

# Tea Caddy Prices are Brewing Up Nicely

by Luke Honey

**T**ea! Imagine a world without it. Yet the English have been drinking tea for only some 300 years. The historical origins of tea are obscured by fascinating myths and legends: tea is the *camellia sinensis* plant and has been known in China for around 1000 years. There is a myth that traces the beginnings of tea to the reign of the legendary Emperor Shen Nung, known as “the Divine Healer”, who was supposed to have reigned in the 3rd millennium BC. There is also the unpleasant story of Dharuma, a Buddhist monk, living in China in the 5th Century AD, who cut off his eyelids as a self-punishment for allowing himself to fall asleep. Where his eyelids fell, grew the first tea plant.

raffish, and sometimes dangerous, watering holes, this beverage was drunk increasingly in the home.

Today we are used to buying tea casually from supermarket shelves, but during the late 17th and 18th centuries it was a precious and expensive commodity. Thomas Garway advertised his tea at between 16 and 50 shillings per pound. Earlier prices had gone as high as £6 to £10 per pound. No wonder 18th Century tea caddies tended to be small and have locks, particularly necessary when a large household might have included several servants with light fingers.

Until the mid-19th century almost all tea came from China, but, after the Opium Wars (in which, incidentally, Britain seized Hong Kong harbour), the British looked elsewhere. In fact, as early as 1822 a Royal Society of Arts prize to whoever could grow tea outside China opened the way for plantations in India and Ceylon.

The word “caddy” is thought to be a corruption of “catti”, a weight of about 1.3 lb used in China and the Eastern Archipelago, and probably came into use sometime during the late 18th century. Until then, the term “tea chest” was used to describe a box, often wooden, holding two or three tea canisters, often made of tin. Later, the canisters became lidded compartments built into the box holding green tea on one side and black tea on the other. The teas could be blended in the fitted glass bowl provided.

Thomas Chippendale’s book the “*Gentleman and Cabinet Maker’s Director*” included designs for tea caddies. By the 1760s the taste for delicate ornament had become fash-

The first detailed account we have of tea being served to the public was at Garway’s coffee house in the City of London in 1657. At that time, tea was kept warm and drawn straight from the cask, and taken as a curiosity - primarily for medicinal purposes. Thomas Garway published a pamphlet in 1665, the year of the Great Plague, which listed the various qualities of tea: “It prevents and cures agues, sufits and fevers” ... “it maketh the body active and lusty”.

Tea had been available from Holland as early as 1610, but it wasn’t until the “politer” reign of Charles II, in the later years of the 17th century, that it became a fashionable drink. Tea was served at the popular pleasure gardens of Vauxhall and Ranleigh in Chelsea, but, from the mid 18th century, as the gardens degenerated into



A 19th Century painted metal Tea Canister sold for £380

Photographs: Phillips Fine Art Auctioneers



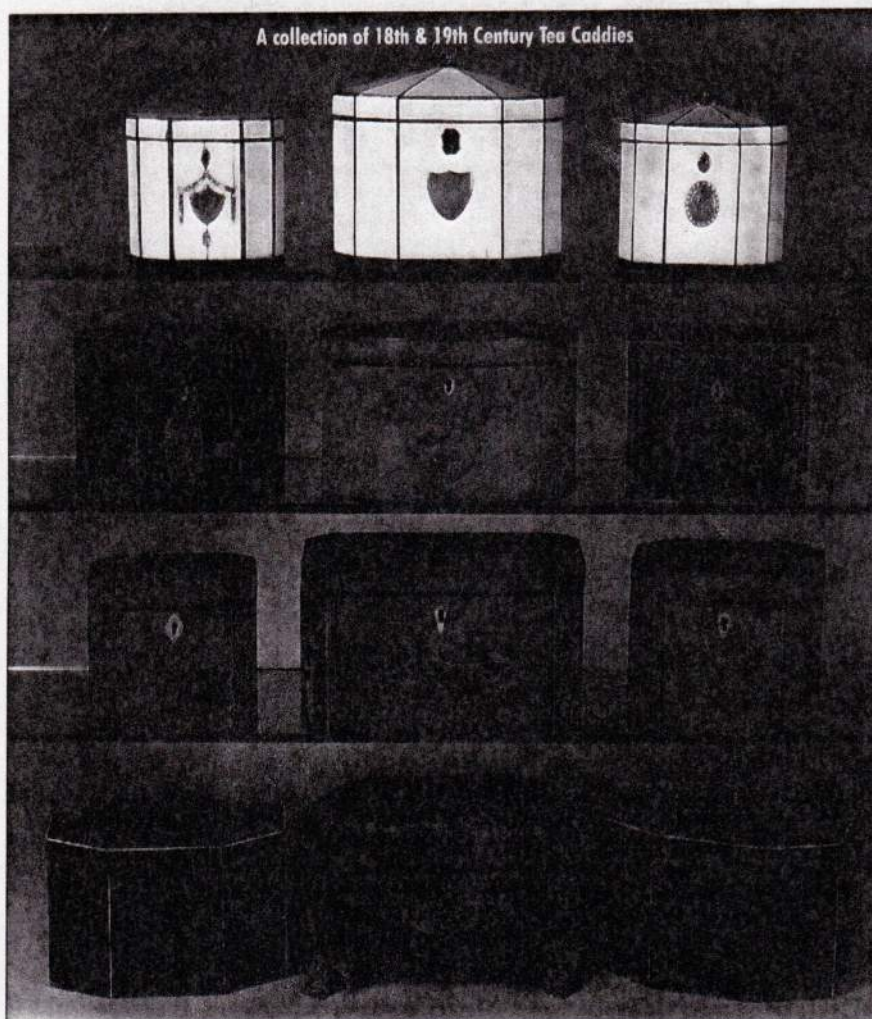
ionable, so that the third edition of 1762 shows six tea caddy designs in the elaborate "rococo" style. Pitt's Commutation Act of 1784 abolished the heavy tax on tea, bringing the price down to a reasonable level so that it could be enjoyed by a wider range of people. Consequently, there was a trend towards smaller containers of a more delicate style that were made in larger numbers.

