

The Tea Party



Top of Patch Box. Hancock "The Tea Party" print

Some years ago, at one of the many fairs we used to be able to visit, (remember those days?) one of the stall owners called me over. "Betsy, I've got a piece here you might be interested in". I'd bought from this dealer before and knew that it would be something fascinating, and invitations like that I find quite hard to resist.

What was shown to me certainly was interesting and has given me a lot of research to undertake. The item in question is a small patch box which the dealer detailed on the invoice as "Liverpool enamel box c. 1760". The print on the lid is the well-known but possibly not the commonest version of "The Tea-party no,1", engraved by Robert Hancock." According to Cyril Cook in "The Life and Work of Robert Hancock", the source from which Hancock obtained this design has not been found. The particularly interesting point about the print on my box is that it is signed, albeit very faintly, but it is just possible to make out "(R)Hf", the R being lost into the metal mount of the lid. A good light and a magnifier are essential.

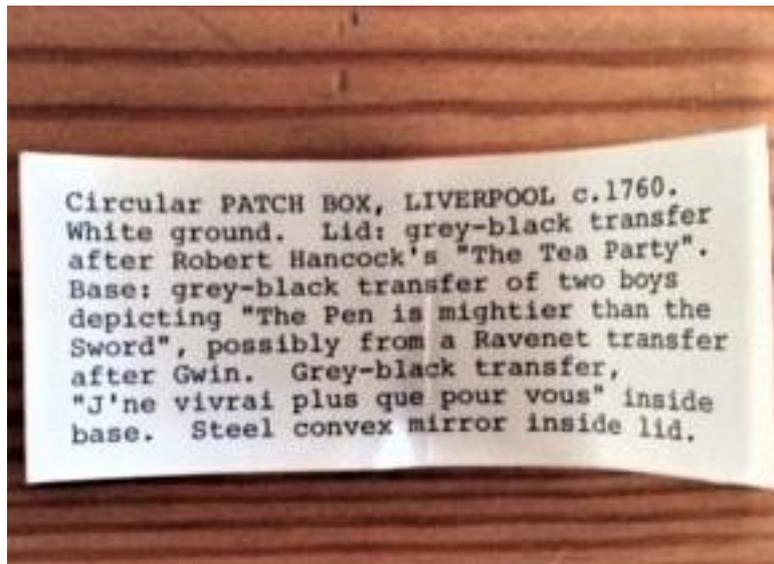


Print on base of Patch Box



Inscription printed inside Patch Box

The prints on base and on the inside of the base of the box have provided much more research opportunity and I still have come to no definite conclusion there.



Label found inside Patch Box when bought

A slip of paper was inside the box as I bought it, possibly provided by a previous owner. The dealer mentioned it but did not claim to have written it. Indeed, they said they had no knowledge of the base print. Interestingly, I have asked at the prints departments of the British Museum, the Ashmolean Museum and the V&A, none of which could offer any insight into this print!

The print in black inside the base of the box is simply a script message in French:

“J' ne vivrai plus que pour vous”. This might suggest that that the box was perhaps made as a love token for a lady. This phrase has appeared on other similar boxes. A rectangular Staffordshire snuff box dated 1765 in the Ionides Collection has this same phrase as a gilded inscription. (Lot 94 of the Sotheby's Sale June 1980)

The inside of the lid is a polished steel convex mirror. Steel mirrors appear to be found in boxes up to the 1770s, and were replaced by glass by the 1780s.

The print on the base of the box is given on the slip of paper as “The Pen is Mightier than the Sword”. This black print is of two children/putti, one holding a large quill pen and the other has a sword by his side.

Considering the box was dated c1760 from the dealer when I bought it and “The Tea Party” probably dates originally from the 1750s, this seems an unlikely original title for this base print. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, “The pen is mightier than the sword” is a phrase attributed to Richelieu in his 1838 play of that name by Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1805-1873).

Further information from the slip of paper suggests that the print is probably taken from an etching by Simon Francois Ravenet after a drawing by James Gwim. The latter was a name unknown to me, but he does appear on Wikipedia as an Irish artist born in Co. Kildare around 1700. He came to London around 1755 and was employed for a time at the Battersea Enamel Works as a designer of snuff box lids. He died in London in 1769. One of Gwim’s series of drawings was entitled “Children in the Arts and Sciences”. He also seemed to do drawings of allegorical subjects. This perhaps then seems to fit with an engraving somewhat later entitled “The pen is mightier than the sword”.

It appears that Ravenet did engrave some of Gwim’s work for the Battersea factory, and having explored other prints of Ravenet’s work, the figures on my box look very similar to Ravenet putti.

Having read many references and looked at several catalogues and books about enamels, I guess I’ve learned quite a lot but still cannot be completely sure of the origin of this attractive little box and its not yet fully identified base print.

References:

Life and Work of Robert Hancock (Cook)

Chambers Biographical Dictionary

Oxford Dictionary of Quotations

The Stretton Collection Catalogue

English Painted Enamels (Hughes)

Battersea Enamels (Egan Mew)

The Ionides Collection Sale catalogue 1980

The Mullens Collection Sale Catalogue 1977

And Google/Wikipedia

Betsy Wilkie February 2021