FRENCH SNUFFBOXES IN
THE WENTWORTH COLLECTION

BY FAITH DENNIS
Assistant Curator of Renaissance and Modern Art

The precious gold, enameled, and jeweled masterpieces of eighteenth-century goldsmith's work in the Wentworth collection, which were hidden away in the apprehensive days following the attack on Pearl Harbor, have at last been unpacked and may now be seen in Gallery F19 of the Morgan Wing. The collection, lent to the Museum by Mrs. Catherine D. Wentworth of Santa Barbara, consists chiefly of various kinds of boxes, although carnetes de bal, étuis, navettes, nécessaires, scent bottles, and fans are also represented.

In the uses to which they were put, as well as in their decoration, these boxes reflect in miniature the life and customs of the fashionable world of their day. It was an age when frivolity was paramount. As one contemporary writer put it, "On traite les minuties en grand, et les affaires serieuses en bagatelles." Around the taking of a pinch of snuff there sprang up an elaborate etiquette, while the possession of many fine snuffboxes indicated the wealth and standing of their owner. Mercier, in his Tableau de Paris, published in 1781, says: "There are boxes for each season. The one for winter is heavy; that for summer light. There are those who carry this refinement to the extent of changing boxes every day: it is by this distinctive touch that one may recognize the man of taste. He who has three hundred boxes and as many rings may properly dispense with a library, a natural history collection, and paintings."

Many of the famous people of the eighteenth century had extensive collections of these boxes. The Regent, Philippe d'Orléans, is reputed to have owned several hundred. Madame de Pompadour's boxes, as might be expected, were noted for their beauty and lavishness, many of them being mounted with miniatures and heavily set with diamonds. Eight hundred snuffboxes were among the effects of Louis François de Bourbon, Prince de Conti, at the time of his death in 1776, and more than fifteen hundred, it was said, were amassed by Frederick the Great.

Snuffboxes were greatly prized and sought after all through the nineteenth century. The Marquis of Hertford and Sir Richard Wallace assembled the distinguished group that now forms part of the Wallace Collection in London. The numerous collections made by various members of the famous Rothschild family rarely failed to include fine examples. As collectors' items snuffboxes have continued to be popular, almost without interruption, down to the present day. Mrs. Wentworth made her collection in recent years during a long residence in France, at which time she brought together distinguished collections in other fields of French decorative art. Her partiality for work in varicolored gold is reflected in the large number of superb boxes in this technique—a particularly happy circumstance because the celebrated Pierpont Morgan collection of boxes, shown in the same gallery, though rich in other types, is almost completely lacking in examples of varicolored gold.

In these two exceptional collections are illustrated a variety of materials and techniques, an excellence of design, and a perfection of workmanship unsurpassed in the long history of goldsmith's work. Supplemented by similar material which has come to the Museum from other sources, they form a group which in quality, if not in number, is comparable to the great collections of boxes in the Louvre and the Hermitage. Since this group is without doubt unequaled outside of Europe, there is special cause for gratitude to those who have made it available for the enjoyment of the American public.
Snuffbox by Jean Frémin, Paris, 1763-1764. Decorated with symbols of the arts and sciences in gold of four colors. The various tints of the metal were obtained through different alloys.

Gold and heliotrope snuffbox by Claude Héricourt, Paris, 1769-1770. This is a “tabatière à secret,” so called because of the concealed miniature portrait in the cover.
Gold snuffbox by Jean Moynat, Paris, 1747-1748. Decorated with sprays of roses, peonies, narcissuses, hyacinths, and carnations in opaque and translucent enamels on a mat ground.

Snuffbox by Jean Frémin, Paris, 1757-1758. Decorated with flower sprays in burnished gold of four colors. The sprays are reserved in panels of mat gold on a rayed ground.