GOLD SNUFFBOXES, FROM EVERYDAY OBJECTS IN THE 18TH CENTURY TO COLLECTOR'S ITEMS IN THE 19TH CENTURY

PUBLISHED 09/01/2026



Gold snuffboxes from the 18th and 19th centuries embody a refined art form, combining craftsmanship, social symbolism, and aesthetics. Luxury items reserved for the elite, they reflect the customs of an era when snuff (dry, often flavored tobacco powder) was an accessory of distinction. In this article, we explore their history, characteristics, value, and place in today's art market.

I. The Golden Age of Snuffboxes : A Historical Overview

18th Century: Snuff-taking is at it's peak

In the 18th century, snuff—introduced to Europe in the 16th century—became a powerful symbol of social status. Royal courts, the nobility, and the wealthy bourgeoisie made it a daily ritual, turning the snuffbox into an indispensable accessory.

The finest goldsmiths crafted these luxurious objects, often commissioned by monarchs such as Louis XV and Louis XVI or presented as diplomatic gifts. Paris, along with cities like Geneva, London, and St. Petersburg, emerged as renowned centers of snuffbox production.

19th Century: decline and reinvention

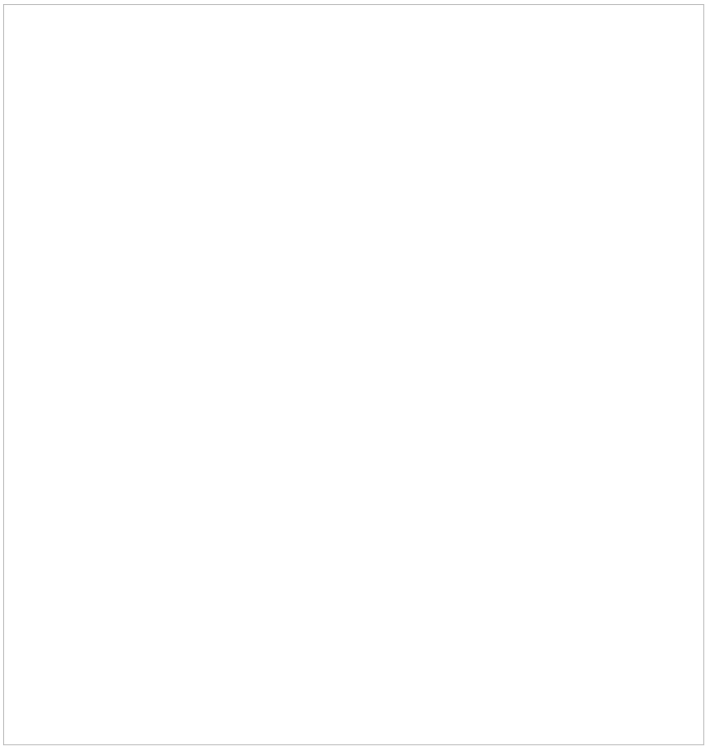
The Napoleonic Wars and shifting social norms led to a gradual decline in snuff-taking. Yet, snuffboxes remained highly prized as collectibles, particularly during the Second Empire, when Napoleon III briefly revived the fashion. Stylistic trends evolved: while the 18th century favored the Rococo style (asymmetrical motifs, shells, acanthus leaves), exemplified by master goldsmiths like Jean Ducrollay, the 19th century saw the rise of Neoclassicism (clean lines, antique motifs) with renowned artisans such as Odiot, followed by Eclecticism (a blend of styles) with Fabergé.

