



What sort of thing is the etui? A case in which one stores anything that should be held snugly, for protection or concealment: spectacles, cutlery, watches, for example. «What didn't the nineteenth century invent some sort of casing for!», wrote Walter Benjamin, who compared the era's dwellings to «the inside of a compass case, where the instrument with all its accessories lies embedded in deep, usually violet folds of velvet».² The eighteenth century had its own passion for cases, whether they held microscopes, surgical tools, weights and scales, or sets of toilet articles. Earlier still, etuis carried small items on the person, writing instruments, prayer books, a knife or spoon. From the fourteenth century survive the etuis for a few supremely important objects: imperial crowns, reliquaries, miters, and monstrances.³ Lightweight but extremely durable, leather was often the most suitable material for the etui. Boiling and molding leather in a process known as *cuir bouilli* produced hard shells in any desired shape. Etuis were also constructed of wooden frames covered in soft leather, with incised and embossed decorations. They were lined with suede, silk, or other textiles.

As an object meant to embrace another object, the etui sits in an undefined interstice between received categories. It is not comfortably a work of art. Nor, when ornamented and carefully crafted, can it be placed in the vast category of functional objects known as «material culture». However, designating the etui a decorative art object does not adequately account for its service to other such objects, for the fact that, as a bespoke case designed to fit the specific contours of an already-made thing, it is always secondary to the object it contains. The etui would not take the form it does, would not even exist, if not for the object it holds inside. It is this relationship between container and contained that resists traditional categorizations and renders the etui worthy of special notice. Exploring that relationship in several early modern examples, I hope to show how the etui defines its own peculiar object-type, with implications for the two-dimensional image.

In addition to the standard etuis that share recognizable forms, like penners and violin cases, a rarer group best emblemizes the concept of containing at issue here. The largest surviving collections of etuis are those made to fit the singular objects of princely *Kunstkammern*. The treasury of the Saxon electors in Dresden holds more than three hundred cases from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, made for the most part by court bookbinders to protect the baroque *pretiosa* collected by Augustus the Strong (1670–1733).⁴ During his lifetime, Augustus became King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania. To assert his power in those distant regions, he dazzled his new subjects with possessions brought from his Dresden wonder cabinet: elaborate parade bowls, ivory bibelots, rock crystal vessels, and precious metal statuettes. The travel cases for these fragile pieces are unique,