

We're In the Mood For



Neoclassical lidded jewel box, c. 1820, with gilded mounts.

King” whose reign, coeval with the early Victorian Era, witnessed the burgeoning development of what remains the world’s premier luxury-goods culture. The Louis Philippe style—more voluptuous than the classical Empire style that preceded it but less ornate than the neo-Baroque Second Empire style that followed—was the ideal vehicle for opaline, thanks to a combination of richness and relative restraint that showed off the glass to perfection.

Though opaline was used for many

domestic objects that could be made in glass, it was particularly popular for small boxes that often found their way onto ladies’ dressing tables, where they held cosmetics, toiletries, or trinkets. Opaline boxes fitted with flacons of scent were poetically known as *caves aux odeurs*. Especially desirable today are the hard-to-find boxes that retain those original accoutrements, which often also included scissors, brushes, and other aids to a lady’s toilette.

Because glass shatters more easily than porcelain, it became standard practice to protect opaline boxes from breakage by lining their lids and bases with thin rims of ormolu—an alloy of bronze—with matching hinges and clasps, often embellished with chased decoration. The somewhat brassy-looking metal was gilded to give it a non-tarnishing finish and a richer appearance.

For people who found the utter plainness of undecorated opaline a sign of poverty rather than chic, there were pieces enameled in colors or incised with patterns rubbed with gold leaf. But

the finest examples of opaline—made by Baccarat or their greatest competitor, Saint-Louis, and, until it closed in 1851, Choisy-le-Roi—were distinguished by their bold simplicity and fearless reliance on the unmasked quality of the glass itself to carry the design.

Among the 20th-century style-makers who rediscovered the glories of opaline was cosmetics czarina Helena Rubinstein, whose taste for striking colors, strong forms, and a good bargain led her to scoop up scads of the stuff for next to nothing during the 1930s and 1940s. The legendary French decorator Madeleine Castaing was another devoted amateur of opaline, which provided the perfect decorative accessory for her Louis Philippe–revival interiors. The same colors—sky blues, pale greens, and fresh pinks—found in her opaline objects often turned up in her rooms, sometimes all together, as in her famous narrow-striped carpeting, which combined those very hues.

The unadorned opalines that Rubinstein and Castaing favored—and the