

## **Flame in the Public and the Private Sphere:**

### **The Relationship Between Match Safes and Figural Gas Lighters, 1850–1910**

By Neil Shapiro

Between 1850 and 1910, the act of creating flame, so elemental and ancient became newly aestheticized in the industrial West. The spread of municipal gas systems and the earlier invention of the friction match transformed fire from laborious necessity into convenient utility.

Was there any cultural meaning to these innovations? Two objects in particular reveal this transformation: the portable match safe (or vesta case) and the fixed figural gas lighter. Though differing in scale and mobility, they share a technological lineage and a common social function. Together they chart the movement of flame between the private pocket and the public house.

The mid-19th century saw rapid expansion of coal gas systems in cities such as London, Paris, and New York City. Gas lighting entered hotels, saloons, and private residences. At the same time, the friction match—mass-produced by firms such as Bryant & May—made portable ignition widely available.

Two parallel systems emerged:

- **Fixed flame** (gas jets, wall burners, bar-mounted lighters)
- **Portable flame** (matches carried in vestas or safes)

Both solved the same problem, instant ignition, but in very different spatial and social contexts.

By the 1870s–1890s, the simple gas jet evolved into sculptural table devices. These figural lighters often depicted:

- Bacchus or satyrs (wine and pleasure symbolism)
- Allegorical female figures
- Soldiers, waiters, or comic characters

Placed atop bars or in hotel smoking rooms, they transformed industrial plumbing into theatrical or amusing display. The act of lighting a cigar (sometimes a cigarette) became semi-ceremonial:

1. Turn the valve.
2. Flame emerges.
3. Cigarettes and cigars are kindled in communal space.

This was flame as public ritual.

The gas lighter was not merely functional; it signaled refinement, prosperity, and masculine (at this time) sociability. The heavier the bronze, the more elaborate the casting, the stronger the statement of establishment prestige



Examples of gas lighters



More examples of

gas lighters

The match is safe (vesta) emerged in the same decades. Typically silver, brass, or nickel alloy, it served several purposes:

- Protect matches from moisture.
- Prevent accidental ignition.
- Display personal taste, affiliation, or humor.

Unlike the bar-mounted gas lighter, the match safe was:

- Portable.
- Intimate.
- individually owned.

It often bore emblems (including fraternal symbols), engraved monograms, or figural motifs mirroring the sculptural trends seen in gas lighters.

Where the gas lighter represented communal infrastructure, the match safe represented



individual agency.



Both the gas lighters and the match safes share many of the same artistic currents:

- Classical revival (1870–1890)
- Aesthetic Movement stylization

- Art Nouveau organic lines (1890–1910)

The figural impulse is especially striking. A satyr holding a torch in bronze on a bar counter corresponds visually to a miniature satyr embossed on a silver vesta. There is a difference in scale, not artistic intention.

Both transformed utility into sculpture.

It may be a stretch, but you could say, the gas lighter anchored flame to architecture, while the match safe liberated flame from architecture.

In practice, both coexisted. A gentleman might light his cigar at the bar's gas jet, then later rely on his personal matches outdoors or in transit.

The relationship between the two objects also reflects social, economic, and technological layering:

- Gas infrastructure was costly and urban.
- Matches were inexpensive and universal.

As electric lighting replaced gas and petrol lighters emerged in the early 20th century, both gas lighters and elaborate match safes declined. Yet they faded for different reasons:

- Gas lighters disappeared with safety concerns, the advent of electricity, and plumbing removal.
- Match safes declined as safety matches improved and disposable matchbooks became common.

Symbolically, it may be said that these two objects represent two philosophical orientations toward fire

The figural gas lighter is a spectacle, controlled by infrastructure, and embedded in architecture.

The match safe allows for personal autonomy, is carried anywhere by anyone, and is often linked to identity and social status.

Together, they embody the late-Victorian transformation of fire from necessity into ornamented ritual. One anchored flame in public sociability. The other placed flame in the individual's hand.

Seen together, they illuminate how industrial modernity did not eliminate ritual, it refined and redistributed it.