II. The Characteristics of Gold Snuffboxes

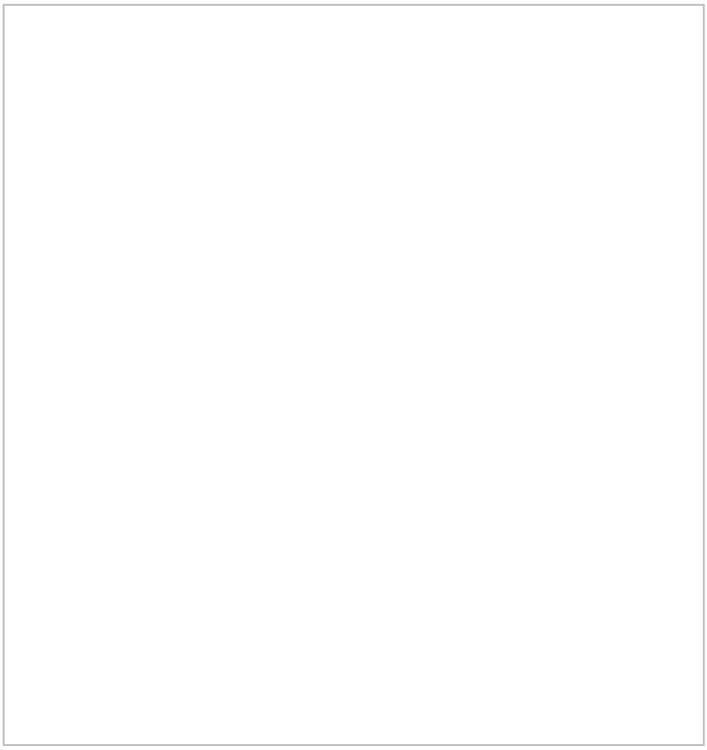
Materials and Techniques

Gold snuffboxes were crafted using a variety of luxurious techniques and materials, including:

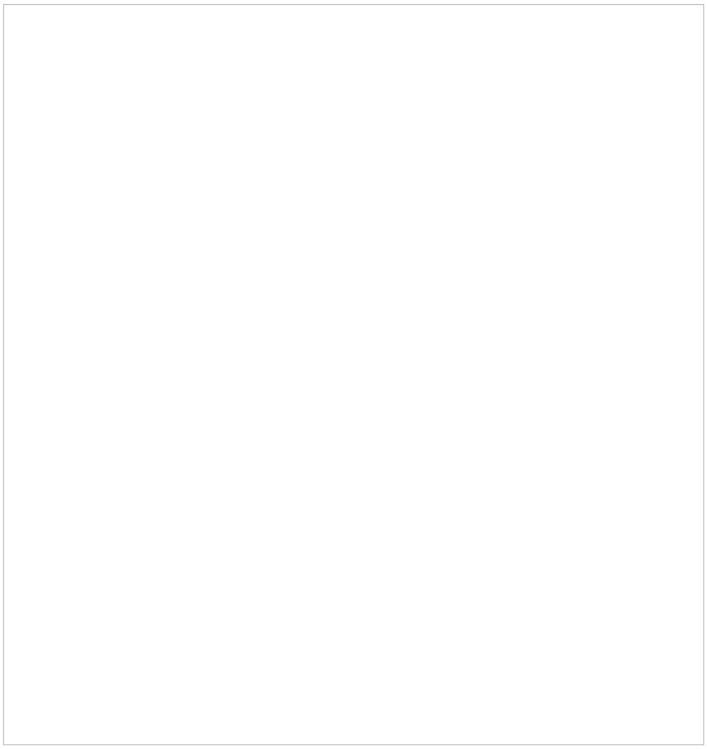
- **Solid gold** (18 or 22 karat), such as this exquisite rectangular snuffbox featuring an allegorical scene :



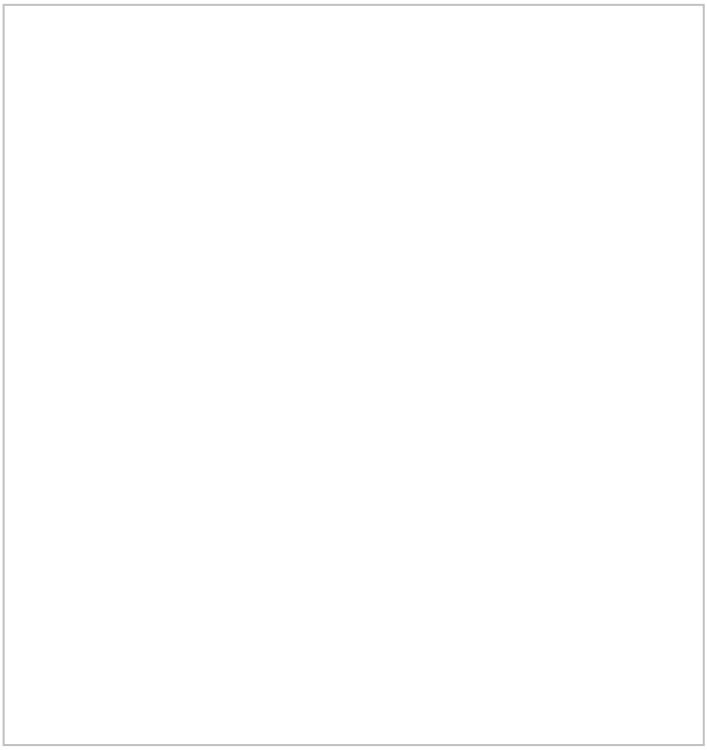
- **Enamelwork**, like this Swiss snuffbox adorned with painted enamel scenes by Guidon, Rémond, and Gide (late 18th century) :



