

Papier chase

All the appeal of the nineteenth century is to be found in Richard Compton Miller's collection of papier mâché

'Don't let anyone other than yourself do the dusting!' warns Richard Compton Miller, author of *Who's Really Who* and avid collector of papier mâché *objets d'art*. His is a very useful piece of advice; the delicate nature of the smaller collectables, many of which feature beautiful handpainted designs, does not stand up well to heavy duty polishing.

Richard's collection, which includes calling card cases with silk linings, folio blotters, glove boxes, card trays, sewing boxes and lap desks, dates mostly from the mid nineteenth century. He once also collected papier mâché furniture, from small chairs to music stands.

In his attractive Chelsea home, Richard displays his collection in sections. Corner cabinets in his warm, burgundy red dining room house his extensive collection of card cases and snuffboxes, resting on miniature stands. Over the fireplace he has hung pretty face screens, originally used to guard porcelain complexions from the heat of the fire.

Glove and crochet boxes bearing Oxford scenes rest on the mantelpiece, and at the top of the house, in a wonderfully light artist's studio, the best of his handpainted snuffboxes are displayed on a low lacquered coffee table. 'Small pieces like these look so much better *en masse*,' says Richard.

Papier mâché's lineage dates back to seventeenth century France. It was a technique originally introduced from the east, but the process is more usually associated with the brightly coloured small objects and furniture produced by English manufacturers during the 1840s and 1850s.

The term is somewhat misleading since not all papier mâché was made of pulped paper; most nineteenth century pieces were made from compressed sheets of paper, heated in an oven to form extremely tough panels.

'For me, the decorative aspect is the principal appeal of papier mâché,' says Richard. 'And it varies according to the age of a particular piece. Most have black as the background colour; early pieces feature gold ornamental designs and, by the middle of the



Above: Richard Compton Miller holds an elegant workbox painted with scenes of Oxford, circa 1865, worth about £800

Opposite: among Richard's collection are, from top left, a Napoleon snuffbox (about £350); painted blotter with scenes of New College, Oxford (about £250); card tray with brass handle and painted scenes of Magdalen College, Oxford (£150 to £200); scalloped plate with floral centrepiece (£100); five Victorian card cases with painted scenes of Oxford (about £250 each)

century, floral subjects embellished with mother of pearl became common.'

Some makers, such as Jennens and Betteridge of Wolverhampton, would mark products with their names, and many firms employed leading artists and designers to decorate their more important pieces. Artists were paid a going rate of about sixpence a flower, and the work of several can be recognised by their 'trademarks': William Bourne favoured verbenas, Luke Amner tulips and George Neville a blue convolvulus as his signature.

Richard, who has been collecting since 1975, points to an attractive lap desk featuring twined foliage, which has pride of place in his bedroom. 'My grandmother started off my papier mâché collection. She had a plain card case. But as the decoration and standard of paint

finish increases, so too does the value. This writing box or lap desk was one of her prized possessions. It's by Jennens and Betteridge, about 1831 to 1846, with decoration probably by George Neville. A similar box was presented to Queen Victoria in about 1840.'

Collecting circular snuffboxes was a natural progression from card cases. 'I have many which feature scenes of Oxford – a particular love of mine stemming back to the time I spent at New College,' explains Richard. 'These would have been made as popular souvenirs.'

Some of the most beautiful feature painted scenes, often reproductions of famous paintings. Richard advises looking out for the names Stobwasser and Samuel Raven who excelled in this field. His collection ranges from a coaching scene to a painting of Mary Queen of Scots.

'The more interesting the painting, the greater the value. I have portraits of Napoleon and his son, the Prince of Rome. But then you're entering another collecting field altogether since Napoleana is much sought after. Stobwasser painted snuffboxes can easily fetch £1,500.'

Richard is obsessive about fairs and sales. 'Some of my best pieces have been found in the most unlikely of places. Bargain snuffboxes picked up at car boot sales have turned out to be real treasures after a cleaning – I use liquid furniture cleaner, sparingly, on very dirty pieces. My mentor, though, is Peter Coke of Sharrington Antiques. He taught me much of what I know. The rule of thumb is simple: you must like what you collect. It's hopeless buying something only as an investment.' □

Dealers in papier mâché

Sharrington Antiques,
Melton Constable, near Holt, Norfolk
NR24 2PQ (0263) 861411.

Rogers de Rin,
76 Royal Hospital Road, London
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Ian G Hastie,
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