

## **An American Match Safe with a Japanese Aesthetic**

By Neil Shapiro

Sometime in the late 1880s, R. Blackinton & Co., North Attleboro, MA, a metal-working company, created a sterling silver match safe that was completely covered with a colored copper casing.

On the surface this is a surprising thing since silver is more highly prized and valued than copper and certainly more popular as a metal for jewelry. Something that may explain this puzzling use of metals on a piece of jewelry is the fad for Japanese inspired design, during the late 1870s through the 1880s, called *Japonisme*.

But a plain coating of colored copper with no other ornamentation is unlikely to appeal to an ordinary American consumer interested in acquiring an item with a Japanese aesthetic sensibility.

So, the question of why such a match safe was made is worthwhile exploring, especially since it was made by a commercial company interested in selling its products and the product made was a regular production item (see the production number), not a special order or a one-off creation.

It is this writer's contention that the electroplated copper covered, silver safe was Blackington's subtle attempt to appeal to the Japanese fervor that was sweeping the jewelry industry at this time, but to sell to an upper class, well-educated client. Just how this would appeal to this cohort required some knowledge of Japanese sensibilities and artistic taste.

The Japanese people honor and appreciate objects that are humble, useful and carry a sense of age with them. Objects that are not loud, noisy, and disturbing. Objects that radiate a stillness, a sense of calmness. A kind of clarity and simple directness, maybe the modern term "minimalism" might convey that feeling to a 21<sup>st</sup> century person.

Objects that are direct but subtle, profound, but simple – objects that show less than its whole self upon first observation.

This Blackington safe does all the above and feels perfectly suited to the hand. The only ornamentation on the safe is the hinge pins which are completely flush to the safe's body and discreetly covered with either a dab of black enamel or a black metal patina as is the back end of the hinge.

The striker is also part of the colored copper body with ridged lines to allow the match to be ignited. The entire safe is unified into a single whole, so the lid and striker are not distinct entities. It is a single rounded rectangle with a lacquer-like coating.

Blackington made two different shapes for this safe; one ovoid and the other rectangular with rounded corners (both are shown here).



Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com



If it is not too far a stretch the creator of this safe might have been celebrating a special Lunar New Year eclipse with the final shade of red applied to this electroplated copper finish.

During a lunar eclipse, the moon can appear red or orange because of the way Earth's atmosphere scatters sunlight. This is why lunar eclipses are sometimes called "blood



moons"

Also, in Japan, the color most associated with the Lunar New Year (also called "Shōgatsu" in Japanese) is red; it is considered a lucky color, symbolizing good fortune and warding off evil spirits. This is also true for many other East Asian cultures celebrating the Lunar New Year. Additionally, red is often paired with white, which is also considered a significant color in Japanese culture.

So, in one safe you have the traditional colors of the Lunar New Year (red and white (silver, in this case)) paired with some Japanese art concepts and *voila*, an American match safe to suit the Japanese aesthetic geared to sell to an educated, upper-class segment of society.

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