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AMERICAN MATCH SAFE MASTERPIECES

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INTRODUCTION

Some match safe collectors may think about what constitutes a great match safe, and indeed, whether a match safe, a decorative object, could even be considered an artistic masterpiece. To determine if a match safe is a masterpiece, it is necessary to examine the entire collecting field of match safes and define its elements, motifs, materials and manufacturing techniques.

This will be the first essay in a series of at least three on match safe masterpieces. This essay will attempt to conceptualize those elements a match safe must have to be considered a masterpiece and identify three American safes that are masterpieces. The second will enumerate three Japanese masterpiece safes. A third essay on European masterpiece match safes will be written by someone who feels competent to write it.

Finally, all who disagree with any of these ideas, inclusions, or conclusions are welcome to add or delete any criteria they feel should be in the definition of a masterpiece, or to agree or disagree with the selections of masterpieces; and they are welcome to submit their own selections with their reasons for inclusion.

As collectors, researchers, and admirers of match safes, most of us are continually acquiring more safes and hoping to acquire better pieces for our collection. Somehow we all hope to



Tiffany masterpiece safe - discussed later in this article

find the greatest match safe and add it to our collection. But just what is a great match safe? What would make a particular safe a masterpiece? Are there match safes that may be considered masterpieces, at least as we understand artistic masterpieces?

A "masterpiece" is the best work by a particular artist and in the language of connoisseurship, the finest example of a style, motif, material, and condition of that work so that it transcends all other similar work.

A masterpiece match safe must exhibit:

- Overall design: It must be an integrated design that melds the lid, box and sides into a conceptual whole that still fulfills its primary functions.
- Materials: Usually, it is made of precious metals or materials used in an unusual manner that enhances the design and function of the safe.
- Execution: The work must be technically flawless but not produced solely by machines that can easily replicate the work that made the safe.
- Condition: It is in almost unused condition, and needless to say, with no damage, obvious repairs or major restorations. If there are any signs of wear they must impart some patina that enhances the safe.
- Uniqueness/Rarity: It is one of a kind or marked by unusual qualities, rarity, merit or appeal to knowledgeable collectors and experts.
- Representation of a particular artistic style: Usually, it will be the finest example of an artistic style, e.g., naturalism, Art Nouveau, *Japonisme*, classicism, etc.



Tiffany masterpiece safe and its iguana-hide case.

The very best American match safes were generally created by artisans working with unlimited budgets, usually for a specific client or for a major exhibition, in a large well-equipped company with brilliant designers and skilled craftsmen who wanted to enhance their marketing efforts or else cater to extremely wealthy individuals or sometimes both.

The American companies that most obviously meet those criteria during the time that most American match safes were made (circa 1860–1920)

are Tiffany & Co., and the Gorham Corp.¹ In examining their known extant match safes, I believe, two great ones can be found, *viz.*, a carved ivory and silver safe, done in the Japanese manner by Gorham; and an extraordinary gold and enamel safe made by Tiffany [see front page] with colored enamel and a uniquely designed American Indian style case for a major exhibition. Both are in private collections.

The Tiffany safe is 18K gold with green and blue raised enamel bands, which, on the front side, swirl diagonally across the body and lid of the safe. The obverse has complimentary horizontal bands that meet the diagonal bands at the sides and flow seamlessly together to form an elegant design. The designs are not identical and yet create a coherent motif and an easy way to hold the safe while it is in use. The overall shape and decoration evoke American Indian pottery, a design used by Paulding Farnham, Tiffany's chief jewelry designer, and John T. Curran,² the top silver designer for a notable silver vase they made for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. This safe was made by Tiffany for a major international fair (probably the same 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago). 18K gold and enamel American safes are very rare, and this may be the finest one known.



