

The Japanese Match Safe That Wasn't

By Neil Shapiro



The images of the above match safe were to be the lead images in a new book on Japanese match safes. A well known collector has allowed the author to photograph his collection and had singled out this piece as one of his most prized.

The author was delighted to showcase what appeared to be a three color gold safe with the common Japanese symbols of cranes, dragonflies, and tortoises.

Just before he was ready to approve the Japanese book's high resolution proofs for printing he was researching multi-metal jewelry and read how in 1991 the British Museum tested some Tiffany pins, brooches, bracelets, and other items, in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum that were done in the Japanese style with different colored metals and found the "white gold" on these items was really platinum.

It seemed to him that if these items, made circa 1875-1900, were platinum perhaps the "white gold" on the Japanese safe was platinum as well and if that was the case this match safe was not Japanese as the Japanese did not use platinum in the years 1875-1890, when this match safe was made.

White gold, if not plated with rhodium tends to turn yellowish after 15-20 years. In all likelihood this match safe, if white gold, had not been plated after it had been made and clearly, had not turned yellow. If the Japanese had access to rhodium plating perhaps the match safe had been plated when it was made. The author needed to learn when rhodium was first used for this purpose to see if this was a possibility. This proved to be difficult as various experts did not know when rhodium was first applied to white gold. In one sense it did not really matter since the collector had assembled a group of

specialists who were certain the safe was Japanese in origin and only a definitive test would make them change their minds.

It turned out there was such a test and it was arranged in a prestigious auction house under the auspices of the director of silver for that auction house. A miniscule bit of the white metal was put on a stone and a drop of acid applied. If there was no reaction the metal was platinum. If there was a reaction the metal was gold. There was no reaction, the metal was platinum and the match safe was not of Japanese origin. Further discussion surmised that the match safe was made in the USA, probably by a specialist maker, perhaps Theodore B. Starr of New York City. But since there are no marks on the match safe the maker is just an educated guess.

The big question raised by this incident is the difficulty of attributing place of origin or maker based solely on visual appearance. The British museums had the Tiffany pieces in their collection for many years and had incorrectly catalogued them. The noted collector, who has a keen and sophisticated eye, misjudged the match safe's origin, as well as the numerous experts he consulted, and the author, was so taken with the match safe that he decided to feature it in his book on Japanese safes. All were wrong.

Note: Rhodium was discovered in 1804 but not used as a plating agent until 1895 and that was for plating platinum to use as a thermocouple. Clearly, not for use as a whitening agent for a gold alloy. Still the white metal on the match safe might have been gold.