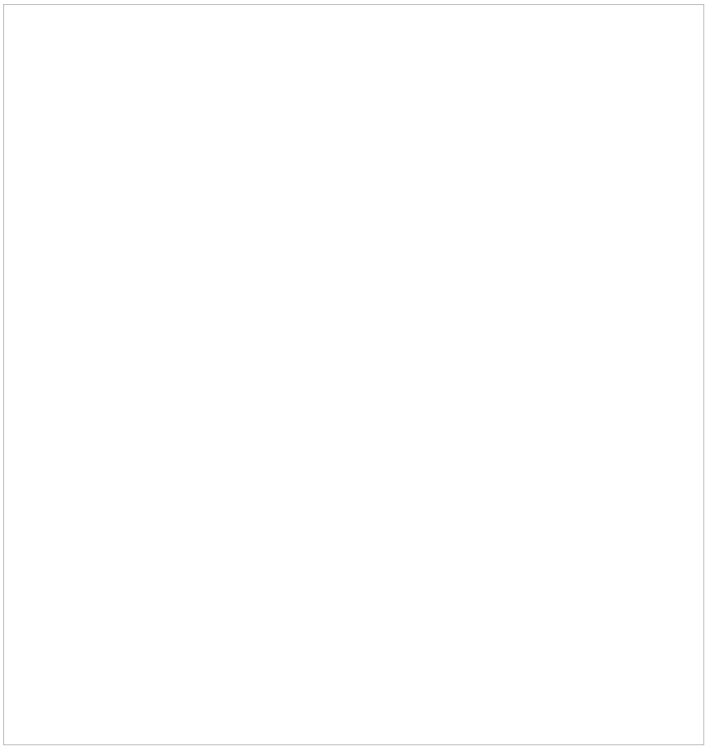
- **Engine-turned (guilloché) gold**, as seen in this 19th-century snuffbox with intricate geometric engravings :



- **Gold inlaid with precious stones** (diamonds, rubies, emeralds) or **micro-mosaics**, such as this box depicting a landscape in micro-mosaic :



- **Miniature paintings**, like this snuffbox featuring a portrait by Louis-Nicolas Van Blarenberghe :



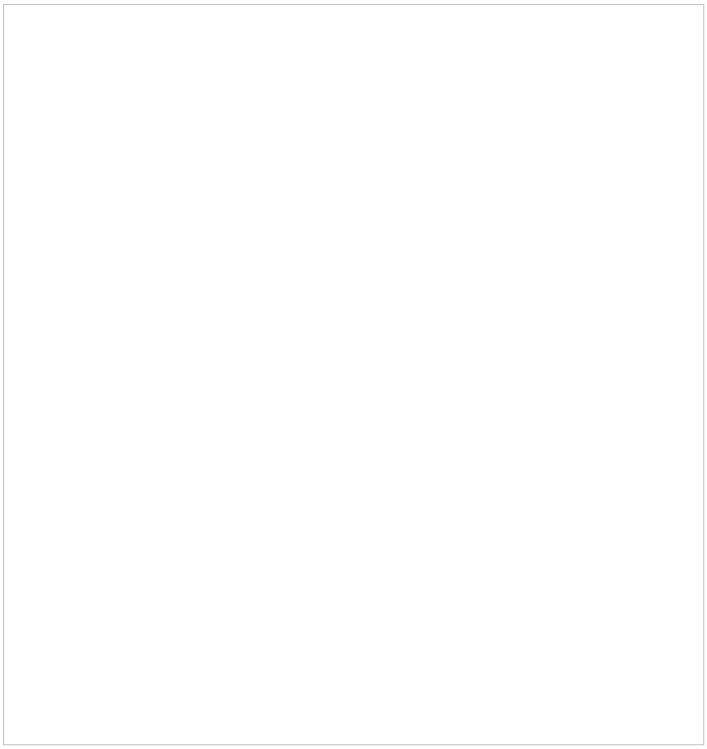
Key techniques included:

- **Chasing** : sculpting the metal
- **Repoussé** : raising relief through hammering
- **Engraving** : incised designs
- **Enameling** : painted enamel decoration

