

Antique English Tea Caddies.

During the eighteenth century most tea was imported to Britain from China. The Chinese insisted that the traders pay them in silver bullion, so tea was very expensive. During and after the First Opium War tea became more difficult to obtain. Some plants were smuggled out of China to be grown in India which was then part of the British Empire.

Because of the high cost of tea the lady of the house would ensure that it was stored in a tea caddy which was usually fitted with a lock and the key would be kept in her possession at all times. Only those who could afford to buy tea would carefully measure it into the warmed tea-pot and then add hot water. The servants would then take the tea-leaves and steep them for a considerable period of time before making their own tea, or they might even sell the used tea-leaves!

Tea-caddies were used during the reign of George III, in the Regency period and throughout the Victorian era. They were made of mahogany, rosewood, satinwood or walnut, while some were made of tortoiseshell, silver and even papier mache. Tea caddies varied in shape; although most were rectangular, some were square and others were oval. Some unusual English wooden tea caddies were made in the shape of apples or even pears. Most of the larger rectangular tea caddies had two, or even three, compartments inside. At least two of these would have lids, which might be hinged, or they could be lifted off by means of a small knob. In some tea-caddies the third "compartment" was not lidded. It might be fitted with a bowl, which could be used for tasting the tea. . Many tea caddies were exquisitely decorated with inlaid ivory, mother of pearl or other exotic woods. Some were mounted on a pedestal with tripod feet and were called tea poys.

The small six-sided mahogany tea caddy with a single compartment, exotic wood inlay and ivory or bone around the lock, dates from the late eighteenth century. It is lined with a special "silver-paper" and has red baize on the base.

The small rectangular wooden tea caddy dates from the early nineteenth century. It is inlaid with other exotic wood and also has ivory or bone inlay surrounding the keyhole. Inside are two unlined compartments with hinged lids.

The larger mahogany tea caddy with domed lid also dates from the Regency period. It has very simple inlay of a paler wood, and bone inlay around the keyhole. Inside there are two compartments with lids, with small tooled bone knobs. These compartments and the undersides of the lids were once covered with "silver paper", but most of this has worn off. Between the lidded compartments is a cut out circle to hold the original black pottery bowl, which could be used to sample the tea. The tea caddy has green baize on the base, but this is not the original.

The wooden rectangular tea caddy, which probably dates from the mid-nineteenth century, has no external inlay except for the diamond-shaped bone inlay around the keyhole. I suspect that the rounded feet were added at a later date. The original baize is missing from the base. I know that the knob on each side was added in the mid-1900s! Inside are three lidded compartments, each decorated with a simple X inlay in a lighter wood. One of the bone knobs is missing!

The other rectangular mahogany tea caddy has black inlay and diamond surrounding the lock. It has a panel of decorative pale and dark wood inlay with a diamond in its centre on the top of the box. There is red baize on the base and it has four rounded feet made of a dark wood held in place with the original screws. Inside there are three compartments, but only the two smaller ones are lidded, with dark-colored knobs.

Ann Grahame

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