

The Origin of a Bronze Nun Match Holder

By Neil Shapiro

In an past essay, "A Clue to the Maker or Origin of the Friar/Monk Match Holder," (see www.matchesafescholar.com) published in the IMSA Newsletter, I speculated about the origins of the friar and the nun match holders. The friar holder had the name of A. Giroux on its base and Giroux, a French maker, may have made the holder or retailed it. But despite being able to identify the nun's habit (Sisters of Charity) I could not assign any maker or country of origin to the piece, although I speculated that the holder was probably produced in a predominately Catholic country.

Recently, I found a reference to a bronze sculpture of a nun by Emmanuel Frémiet (1824-1910), a French artist, who may have made a model that the nun match holder is based upon.

The Frémiet sculpture measures 23 cm (about 9" tall) and 13 cm (about 5" wide) while the match holder is 13 cm high (about 5") and 6 cm wide (about 2 1/2").

Frémiet's biographer, Jacques de Biez, describes the sculptor as an artist who is equally adept at rendering military figures as animals. De Biez goes on to explain why Frémiet created the nun sculpture:

The Parisian sculptor [Frémiet], nephew of Sophie Frémiet and François Rude, a fervent Christian, undoubtedly wanted to pay a discreet tribute to all these sisters who work in the silence of their faith. Sister Rosalie Rendu, Daughter of Charity, died on February 7, 1856. Her coffin was followed by a huge crowd of very moved Parisians. Why such an upheaval around this nun? Jeanne Marie Rendu* was born on September 9, 1786, in Confort, in the Pays de Gex (Ain). Entering the novitiate of the Daughters of Charity of Saint-Vincent de Paul in Paris in 1802, she was sent to the miserable Mouffetard district. With discretion, compassion, energy and faith, for some 53 years, she was a nurse there, but also a justice of the peace unraveling sometimes inextricable family or local situations, as well as a catechist for the most deprived children. Having become superior of her House, she nevertheless continued to roam the streets of her Saint Médard district to relieve suffering. Her discreet and effective work was distinguished by the imperial power which awarded her the Legion of Honor. Her grave, in the Montparnasse cemetery, is still decorated with flowers today, while her epitaph "to good Mother Rosalie, her grateful friends, the poor and the rich" resonates with the impact she had on the Parisian population. (Texts and photos: The Treasures of Gamaliel website)

The Frémiet sculpture fits the time frame for the manufacture of these mid-19th century holders and nun's habit is what the Sisters of Charity wore at this time and the modeling pose is almost identical to the match holder. There are subtle differences between the sculpture and the holder but that can be attributed to artist license. For example, the wimple and the habit are slightly different, but overall, there is no doubt that the habit is of the order Sisters of Charity.

It is important to remember that until very late into the 18th century manufacturers and iron foundries had little to no restrictions on copying one another's work. It was

commonplace for jewelers, silversmiths, and foundries that produced applied art objects, even fine objects, to copy the repertoire of a competitor. Also, in the case of small objects, there are few signed pieces as these were often sold in cases that were marked by the retailer or the manufacturer. Once the object was in use the case was often thrown away or lost over time.

Especially smaller companies copied finely modeled items because they did not have to pay a modeler and these companies focused on financial gain rather than quality production. So, the lack of a factory mark or modeler name on the nun match holder is understandable. But the timing, the clothing, the pose, all speak to the Frémiet sculpture as the model for the nun holder. As to who made and marketed the nun match holder that is still unknown.



Friar match holder

Nun match holder



Signature of A. Giroux on the friar



Signature of Frémiet on the nun



Nun holder



Frémiet's sculpture of a nun

*On 9 November 2003, Pope John Paul II beatified her.

Note about Frémiet:

Napoleon III ordered from the Frémiet a series of fifty-five statuettes reproducing the different uniforms of the army between 1855 and 1864. **This series also included a nun, Sister of Charity** (Boldface mine). The emperor [Napoleon] gave them to his son, Prince Imperial Louis-Napoleon, who really liked to play with them, often without much delicacy, so much so that [Napoleon] confiscated them from him. However, their fate was sealed... On May 23, 1871, a gigantic fire devastated the Tuileries, started by around thirty fanatical federates, led by a butcher's boy named Benot. For three days and three nights, the fire burned, ravaging the royal palace. The statues do not resist it... However, luckily, Emmanuel Frémiet had not destroyed all the molds. This is how 16 were able to be reissued including a Sapper, a Zouave of the Guard, an Artilleryman in the coat, a Brigadier of the Cent-Gardes squadron, a Cuirassier of the line, a Voltigeur of the Guard, a Grenadier of the Guard, a Mounted Gendarme, a Sailor from the Fleet crews, a Cantinière **and even a Nun**. (Text from: The Treasures of Gamaliel website)