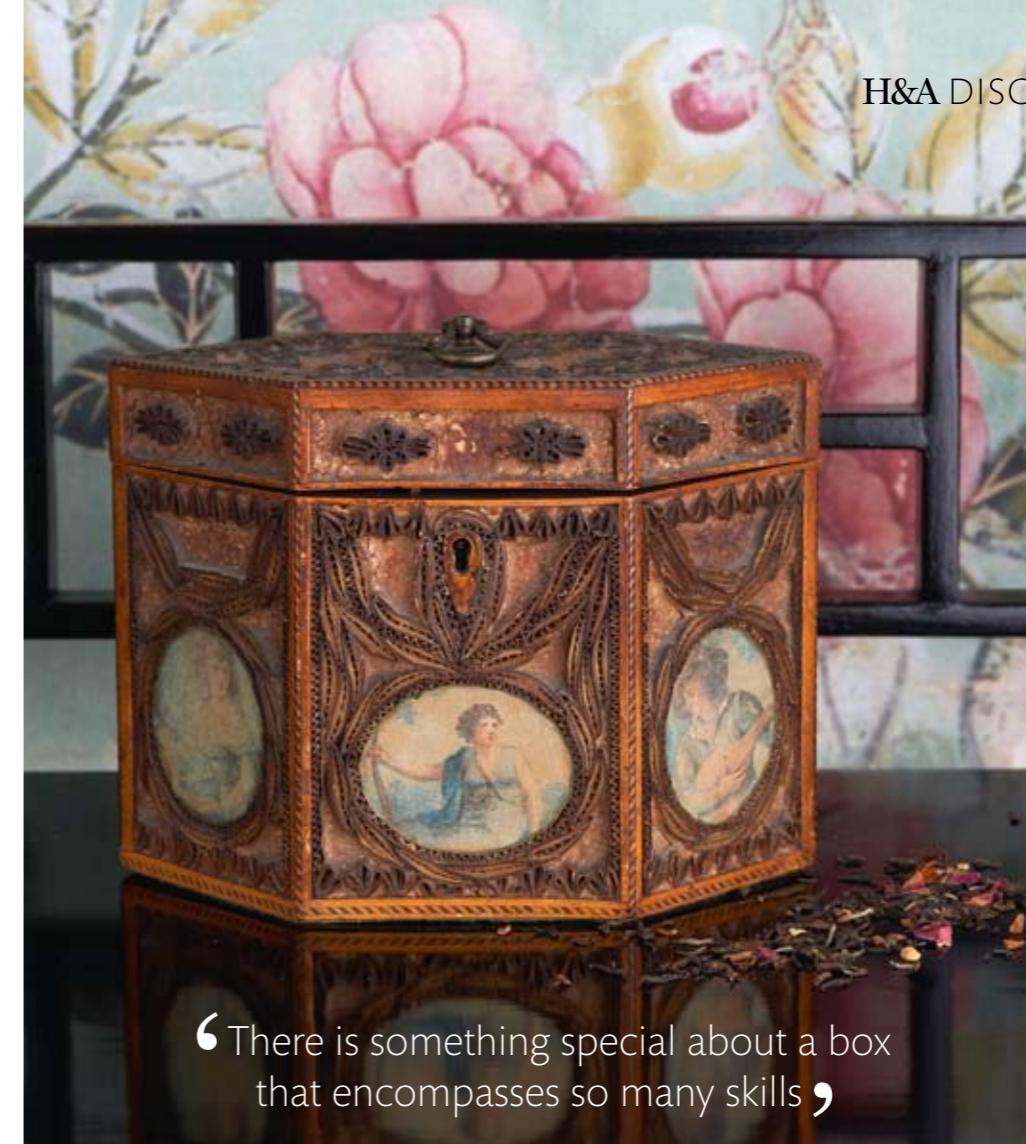
Perhaps the most famous of all caddies was that made by William Potter of Cornhill in 1786 in the form of a miniature model of Carlton House, the Prince of Wales's (later Prince Regent) residence. Potter offered to sell the caddy to George III for



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This page Chinese export lacquer TEA CHEST, c1840, £2,850, Hygra. BOOKS, from a selection, Maison Artefact. Copper SILK TASSEL, £35, Orchid Furniture. George III filigree caddy SPOON, c1800, £195, Vine Antiques Facing page Late 18th-century rolled paper TEA CADDY, £2,500, Hygra. BOOKCASE, as before



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100 guineas. When the king refused to buy, Potter held a lottery for his masterpiece. He issued 50 tickets, selling many of them to members of the aristocracy, and raised 880 guineas. Potter bought several tickets himself and, rather amusingly, won his own caddy. This remarkable object is now on display in the Museum of London.

#### A matter of taste

By the late 1800s, tea was available ready packaged and tea-making became relegated to the kitchen. The fashion for caddies dwindled, although they found a new market among collectors. ‘The huge variety of caddies mean there are endless options for collecting,’ says Richard Gardner. ‘Some people concentrate on caddies in certain materials or forms.’ Tortoiseshell-veneered caddies are a popular area. ‘They vary in price from £1,500 up to £25,000-plus. Rare colours such as green and red are highly prized and therefore more expensive.’

As with other areas of the antiques trade, caddies are subject to trends. Simpler wooden examples have become more affordable than they were. ‘Today you can buy a plain Georgian caddy

with inlay for £200, which five years ago would have been difficult to buy for £450,’ says Mark Goodger of Hampton Antiques. Others have seen dramatic increases in value. ‘Around 30 years ago people were prejudiced and avoided caddies that looked Indian. Now it’s the opposite,’ says Antigone Clark. Dealers warn that as prices have risen, so too have the numbers of fakes on the market. Antigone advises holding inlaid caddies with your eyes closed to see if they feel right: ‘You should be able to feel the undulations of age. If you can’t, beware.’

Anne Brooks, a collector for the past 30 years, is drawn to wooden caddies decorated with pen work. ‘Often made by women of the leisured classes, they appeal to me because women’s arts have traditionally been neglected,’ says Anne. ‘There is something special about a box that encompasses so many skills and holds unique associations. They have a personal touch and yet are anonymous.’ Anne doesn’t use her caddies for their original purpose but their refinement and connection to a forgotten age remains as potent a brew as the tea they once held. H&A

#### FIND OUT MORE

##### WHERE TO BUY

- Hygra. 020 7254 7074; hygra.com
- Hampton Antiques. 01604 863979; hamptonantiques.co.uk
- Richard Gardner, Swan House, Market Square, Petworth, West Sussex. 01798 343411; richardgardnerantiques.co.uk

##### WHAT TO READ

- *Antique Boxes, Tea Caddies & Society: 1700-1880* by Antigone Clarke and Joseph O’Kelly (Schiffer Publishing, 2003)
- *Tea Caddies* by Noel Riley (Lutterworth Press, 1985)

##### WHERE TO SEE

- The Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, London (020 7942 2000; vam.ac.uk) has caddies on view in its room displays as well as within its collections of silver, metalware and ceramics. Many items not on display are illustrated on the V&A’s website
- The Museum of London (020 7001 9844; museumoflondon.org.uk) has several interesting caddies in its collection. It’s also worth looking out for caddies in stately home interiors