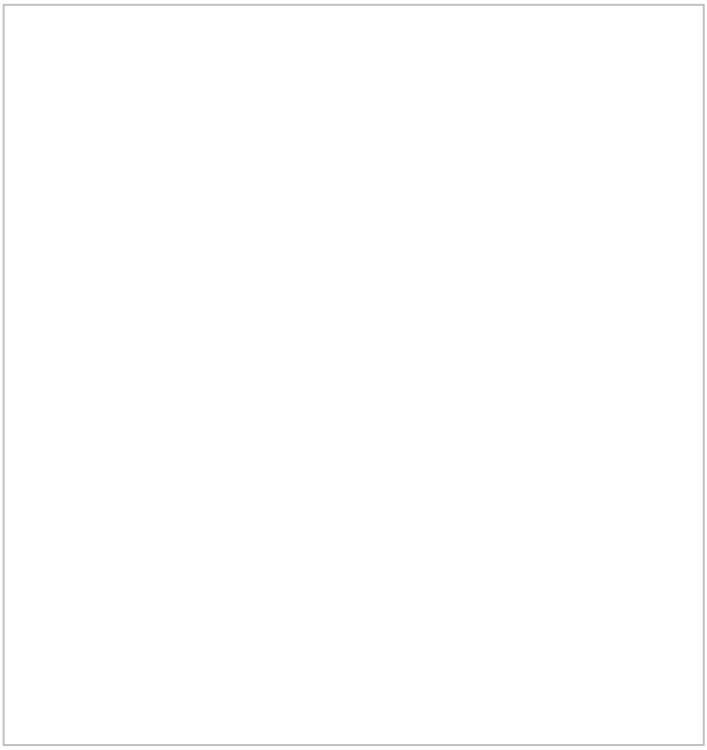
Shapes and Decorative Motifs

Snuffboxes came in a variety of forms:

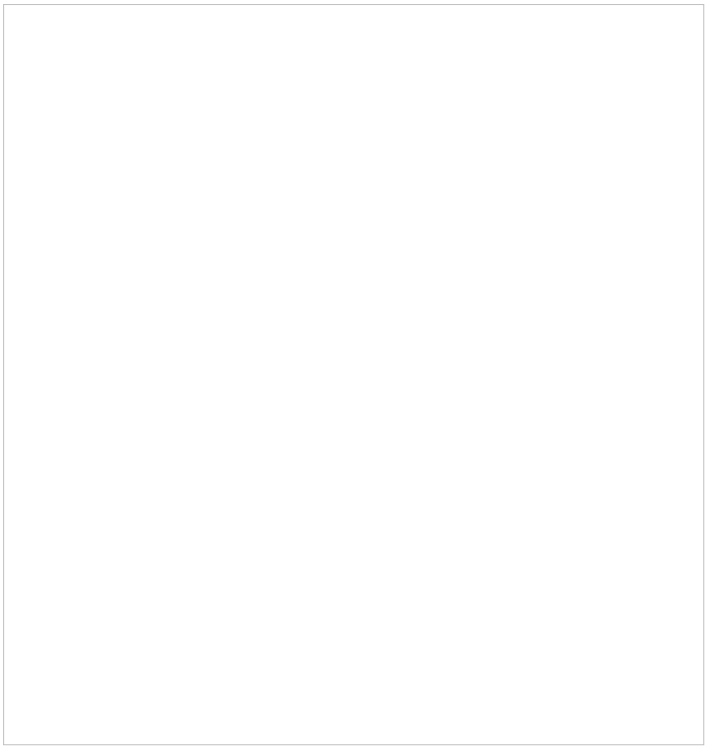
- **Rectangular snuffboxes** are the most common, such as this gold box :



