

A GORHAM BANKO IRON WARE MATCH SAFE

By Neil Shapiro

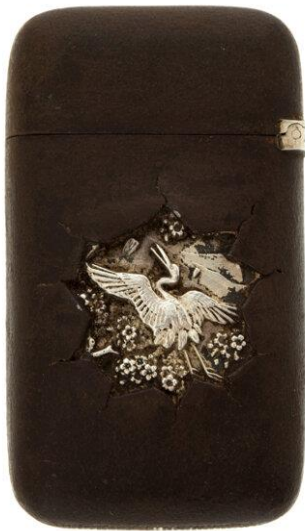
American manufacturers helped fuel the popular interest in Japanese aesthetics that resulted from renewed trade between Japan and the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. Some companies imported Japanese wares while others, like the Gorham Manufacturing Company, produced luxury items that were inspired by, and sometimes overtly appropriated from Japanese culture. For one year only in 1883, Gorham experimented with a line they called Banko Iron Ware, which included, an amalgamation of several Japanese craft traditions.

The name of the line comes from Banko ware, a type of ceramic made with an iron-rich clay that turns reddish brown to black when fired. Gorham's version was fabricated from patinated sheet iron that references Meiji-era metalwork.

Gorham's skilled craftsmen borrowed design inspiration from Japanese woodblock prints using robed figures, dragons, birds, crabs, fish, insects, flowering prunus branches, and other elements from nature to create fresh new objects for their clients. They also appear to have accepted special requests from some of their clients. Their designers also took inspiration from Japanese artisans using a variety of different textures on the same object, often leaving the hammered surface of the object deliberately "unfinished", a look traditional Western silversmiths never contemplated.

Few pieces of Banko Iron Ware appear in the marketplace due to the limited production and rarity. A small number (no match safes) were included in an exhibition at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in 2019, *Gorham Silver: Designing Brilliance 1859-1970*.

In the Gorham Manufacturing Company's work records only three examples of Banko Iron Ware match safes are listed: W16, W17, and W18. There are 17 steel match safes listed with the Gorham prefix "W." In 2011 Heritage Auction Galleries sold W16 but until now W17 and W18 have not been known to exist. But recently W17 has been located and is available for study.



Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com

W16, Gorham



W17, Gorham



close-up of silver insert

It is 2 1/2" in length, and the lid and body are made of patinated iron. It has a rounded, almost oval shape as compared with W16 which is rectilinear. There is a silver plaque mounted to the interior of the iron body which creates the illusion of the body being peeled away to reveal the applied silver head of a man circled by Greek letters.

The patinated iron has lost some of its coloration due to age wear but dark areas of patina exist on the front and back sides of the safe. To color the iron Gorham made a solution of hyposulphite of soda (4 oz.), water (1 1/2 pints), acetate of lead (1 oz.) more water (1 1/2 pints) and heated the solution with the iron match safe in the solution to the boiling point. (Untitled book, Gorham Archives, Brown University)

The surface of the iron has a soft, mottled look with the residue of the original patina seen in the small concavities of the iron body. There is a "V"-shaped, ribbed striker on the bottom of the safe. The bezel has the Gorham anchor, a W17, the date mark, "P" (for 1883), and the words, "sterling & iron."



Why Gorham chose to make a match safe (and other articles) out of iron, a difficult and costly operation, is open to speculation. The craze for things with a Japanese aesthetic

was widespread in western culture. Certainly, well known cultural critics helped the promote the Japanese mindset about metal work, see what Chistopher Dresser says:

The Japanese are the only perfect metal-workers which the world has yet produced, for they are the only people who do not think of the material, and regard the effect produced as of greater moment than the metal employed. To them, iron, zinc, bismuth, gold, silver, and copper, are only so many materials with which things of beauty may be produced, and the one is as acceptable as the other, if perfect appropriateness is seen in the application of the material, and if the result produced be satisfactory and beautiful. (Christopher Dresser, *Principles of Decorative Design*, 1873 (Reprint, New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1973))

Historically, Gorham had begun to make products influenced by Japanese aesthetics in the late 1860s. By the middle of the 1870s Gorham began to develop a line of products that were conceived as art rather than as strictly utilitarian pieces. Part of this concept probably developed out of the designers' interest in Japanese art. The art journals of the time, both in the UK and the USA, wrote about Art furniture, Art pottery, and objects made for an "artistic interior." This focus on artistic products led Gorham to design products that echoed Japanese metalwork, such as textured surfaces and mixing different metals in a single item.

By the 1880s Gorham was producing a line of copper ware often with silver appliques or silver decorations. The copper ware was handmade by silversmiths, beautifully designed and expensive. It certainly was not treated as a cheap, nonprecious metal. The various finishes and patinas on the copperware ranged from warm reds to deep browns. Many of the copperware pieces had Japanese designs and motifs. It seems reasonable to think that Gorham would try other inexpensive materials, e.g., iron, in their quest for artistic wares.

The economic situation in 1893, otherwise known as The Panic of 1893* offers another possibility, which caused Gorham to think of using a less expensive material for a common item. Once Gorham's craftsmen started to work with iron, they soon realized that the material was cheaper but the time to produce the item was longer, hence negating the saving on the material.

Whatever the reason Gorham chose to make Banko Iron Ware match safes they are certainly one of the rarest and most interesting of Gorham match safe production. In a period, 1870-1885, when Gorham was creating a considerable number of inventive, fascinating, and memorable objects, the iron ware match safes of 1883 were, in this writer's opinion, one of the most difficult safes to manufacture and one of the hardest to find for the match safe collector.

Finally, it is important to realize that the beauty of Japanese metalwork encouraged Gorham, and other American companies, to imitate the ingenuity of traditional Japanese metalwork and in doing so led them to develop their own technically difficult

manufacturing processes, produce aesthetically striking products, and achieve international renown.

* A true and severe financial panic lasting from May of 1893 to November 1893, with a run-on currency, and banks closing, and businesses and manufacturers not being able to open because they had no cash to pay workers or buy materials.