

Japonisme: It's Influence of Western Match Safes

By Neil Shapiro

Japonisme, a term devised by Philippe Burty in 1872, refers to the influence of Japanese art, aesthetics, and culture on Western art during the 19th and early 20th centuries. This influence had a significant impact on various art forms, including painting, decorative and utilitarian arts, fashion, and even architecture. The term became popular in the latter half of the 19th century as Japan opened to the West after centuries of isolation.

But it wasn't just the colors, shapes, and crafts of Japan that the French had become entranced by; it was the Japanese idea that objects e.g., vases, dishware, vanity boxes and other items theretofore considered strictly utilitarian were themselves art. This was the beginning of a radical shift in how France and the rest of the Western world would come to view *all* art.

A bit of history:

The start of the interest in Japanese culture can be dated from the opening of Japan to the western world on 31 March 1854 when Commodore Perry of the USA sailed into Japanese ports. After two centuries of Japanese isolation, economic, and cultural exchanges were begun.

The English artist, Walter Crane (1845-1915) wrote, "... the opening of Japanese ports to Western commerce, ... had an enormous influence on European and American art. [The] ... wonderfully skilled artists and craftsmen, in all manner of work of the decorative kind, ... were under the influence of a free and informal naturalism." (Crane, Walter, *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New*, London, 1896.)

International exhibitions and trade between Japan and the West facilitated the exchange of art and cultural ideas. These exhibitions, such as the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris, showcased Japanese art and crafts to Western audiences, fueling the fascination with all things Japanese.

The Japanese artistic sensibility came to affect Western artistic movements such as Arts and Crafts, Art Nouveau, Impressionism, Symbolism, De Stijl and the Bauhaus as well as the so-called craft work, glass manufacture, metal work, jewelry design and ceramics. Certainly, it influenced the manufacturers of match safes.

Match Safes:

The rise and spread of Japonisme occurred mainly from the 1880s through 1900, the same period that the use and manufacture of match safes was most popular throughout the Western world.

The manufactories and their artistic leaders followed the popular craze for Japanese design while at the same time producing safes that hewed to the tenets of the Arts and

Crafts movement which emphasized simple handwork, natural materials, and craftsmanship.

The two movements would seem to be incompatible since most match safes were production items often made in the hundreds, if not the thousands. * Yet, many match safes made in the West have Japanese type designs and motifs. While this incompatibility did not inhibit the production of match safes it deserves some research as to why companies can hold competing ideas of production techniques and design aesthetics. **

One example of a Japanese style match safe was made by George W. Shiebler, New York, NY (1876-19010) that looks like a handcrafted piece of metal work but is just one of Shiebler's production match safes. Shiebler clearly wanted to appeal to consumers who wanted a Japanese design match safe, made in keeping with the Arts and Crafts ethos of hand production but the company chose to manufacture it in a more economical manner.



G.W. Shiebler, silver, Japanese motif, production safe

Below are some examples of Western match safes using Japanese influences:



French enamel with flowing vine



Japanese vine scroll

Japanese artists understood and studied the natural world. This knowledge allowed them to render animals and plants naturally, without any stiffness and often with a symbolic element that accompanied that realism. Thus, certain plants like the peony heralded spring and the chrysanthemum stood for autumn. This aspect, and the naturalism was often lost in the Western use of Japanese designs. The example of the French match safe depicts a flowering, cascading vine in a stiff, stylized manner while the same flowering vine simply flows in the Japanese scroll painting.



English silver mask



Kibabeshimin Noh Mask



USA, silver, fish



Japanese painting of fish



USA, silver plated, fans



Japanese painting of fans.



USA, silver, patterns Japanese Nami pattern



French, silver, waves

Japanese wave painting

A taste for the art of Japan with its combination of artistic quality and traditions of craftsmanship became prevalent in Europe and the United States from the 1860s through the 1890s and match safe ornamentation was no exception.

Some of the most common Japan- style themes used by Western artists were patterned backgrounds, tall, narrow formats, or cut-off foreground objects, wave ornamentation and the Japanese style of depicting plants and animals. Another approach was the asymmetrical composition for the representation of space which left large areas of the art empty. Whatever the subject matter Western artists and companies made and manufactured match safes that embraced the Japanese aesthetic during this period.

In summary, Japonisme had a profound and lasting impact on Western art by introducing new artistic concepts, styles, and subject matter. It played a crucial role in the development of movements such as Impressionism and influenced the broader trajectory of Western artistic expression.

*Almost all match safes were mass produced. Yes, there were some special-order match safes, but in the main most safes were made in multiples to be sold to the public. In the world of antiques made in the West, 1830, is usually used as the year when mass or industrial production created more objects than those solely created by human hands.

Since we know that match safes were made to house friction matches and that was devised in 1826, we can state that most match safes were made during the era of industrial production. Does that mean the match safes had no hand work done in their production? The answer is no.

There is documentary proof from the production records of the Gorham Co. that many production match safes had some or lots of handwork to create the finished product.

**A full analysis of conflicting philosophies of the Arts and Crafts movement and Japonisme is beyond the intent of this essay.