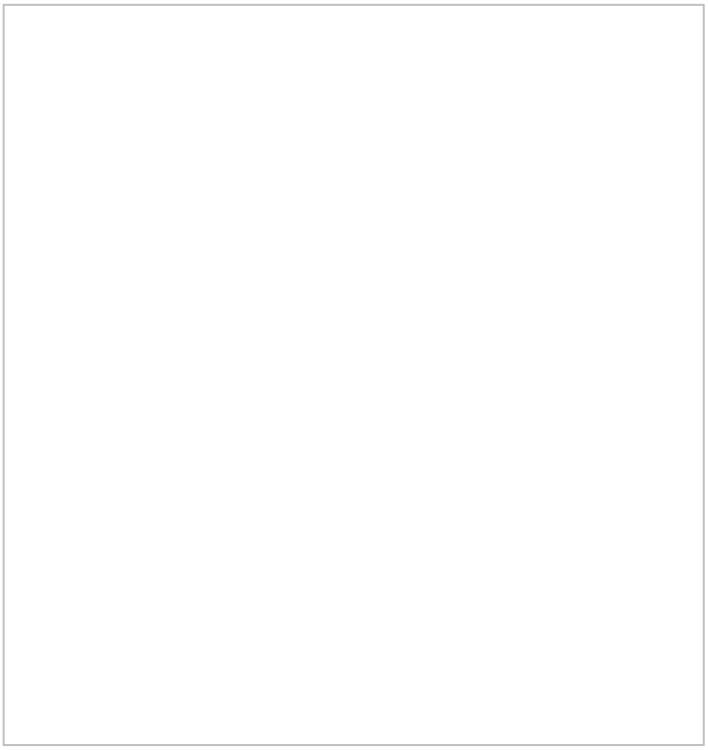
- **Oval snuffboxes** are mainly used for the Rococo style, such as this gold box :



- **Round snuffboxes** are inspired by "bonbonnières" (candy boxes), such as this box with a miniature on it:



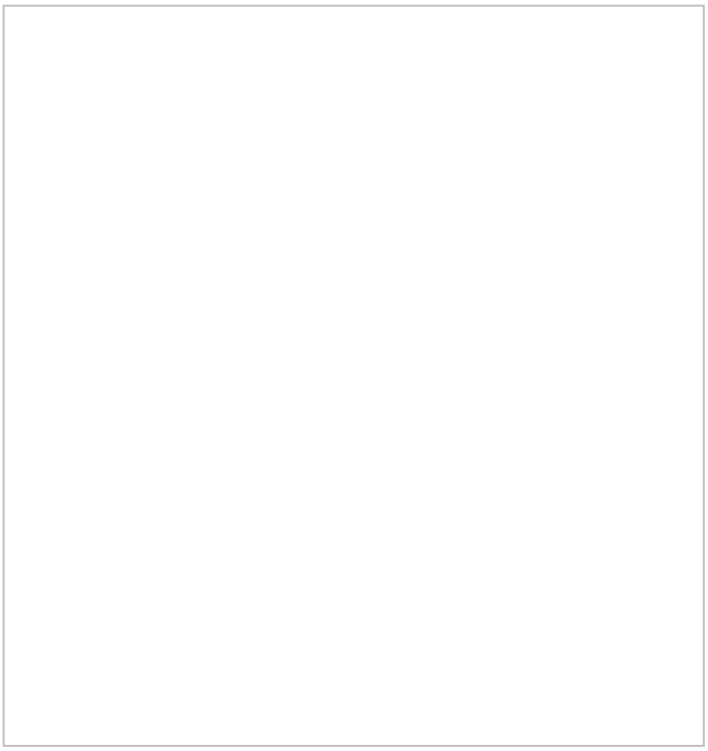
- **Snuffboxes with shapes such as books, shells, or symbolic objects**, like this beautiful gold box :



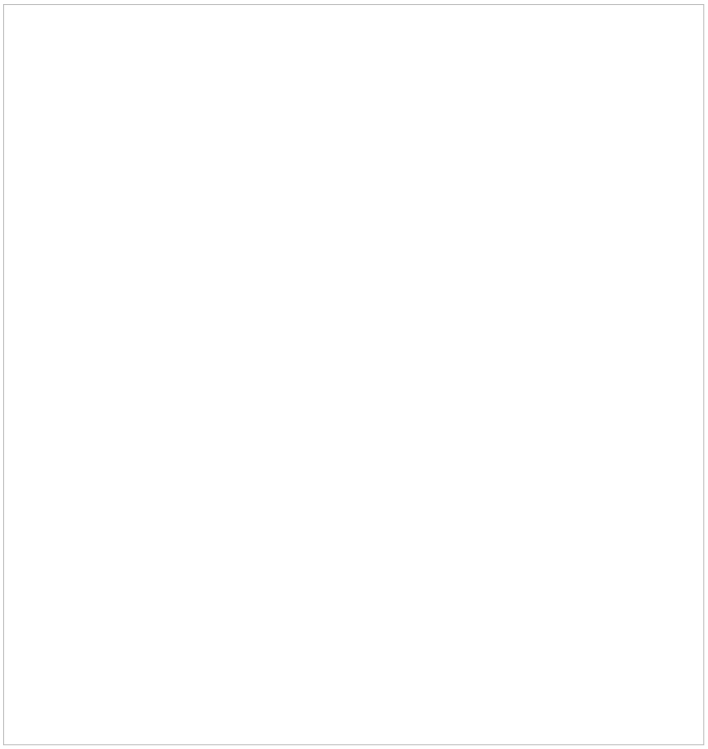
Themes reflected the tastes of the era:

- **Gallant scenes** : romantic encounters, shepherds, pastoral festivities...