**Gorham antler safe
above, with obverse &
cap at right**

The Gorham safe is a brilliant *tour de force* of antler carving in the Japanese manner with American silver work. I know of only two American carved ivory/horn safes, both made by Gorham. This safe has brilliant, yet subtle carving of a Japanese samurai. The Japanese have a distinct way of depicting human figures and human faces. In early Japanese art the Japanese tended to have a certain amount of stereotyping in their artistic expression; warriors were always bold, ladies always beautiful. But by the Meiji period (1868-1912) when this safe was made, the artists had developed techniques to show expression and sentimentality. In this safe, the carver³ has developed a full range of bodily expression that exudes an expression of nobility in this warrior. There are carefully delineated details that make the robes flow and show the underlying sinews and muscles of the samurai.





**Starr Egyptian revival
masterpiece**

In this writer's opinion, a safe made or marketed by T. B. Starr (1909–1924?), a New York City manufacturer/retailer, an upscale competitor to Tiffany, and the exclusive retailer for Gorham in New York City, is the third great American match safe.⁴

It is handmade of heavy 18K gold with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and sapphires. It features an Egyptian Revival motif of hieroglyphics on one side and an elaborate hieroglyphic type of initials on the obverse. There is an integration of the design between the box, sides and lid. It is in superb condition with its gold retaining its "bloom". ("Bloom" is the current term for this effect - in the 1880's this type of finish was called "Roman Gold.") It was produced by pickling the gold to remove all of the alloys that adhered to its surface. Usually, with wear, this finish is lost.)

American Egyptian Revival match safes are very uncommon. This writer knows of ones by Blackinton (#3316), Simons (#2096 – although this is a fraternal motif for the Masons), two by Watrous (#27 & #28), and perhaps one by Holmes & Edwards (although this is not silver). All of these safes are die-stamped, and most are readily available for purchase. Although some are fairly expensive, none are in gold.

This safe marked by T.B. Starr differs from the other American Egyptian Revival safes in the intricacy and quality of its design, the power of its presence, its heft, luminescence and the brilliance of its gem stones. It is handmade, the only one of its kind that is known, and the finest example of the Egyptian Revival style in match safes.

I have defined this American masterpiece match safe by the criteria listed above, criteria that is not subjective when used by knowledgeable collectors and experts; however, it may be argued that some aspects of this rating scheme are subject to personal taste and perception.

There have always been some critics who held that any aesthetic judgment is just some culturally defined opinion and that no particular work of art is better than any other. Collectors have always sensed that some works are superior to others and may be called masterpieces. Whether that masterpiece has a certain level of technical virtuosity, has withstood the test of time, defines a new way of perception, demonstrates the best of an historical period or simply expresses the maker's skill, as well as his experience, and vision for an idiom, the masterpiece always transcends its maker, time, material and design.

Most match safe collectors favor some aspect of the field over others, e.g., figurals, celluloids, enamels, etc. For these collectors all of the criteria would not apply, although they would claim

that some of the elements of greatness are in their favorites, and I would argue that, in terms of being a masterpiece against the entire range of American match safes, their choices are not masterpieces.

If I had to choose one quality over all the others that make a great match safe, I would opt for its inability to be easily replicated. This would eliminate almost all die stamped safes without hand applied ornamentation or intricate mechanical workings.

Their subtlety of detail, nuance of expression, archival quality, and timelessness all make the T.B. Starr, Tiffany and Gorham safes masterpieces. These match safes have an importance and a certain kind of gravity that all artistic masterpieces possess.

Notes:

¹In the Gorham Archives in the John Hay Rare Book Library at Brown University there are cost records of safes made for individuals and for the Paris Exhibition of 1900 that would be deemed masterpieces, but at this time no known examples can be located. The same is true for the Tiffany archives. So, this essay has been limited to extant examples.

²Curran was supported by Eugene Julius Soligny and James H. Whitehouse, two great silver designers.

³It is possible that Gorham purchased this piece of carved ivory and incorporated it into the match safe in its workshops.

⁴Although the safe is marked with Starr's name, there is some question about Starr being a manufacturer as well as a retailer at this time; there is some evidence that this safe may have been made by Gorham for Starr.