We now use "caddy" as a general term, meaning a box that contains tea. Caddies have been made from precious woods, ivory, tortoiseshell (the shell of the sea turtle), shagreen (high polished shark or fish skin), silver, porcelain and papier-mache. Tortoiseshell caddies can be found in a variety of different colours including dark green, yellow and brown. The tortoiseshell is actually tinted from behind and the colour allowed to glow through the veneer.

Another interesting type of caddy worth looking out for are those decorated with rolled-up strips of paper. At the time of the Napoleonic Wars it became a fashionable and amusing hobby for young ladies of leisure to decorate caddies in this manner. Paper was cut into strips, rolled up and then stuck down to create floral or 'filigree' patterns. The caddies were often made in a lozenge shape and sometimes incorporated portrait miniatures on the front.

The beautiful and rare porcelain tea canister illustrated in the photograph was made by the Meissen factory sometime between 1725 and 1730. The painted decoration shows miners in the employ of Augustus the Strong, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony, hard at work in the silver mines near Dresden. Augustus had a large and famous collection of Oriental porcelain and the shape of this canister is copied from a Chinese example. It fetched £3,400 at auction.

Tea caddies are highly collectable - though prices at auction can vary between £100 or so for a run-of-the-mill 19th century plain mahogany caddy and a great deal more for an extremely fine tortoiseshell (particularly if coloured), ivory or period fruit-shaped caddy. Particularly attrac-



tive and collectable are caddies in the shape of apples, pears and other fruit, usually turned and carved from the appropriate fruitwood and sometimes coloured with rouge imitating the "bloom" on the fruit's skin. These were made during the 18th century and well into the 19th century, but the later caddies tend to be of lesser quality. Period examples can fetch more than £1,000 at auction and are highly desirable. Consequently, there are many fakes on the market and collectors should take great care before buying.

Metal tea canisters - used by tea merchants to store tea - can also be interesting items to look out for at auction. A highly decorative 19th century tea canister, painted with a charming scene of Yarmouth beach, fetched £380 at Phillips recently. Tea canisters are popular with interior decorators as they can be turned into table light bases. Overpriced repro-

duction canisters, often with spurious coats-of-arms, can be seen at street markets and "antique" fairs.

As with all antique collecting, buy what you like, rather than what you're supposed to like, and try and find tea caddies in the best possible condition, though a good furniture restorer should be able to repair damaged veneers. Auctions are a good place to buy tea caddies, though buyers should always try to examine the lot carefully before purchase. A competent auctioneer, however, should always be willing to advise on the condition of a piece, and give his own opinion, before a sale. Tea caddies can not only be beautiful and decorative objects in themselves, but also reflect our social habits over the past 300 years.

■ *Of interest: The Bramah Tea and Coffee Museum, The Clove Building, Maguire Street, London SE1 2NQ. Telephone: 0171 378 0222.*