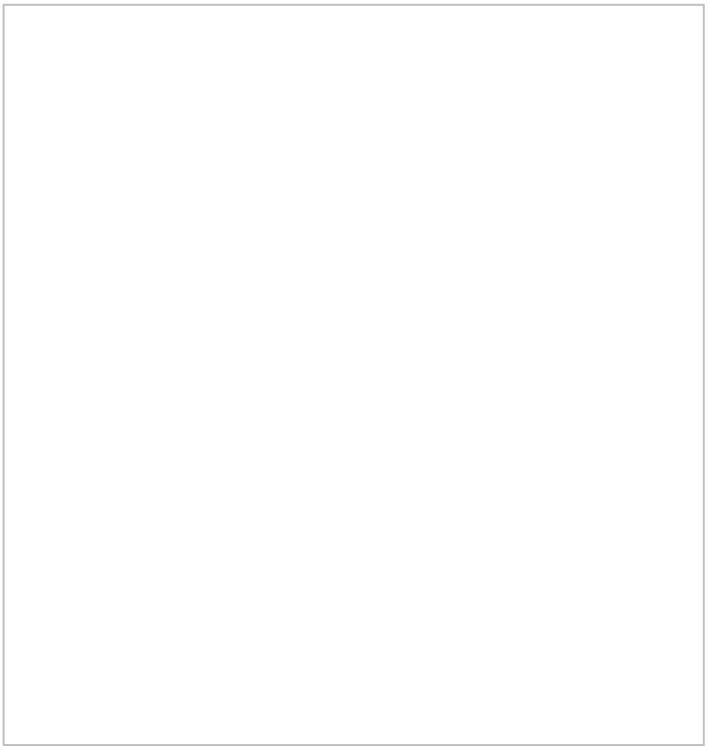
- **Allegories** : Justice, Music, the Arts



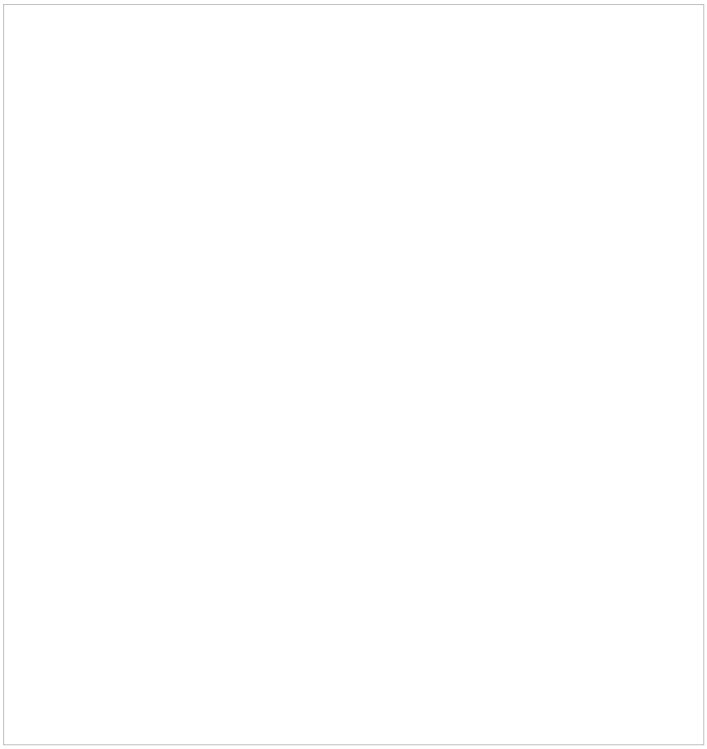
- **Portraits** : royalty and famous figures



- **Landscapes** inspired by Dutch or Italian painting



- **Erotic scenes** known as "secret snuffboxes"



III. A legacy of Craftmanship and Prestige

Far more than mere accessories, 18th- and 19th-century gold snuffboxes are historical artifacts, masterpieces of goldsmithing, and tangible investments. Whether you are a passionate collector, a history enthusiast, or a discerning investor, these exquisite pieces deserve a place of honor in any heritage collection.