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# Koopman Rare Art

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## Directors Choice – Timo Koopman Giovanni Bellezza's Milanese Masterpiece



An Italian Gold box By Giovanni Bellezza signed on the border "Bellezza Gio Milanese fece 1840"

It is generally believed that the first evidence of the sniffing of a powdered tobacco was recorded by the Franciscan monk, Ramon Pane, in 1497. Although the most popular form of inhaling tobacco right up until the late 17th century was of course through smoking. By the beginning of the 18th century the fashion for taking snuff had become widespread.

Gold boxes have always played a long and important role in fashion, self-promotion, diplomacy and in collecting. Often, they were used as a currency for their monetary value and the status they could embody. Their practical purpose was usually secondary, and they have always been a source of fascination. This Italian eighteen carat gold table snuff box is of such exceptional proportions and its creator the goldsmith Bellezza has spared no expense in the making of his masterpiece. It is lavishly decorated and finished with such jewel like quality that it is my Director's Choice. We are proud to present this unique triumph of the goldsmith.

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Giovanni Bellezza was born in Milan on 9th August 1807. He trained as a goldsmith, chaser-engraver and bronze-maker. He also taught at the Accademia di Brera as at the all'orfanotrofio maschile di Milano. In 1842, he was commissioned by the City of Milan to create objects commemorating the citizenship offered to Vittorio Emanuele II at the wedding celebrated with Maria Adelaide of Habsburg-Lorraine. In 1854 he engraved the paliotto in Milan Cathedral, in the chapel of the Madonna of the Tree.

In 1856 he was commissioned by Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria to recreate two reliquaries in gold, based on sixteenth century works originally by Nicola da Milano to a design by Benvenuto Cellini. These relics are now preserved in the Basilica of Sant'Andrea, Mantua. For the 1800 anniversary of the martyrdom of St. Peter, he created a chalice with detail on the foot with the Sacrifice of Abraham. Bellezza was buried in the Monumental Cemetery of Milan; his marble bust was placed in the upper gallery of the Brera Academy.



Signed on the border "Bellezza Gio Milanese fece 1840"

Bellezza's gold box is rectangular in shape and its hinged lid is decorated with a central medallion with characters attending the presentation of a woman to a man. On each side is a bust looking at the scene. All this is presented within a diamond lozenge on the cover. The cover is further decorated in each corner with allegories for writing, painting, architecture and conquest. The sides of the box are decorated with cast and applied floral and foliate décor together with demi winged figures of Pegasus. Not one part of this glorious gold box is left unadorned.





The name of the city Milan derives its name from 'Mediolanum' which as legend tells, was a monster that was seen in the place where Milano was built, This monster was a pig half covered in wool; Sidonius Apollinare described Milano as follows: Et quae lanigero de sue nomen habet which translates to 'And that woolly thing has its name', meaning that the city takes its name from the monster.

This same Latin inscription appears on the garter on the back of the gold box which in turn encloses a beautifully cast, chased, and applied Mediolanum pig. on a plaque.

Gaius Sollius Sidonius Apollinaris was a Gallo-Roman nobleman, a high official of the Roman Empire, poet, epistolography, bishop of Auvergne and saint.

The box is further adorned with grotesque decoration, characterised by the hybrid and monstrous beings such as its chimaeras, portrayed as slender and whimsical figurines, which blend into its geometric and naturalistic decorations, structured symmetrically, against a monochrome background. This is beautifully rendered by its stippled matte finish.





The Mediolanum Pig as described by Sidonius Apollinare

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### Snuff Boxes

The term *tabatière* or *tabaquièr* (snuff box) appeared in French as early as 1650 but the term 'gold box' has been used to express these magnificent vessels since the eighteenth century. They were not necessarily entirely of gold, as hardstones semi-precious and precious stones, enamels, wood, ivory, tortoiseshell, and rock crystal to name a few medium, were also incorporated in the splendid design of these boxes. Gold boxes were produced prior to the eighteenth century but it was the fashion of taking snuff, popularised in the second half of the seventeenth century, that necessitated the development of a container specifically for its use.

These boxes even superseded the *boites à portrait* as the ultimate royal gift as they were of such luxurious nature that they became the height of fashion throughout eighteenth-century Europe. The *boites à portrait* was a jewelled portrait of the monarch usually enamelled and was presented to the highest ranks of society - princes, ambassadors, members of nobility, distinguished statesman and even artists. Incorporating all the skills of the goldsmith to decorate these wondrous pieces of perfection they included chasing, *piqué*, turning, enamelling, cutting, and inlaying of precious stones and a dazzling array of wondrous hardstones too. The requirement was simple; a neat and beautiful object to be held in the hand, or to be taken out of a pocket to be shown to others.

These could be pocket boxes, or as with the Bellazzo example, table boxes to be shared or even smaller boxes to contain just one days' worth of snuff (journée). There were presentation boxes such as the most famous produced by Frederick the Great in Prussia, boîtes à mouches that contained patches for decoration, bonbonnières which held confectionary or dried fruits, carnet-de-bals used at ballrooms to inscribe your next dance partner, etuis for bodkins, sealing wax cases for important letters or documents, nécessaires for your grooming, freedom boxes presented in recognition of an achievement to a city or nation and micromosaic boxes made to hold souvenirs of the Grand Tour to Rome and the Vatican. An individual of taste should consider a box for each day of the year, a heavy one for winter and a lighter one for summer wrote Louis-Sebastian Mercier in 1782.

The variety of uses and requirements of course piqued the interest of the collector. There were many accounts of fabulous collections in the eighteenth century but whether they were true collections or an accumulation of boxes for reasons of fashion or promotion is a paper in itself. Frederick the Great of Prussia was reputed to have owned as many as 1500. It was the early nineteenth century that saw collecting gold snuffboxes in the contemporary sense become fashionable. In England the principal collectors followed the lead of the Prince Regent, later George IV. They were more interested in their artistic, historical, or even their commercial value rather than their use. Many of those great collections are well documented and admired. The Rothchild's collection at Waddesdon Manor, the Wallace collection in Manchester Square and the Gilbert collection housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum here in England are just a few of these great collections. The royal households, museums and private collections throughout the world continue to lure the next generation of collector. Please come and visit us at the gallery or visit the gold box section of our website [here](#) to enjoy many more of these magnificent gold boxes.





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All works shown, unless otherwise indicated, are available to view and purchase  
in our gallery located in 12 Dover Street, London, W1S 4LL

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